Mexico
Chapter 1

Rehearsals of the Tragi-Co(s)mic Race

April 27, 1924, was not a good day for José Vasconcelos, the man who would go down in history as the premiere “cultural caudillo” of the Mexican Revolution.1 With only a week to go before the inaugural ceremony of the new National Stadium, the founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education was struggling to hold his own against a barrage of negative publicity. The sixty-thousand-seat arena was supposed to be the crowning achievement of his sweeping cultural reforms—proof the Mexican people could accomplish constructive goals and the new government could deliver on its promises, even if large parts of the country had yet to be “pacified” and political assassinations were still a common affair. Instead, his pet project had been plagued by controversy from the start. First, he had tangled with the architect, who had trouble wrapping his unimaginative head around the fact that the stadium was meant to be not a mere “racetrack” but a revival of the ancient Greek open-air theaters. Then Diego Rivera had requested some modifications in the design to accommodate his plans for the interior murals, causing his diehard enemies to howl and every architect in the city to protest that painters, sculptors, and other “decorators” should stick to their area of expertise. Now Rivera was all riled up and on the verge of lambasting his critics in the press as semi-civilized vestiges of the prerevolutionary bourgeoisie. And as if all of that weren’t enough, rumors were flying that Vasconcelos was either about to quit or be fired—rumors he knew were true.

All of that, and now this. Five thousand schoolgirls were assembled in the stadium, rehearsing the songs they would sing en masse while others formed improbable pyramids or danced a traditional *jarabe tapatío.* Everything seemed to be going fine, but the day was exceptionally hot and no one had thought to bring refreshments, so around high noon the children began to collapse. It was just a mild case of sunstroke, though try telling that to the parents watching in the stands who descended in a panic, setting off a stampede out of which several girls emerged even worse for wear. Still, none of the injuries were serious, and surely a hundred heat-frazzled schoolgirls out of five thousand wasn’t such a bad tally. Alas, the daily *Excélsior* disagreed. The next day its front-page headline screamed, “More Than One Hundred Girls...
Were on the Verge of Dying of Sunstroke in the National Stadium.” Then a string of subheaders such as “Great Alarm in the City” led up to the article’s histrionic first line: “Yesterday, over thousands of homes in our capital and outlying areas of the District, the horrifying grimace of tragedy appeared.” Never one to hold his fire, Vasconcelos immediately dispatched a communique to every classroom in the city urging students to ignore the newspaper, a commercial rag in cahoots with the bullfighting impresarios and other purveyors of dishonest entertainment who recognized the stadium as a threat to their ill-gotten gains. Yes, he conceded, the incident was unfortunate, but in fact a mere fifty girls had fainted, and it only demonstrated the urgent need for a “theater-stadium” where “our race” would forge its physique and create the “art of the future”—an art that would put an end to all the ensayos, all the rehearsals foiled by the foibles of the human, all-too-human flesh.

The National Stadium was demolished in 1949 due to cracks in its foundation, and today few residents of Mexico City recall its existence. Far more often Vasconcelos is remembered for his messianic cultural “missions,” which sent newly trained teachers into rural areas to spread the gospel of good hygiene and teach impoverished peasants to read the Iliad and the Mahabharata. But despite his penchant for the classics and his eventual transformation into a peevish librarian, Vasconcelos is a hard man to pin down, not least because he was instrumental in creating the conditions for the emergence of the Mexican avant-garde. Shortly after assuming office he reached out to Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, still on extended sojourns in Paris and Barcelona, and offered to subsidize their studies of Renaissance fresco techniques in Italy before luring them back to Mexico with commissions to adorn the walls of government buildings. He also encouraged artists to immerse themselves in indigenous cultures (even if he drew a clear distinction between such sources of inspiration and actual “art”). Some avant-gardists mocked his spiritual rhetoric and political pretensions, especially after his self-exile and return for a failed presidential run; yet few were as focused on the future as Vasconcelos, and it is possible his grandiose plans for radio and other new media would have intersected with the technophilic dreams of the avant-garde had his time in office not been limited to a few turbulent years. Such connections, both uncanny and concrete, make his cultural politics difficult to define and undermine any easy understanding of the avant-garde as contrarian to institutional authority. The one thing on which almost all critics agree: whatever connections or stylistic similarities they might share, Vasconcelos was an ideologue, not an artist.

This distinction relies on his status as the author of a singular and very powerful idea. What now goes by the name of La raza cósmica was first published in 1925 as the prologue to a narrative of his diplomatic travels through South America, but the body of the book has gradually withered for lack of attention even as the preamble has usurped its name and become a discursive double for the cosmic race—an idea Antonio Cornejo Polar aptly
described as “the hymnal exacerbation of some sort of supermestizaje,” an overwrought expression of the metaphor for cultural miscegenation that remains “the most powerful and widespread conceptual device with which Latin America has interpreted itself.” Vasconcelos left reflections on race and aesthetics scattered across a wide array of speeches, stories, articles, government bulletins, and so on, yet the obligatory point of reference in any discussion of his creed is a text that has long since shed its identity as a preface without acquiring a well-defined form of its own. *La raza cósmica* is strident and programmatic, yet it seems too longwinded and expository to qualify as a manifesto; its allegorical bent and idealist tone make it vaguely akin to a utopia, but the narrative lacks the utopia’s fictional frame. If only by default, then, it tends to get lumped in with the genre of the essay, or *ensayo*—a respectable, un-avant-garde denomination that links it to a long line of intellectual reflections on Mexican identity.

In certain respects, this is strange company for it to keep. Written in the months after its author resigned his powerful post in opposition to the incoming president, *La raza cósmica* rejects nationalism in favor of an Ibero-American alliance against Anglo imperialism and prophesies a future in which the Brazilian Amazon serves as the site of Universópolis, a technological wonderland where all of the world’s races converge at the dawn of a new “aesthetic era.” In Mexico, however, such prosaic details did little to prevent the cosmic race from being repurposed as the protagonist of a powerful narrative of national identity. Whether in schoolbooks or academic treatises, it came to be depicted as an a priori idea, the master plan behind Vasconcelos’s foundational acts; often it was (and still is) projected onto the entire post-revolutionary period, serving as a stabilizing figure that lent coherence to the contradictions and contingencies of culture during those messy, uncertain years. Over the past several decades, as the government has abandoned the ideology of revolutionary nationalism and lost even the appearance of legitimacy, critics have called attention to the less savory aspects of Vasconcelos’s career—including a flirtation with fascism in the early 1940s—and his futurist fantasy now stands accused of underwriting the developmentalist designs of the single-party state. It has become obligatory to note that although the essay attacks social evolutionism and the segregationist policies of Jim Crow, its call for racial mixture is driven by a desire for racial whitening; its ostensible “universality” erases rather than embraces difference. Yet despite (or because of?) its periodic dissection, *La raza cósmica* is still lodged in the cultural canon, and its idea remains.

But what happens when ideas take the form of figures, bodies, and actions on a virtual or physical stage? In what follows I uncouple the cosmic race from its textual twin and reexamine it in the light of Vasconcelos’s little-known experiments with theater. If the essay has become a comfortable lens through which to view the cosmic race—a kind of second skin—this chapter defamiliarizes its physiognomy by tracing the genesis of this foundational
idea and bringing it into play with an alternative meaning of the *ensayo* as a rehearsal or unfinished work. To begin, I show how the essay genre is often imagined as quintessentially modern in its refusal to obey distinctions among disciplines or rigid definitions of form, a quality that in Mexico (as elsewhere in Spanish America) tends to be associated with the celebration of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture. In the following section, I rewind the clock in order to trace a set of recurring concerns across a set of disparate texts that Vasconcelos wrote during the armed conflict in Mexico, including his treatise on the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, his legal defense of the revolutionary Convention of Aguascalientes, and his scathing remarks on—of all things—the essay genre. For Vasconcelos, forging a common ideology, creating a new artistic genre (or form), and birthing a new race were (almost) all one and the same. What linked them was rhythm—a phenomenon at once corporeal and abstract that suggests a certain connection between the cosmic race and recent attempts to rethink the concept of ideology in relation to affect and embodiment. Nowhere is this more evident than in his *Prometeo vencedor* (1920), a “modern tragedy” conceived (according to its author) as an essay but born into the world of print as an unperformable play. Rather than attempting to salvage this deeply strange and rarely read text from the heap of history’s mistakes, I show how its apparent failures allow readers to see what would later be called the cosmic race not as an expression of identity, but as a self-reflexive (and even ironic) allegory enacted on a speculative stage. By contrast, the construction of Vasconcelos’s “Theater-Stadium” and the rehearsals leading up to its debut (which bring the chapter to a close) illustrate the contradictions and constraints he and other intellectuals faced in their attempts to create a material stage on which their projections for the future could enfold.

If rehearsals imply an understanding of art as part of a process of production in which error is integral, I recast the cosmic race in such a light in order to unsettle its retrospective reification. This move also aims to put pressure on Vasconcelos’s curiously ex-centric relationship to the avant-garde. Although he never claimed allegiance to the avant-garde, this is not an automatic disqualifier: the word *vanguardia* was used in an inconsistent fashion during the 1920s, and critics today routinely deny this classification to artists who collaborated with figures comfortably ensconced in the vanguard canon while bestowing it on others who rejected it at the time. A fuzzy category in any context (not unlike the essay genre?), the avant-garde is especially difficult to define in a place such as Mexico. Who or what counts as *la vanguardia* in a country where the revolution has already taken place, a country where a “revolutionary” government fosters the formation of a new class of intellectuals and artists with ties to the international “avant-garde” and conscripts them to help build the infrastructure of the state? This chapter follows a circuitous (and somewhat essayistic) course, skirting the edges of the avant-garde and dwelling on its pre- and posthistories in order to pinpoint
what is at stake in excluding a figure such as Vasconcelos—to explain why he
is denied the designation of “artist,” and why he fails to fit into a category he
did so much to create.

When Is an Essay Not an Essay?

Reflections on the essay genre almost invariably invoke Michel de Montaigne’s original use of the term *essai*: a text conceived not as a finished object, but as an exploratory trial or attempt. Long derided as incomplete, improvisatory, and even degenerate, the essay has been celebrated in more recent times as an exemplary vehicle of thought, a heterodox genre that enjoys relative freedom from disciplinary injunctions and the strictures of predetermined form. In “The Essay as Form” (1959), Theodor Adorno describes it as a “hybrid” mode of writing (*ein Mischprodukt*) that registers the historical separation of science and art even as it mediates this opposition through its dogged negation of method. Tied to the transitory and ephemeral, the essay “thinks in fragments,” coordinating constellations of elements rather than subordinating them to discursive logic or finite totalities. “It does not insist on something beyond mediation—and those are the historical mediations in which the whole society is sedimented—but seeks the truth content in its objects.”

Rather than striving to transcend language, the essay engages in a mobile praxis of self-reflection on the very act of signification, which is also to say that it is more than just an apposite medium for expressing a critique of ideology: it is also a textual performance in the sense that its fluid, unfinished architecture enacts a critique of ideological form.

More than a decade before Adorno penned these reflections, the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes situated the essay genre in relation to the changes wrought by new technologies of communication. “Las nuevas artes” (The New Arts, 1944) begins with the premise that six *medios*, or media, are responsible for transmitting culture in contemporary society: schools, the press, theater, museums, radio, and film. Reyes notes that the appearance of radio and film have aroused opposition from traditionalists anxious to defend the integrity of the older arts, and his objective is to counter such hostility while forestalling any threat the expansion of the “public” might pose by assimilating these mass media into the orderly realm of “art.” Theater, he argues, is wrong to view film as a rival, because the cinema merely brings the true nature of its performative cousin into clearer relief, introducing a distinction between two different “artistic orders” that were once regrettably “confused”; nor should print culture fear radio, because books respond to different needs than broadcasting, which extends the benefits of learned culture to more people even as it revitalizes the lost art of oratory. Reyes even acknowledges that these new arts have provoked a series of “generic transformations” that have revolutionized the “classic contours” of literary functions.
outlined by Lessing in his *Laocoön*. Today, the literary field is divided into the lyric (“the purest poetry”), scientific literature, and the essay. Only in the final sentence, as a self-reflexive flourish, does he define the essay as the “centaur of genres,” a site where all of these cultural forms commingle, “where there is a bit of everything and where everything fits . . . capricious child of a culture that no longer responds to the circular, closed orb of the ancients but to the open arc, the process in motion, the ‘Etcetera’” (403). Once again, the essay appears as an unfettered space of intellectual freedom; and yet here it is clear that this freedom is not an effect of its exclusion from established institutions of knowledge but a corollary of its authority to regulate their proper function. Neither high nor low, the essay is a nongenre or transmedium that holds the taxonomic order in place while eluding its strictures, the necessary exception to the rule that Derrida dubbed the Law of Genre: “Genres are not to be mixed.”

Adorno frames his argument as a polemic against a tradition of German idealism that condemned the essay for its ontological impurity, and his claims about the critical force of its “consciousness of non-identity” presuppose its discontinuity with orthodox forms of truth. Only by turning his logic inside out is it possible to account for the essay’s relation to an intellectual tradition that has enshrined “hybridity” as a first principle. Throughout Spanish America, too, the essay is regarded as an idiosyncratic, liminal genre that cuts across conventional boundaries—a “centaur,” in Reyes’s oft-cited formulation. Yet as the countless anthologies and metacritical essays on *el ensayo hispanoamericano* suggest, this misbegotten stepchild of modern knowledge has not been outcast from the dominion of truth but is instead hailed as a “natural” forum for reflecting on the linguistic, racial, and cultural contradictions characteristic of the (post)colonial condition. Take, for example, Germán Arciniegas’s “Nuestra América es un ensayo” (Our America Is an Essay, 1963), a charming and in many respects insightful text published in a journal affiliated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international organization of liberal anticommunist intellectuals covertly funded by the CIA. In this imaginative genealogy of the genre the author capitalizes on the essay’s elasticity by gathering a long line of historic documents under its umbrella. This retrospective act of reclassification leads him back through *La raza cósmica* to Domingo Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845) and Simón Bolívar’s *Manifiesto de Cartagena* (1812) all the way to the colonial chronicle, at which point he boldly asserts that “essays have been written among us ever since the white man’s first encounters with the Indian, in the sixteenth century, several years before Montaigne was born.” In one fell swoop, the Colombian writer lays claim to the Enlightenment by conflating the birth of this quintessentially “modern” form with Latin America’s own imagined origins—an “encounter” between two racially defined extremes that confounds the “pure” categories of Eurocentric thought. The irony underlying this gesture is heralded in the title of Arciniegas’s text: “Our America” is an essay, a trial or an attempt but
also, in Spanish, a rehearsal for a New World, a performance perpetually deferred.  

This spirited defense of the ensayo challenges Europe’s imperial pretensions by shifting the locus of modern truth to the “historical mediations” (Adorno) that occur on the Old World’s outer edge. But its power hinges on a paradox, because it reifies antifoundationalism, and it redeems violent social contradictions as emblems of identity by racializing the very principle of mediation. Often described as a type of mestizaje formal or mestizaje literario, the essay came to be seen as exemplary of a more general interdisciplinary impulse endemic to a region where reality itself elided all rigid categories. Nowhere is this more evident than in Mexico, where mestizaje served as a master metaphor of the developmentalist state for much of the seven-decade rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which began in 1929. Noting the essay’s monopoly over discussions of national culture, the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz portrays it as part of a symbolic chain linking the nation’s “mixed” economy and “mestizo” population to the figure of the pensador, an intellectual-at-large who enjoys proximity to power (and often holds bureaucratic posts) while maintaining a critical pose. In Mexico, Lomnitz argues, these interpretive “syntheses” are too flexible and too closely tied to public opinion as well as the particular political conjunctures out of which they arose: although they often draw on social scientific theories, the knowledge they generate is never formalized according to a clear method or standards of empirical proof, so once it has been consumed, all it leaves behind is a symbol or stereotype that can be pressed into the service of any number of political positions. With the official shift to an embrace of “pluralism” and the rise of cultural studies in the late 1980s, the psychodramas of Mexican identity elaborated in essays such as Octavio Paz’s Labyrinth of Solitude took a critical hit; yet the tools of textual deconstruction fail to disable their representations of national culture because their labyrinthine contradictions lead right back into the belly of the centaur where nature and culture meet.

Lomnitz says nothing of La raza cósmica or its author, but it can be argued that they act as a limit case for the tradition he traces. Starting in 1906, Vasconcelos collaborated with Alfonso Reyes, Diego Rivera, Antonio Caso, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, and others as part of a circle known first as the Ateneo de la Juventud (Athenaeum of Youth), and later as the Ateneo de México. Touted in retrospect as the intellectual prelude to the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Ateneo defined itself in opposition to the científicos, a group of businessmen and academics schooled in the doctrines of French positivism who occupied prominent positions in the government of the long-standing dictator Porfirio Díaz. Seeking alternatives to the científicos’ deterministic view of society and technocratic outlook on education, the ateneístas steeped themselves in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and the ancient Greeks, embracing metaphysical inquiry and the ethical
dimension of art as part of what Horacio Legrás describes as their preference for “a philosophy of the indeterminate and an unforeseeable future [un devenir no previsible].” As discontent with the dictatorship’s program of modernization under the aegis of foreign capital grew, the more bellicose among them also exalted the superior aesthetic sensibilities of Latin America over and against the soulless conflation of culture and commerce attributed to the United States. In doing so, they drew on a set of motifs and ideas also associated with modernismo, the self-consciously cosmopolitan literary movement that had emerged throughout the continent in the decade prior to the Spanish-American War of 1898. But the modernistas were known as poets and writers of crónicas—anecdotal accounts of literary miscellanea or urban ephemera written for newspapers. In contrast, most of the ateneístas would make their mark as the authors of ensayos, a genre whose emergence was facilitated by the growth of the book market and increasing autonomy of the cultural field. Freed from the exigencies of the newspaper, Julio Ramos explains, the ateneístas staked their authority on a holistic notion of culture and an opposition to the division of intellectual labor into distinct disciplines. The essay, in his words, served as a paradoxical “form of metaspecialization, a reflection on and critique of specialization.”

The essays of Alfonso Reyes, who spent most of the revolution and subsequent decades as an ambassador to Spain, Argentina, and Brazil, exemplify the ateneístas’ continental outlook and refusal to define their mission in narrowly nationalistic terms. Vasconcelos espoused similar ideals, yet his involvement in the nitty-gritty business of building national institutions made it easier to assimilate his (in)famous text as an essay of Mexican identity—despite all the evidence that it doesn’t fit. His actions while in office were doubtless instrumental in creating an institutional space for the pensador, but La raza cósmica was published in Barcelona, less than a year after its author noisily resigned as head of the Secretariat of Public Education and then ran a failed campaign for state governor of Oaxaca before going into exile in the United States. In 1929, when he returned to run as an opposition candidate in the presidential elections, the government used voter fraud and violence to assure the victory of the newly formed Party of the Mexican Revolution (forerunner to the contemporary PRI); after this Vasconcelos became even more of a persona non grata, and although he was brought back into the fold as the director of the National Library in 1940, the first Mexican edition of La raza cósmica only appeared in 1948. Finally, to hark back to Lomnitz’s insights, just how is it that a “cosmic” figure of the future can serve as a stereotype or symbol?

Far from eschewing formalization, La raza cósmica draws together a dizzying array of discourses, flexing all its rhetorical muscle in a strenuous attempt to integrate Greek myth, experimental physics, Plato, Pythagoras, Nietzsche, Aztec cosmology, Christianity, Mendelian evolution, Bergson, and Buddhism. Woven through this discursive jumble is a speculative narrative of
human development that projects the “synthesis” of the world’s four races: white, black, yellow, and red. In a twist on the Comtean law of three stages, Vasconcelos contends that for eons after the dawn of history, humans were stuck in the material, or warrior stage, when conflicts were decided by brute force; at present we are in the intellectual, or political stage, distinguished by the formation of nation-states under the tyrannical rule of reason and the ascendance of Anglo-Saxon imperialism, with its ideology of evolutionary racism. The ultimate objective, however, should be to arrive at a spiritual, or aesthetic stage, when all peoples will peacefully coexist “beyond good and evil, in a world of aesthetic *pathos*.” This apotheosis of the aesthetic will retrospectively redeem the existence of Latin America, whose superior “intuition” and long history of racial assimilation have prepared its people to become the medium for a new, “universal” race—a “synthetic type who will gather together the treasures of History, in order to give expression to the total desire of the world” (15). Yet even as he constructs this teleology, Vasconcelos also underscores its contingency: according to his vision, the new über-race will found the Amazonian city of Universópolis, which will send airplanes of educators forth to save any stragglers—though if this does not happen (a possibility he leaves open), the blond people of the North will found their own xenophobic dystopia and call it Anglotown.

I leave it to others to critique the racism of Vasconcelos’s notion of “aesthetic eugenics” (according to which ugly people will lose the desire to reproduce, allowing black people to be “redeemed” and Indians to leap from the ancient past into the future); nor is this the place to delve into its unacknowledged debts to the Porfirian positivists, who had already begun to recuperate the mestizo as the privileged subject of Mexican history. Suffice it to say, none of the científicos had ever written anything quite like this. Ignacio Sánchez Prado makes a similar observation, noting that the common critique of the cosmic race as a falsification of reality misses the point, because an accurate depiction of the facts was never its aim. An example of the “utopic essay,” an ephemeral genre that flourished in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, *La raza cósmica* had as its objective the creation of a unifying political ideal. For Julio Ramos, too, Vasconcelos is pivotal because in *La raza cósmica*, “cultural authority has become ontologized, constituting the base of a new ‘theory.’” The essay’s capacity to integrate competing discourses gave substance to Vasconcelos’s mestizo ideal, such that “the super-vision of culture materialized in the ‘total form’ of the essay came to represent the distinctive attribute of the ‘cosmic,’ ‘Latin’ race” (241). This observation lucidly points to the essay as one of modernity’s points of desencuentro, or divergence—a fragment that, in Spanish America, has acquired the symbolic shape of a social totality defined as unfinished because of its dependent position in the global economic and political order. But Ramos overstates the ease with which culture “has become” an ontology; he too quickly passes over the process through which it was “materialized” in the form of the essay. As a result,
his argument has a strangely familiar ring: *La raza cósmica* and the cosmic race are one and the same; form and content coincide. In short, the cosmic race *is* an essay.

But to play the devil’s advocate: how do we know *La raza cósmica* is an essay? Nowhere in the text itself is there any explicit indication of its generic affiliations, and all early editions of the travelogue simply label it *el prólogo* (prologue). True enough, its utopic subject matter overlaps with a number of other Spanish American “essays,” but as Ramos himself concedes, it is atypical in its strong theoretical thrust. Of course, generic classifications are seldom unequivocal, because genre is not an empirical quality found in a single text; it rests on readers’ recognition and reactivation of stylistic conventions and common themes. In Fredric Jameson’s description, “genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.” But who is the “specific public” in this case? *La raza cósmica* was published on the other side of the Atlantic and is addressed to readers throughout the vast and diverse region of Latin America. Concrete data on reception is hard to come by, but it seems unsafe to assume all of its readers were familiar with the conventions of the genre. The 1920s were an era of social and artistic upheaval, a period when accepted typologies were called into question and the very notion of a “public” was under pressure from new media and the expansion of literacy. In other words, it was a time when the institutions that enable shared frameworks of interpretation were under radical and contentious reconstruction—a process in which the author himself played a prominent role. Add to this the difficulty inherent in recognizing the codes of a genre defined by its idiosyncratic nature and *lack* of formal rules.

From our own vantage point, then, *La raza cósmica* might look more or less like an essay. But what if it isn’t—or isn’t only, or wasn’t always—that?

**Who Knew Vasconcelos Had Rhythm?**

This question is more mystifying than it should be given that Vasconcelos himself dedicated many pages to the question of genre and form. These early writings on aesthetics have fallen out of fashion, and his other activities during the Mexican Revolution receive almost as little attention, perhaps because of the tendency to draw a sharp distinction between the military conflict (1910–1920) and a subsequent “cultural revolution” (1920–1940)—as if questions of culture were put on pause during the armed struggle and could be abstracted from the bloodshed of war. Another possible reason for the omission are judgments of the sort made by Carlos Monsiváis in an essay from 1968, at the height of the youth counterculture movement and just months before government forces fired on protestors at the Plaza de Tlatelolco: in a
tone of equal parts affection and condescension, Monsiváis insists that Vasconcelos misunderstood the revolution and concludes that his only consistent quality was his “conservatism,” the fact that “he detests change because it brings him close [lo aproxima] to the masses.” How then to explain the fact that he was one of very few intellectuals willing to jump into the revolutionary fray, and one of even fewer who aligned themselves with its most radical leaders (at least for a time)? One of the reasons Vasconcelos is a sore spot in accounts of the avant-garde is that he muddles the binaries on which narratives of transgression depend: in a strange way, he came closer to achieving an approximation between intellect and action than many avant-garde artists in Mexico did, and their own relationship to “the masses” owed a good deal to his complex role in the revolution and its aftermath.

An early and ardent supporter of Francisco Madero, the liberal reformist whose anti-reelection drive against the dictator Porfirio Díaz sparked the initial uprisings, Vasconcelos edited the campaign newspaper and—on the multiple occasions he was forced out of the country by Díaz—lobbied U.S. officials and corporate interests on Madero’s behalf. Yet at the end of 1914, a year after Madero’s ouster and assassination, Vasconcelos turned up for the Convention of Aguascalientes, where he supported Pancho Villa in renouncing the more conservative presidential claimant Venustiano Carranza and then accepted a post as minister of public instruction in the oppositional government backed by Villa and Emiliano Zapata. The convention (and subsequent meeting of the two military leaders in Mexico City) is typically taken as the high point of the popular revolution, but Vasconcelos’s authorship of its most significant theoretical statement is routinely overlooked. Dated October 29, 1914, the document is framed as a formal legal opinion defending the sovereign authority of the convention and its refusal to recognize Carranza as the executive power. Dispensing with preambles, the opening sentence defines sovereignty as the “power of the people to govern themselves according to their own will”—a simple and conventional enough statement, though it raises a series of thornier questions: Who are the people, and how is their will expressed? In the midst of revolution, when the very apparatus of the state has been called on the carpet, on what basis can an individual or collective body claim the right to rule?

Unwilling to entirely forgo the sanctity of written law, Vasconcelos initially grounds his argument in an appeal to the Constitution of 1857, which affirms the right of the people to change the form of their government through means left unspecified but typically interpreted as including armed insurrection. The constitution itself, Vasconcelos points out, allows for its own temporary suspension at times when the existing government fails to comply with the principles its magna carta enshrines. Yet as Joshua Lund and Alejandro Sánchez Lopera have observed, the young lawyer quickly runs up against the limits of the liberal democratic framework he purports to uphold. Just a few pages into his text, he sets the constitution aside and
Chapter 1

turns to another, “possibly more important” justification of the right to revolution and the legitimacy of the convention—one that exists “independently of the laws governing us.” Revolutions, after all, “begin by rebellion, they place themselves immediately outside the pale of the law, they are antilegalist, and therefore sovereign and free, recognizing no other overlordship than idealism”; liberated from all social norms and united by the very experience of struggle, the “good and the strong meet like brothers” and form assemblies empowered by the “double right of a superhuman inspiration and of a victorious strength” (10). To put it another way, the sovereignty of the Convention of Aguascalientes derives from a heady combination of ideas, emotions, and guns. Or as Vasconcelos unapologetically puts it, “Revolutionary assemblies do not mete out the justice of the textbook, but that which is imbedded [sic] in the heart. Our fight against the landed interests could never be solved within the legal order.” All constitutions protect the existing social order, and it is only by exceeding such strictures that the revolution can achieve its most important objective: the expropriation of land from the latifundistas and its redistribution among all Mexicans willing to work it. The convention must “draw up resolutions on this point and put them into effect immediately, so that all the reforms thus brought about may be accomplished facts before the legally constituted congresses of the governments succeeding the Convention can labor against the national interests” (15).

Even among the factions joined in opposition to Carranza, the Zapatistas’ demands for radical agrarian reform were a bone of contention, and it would be hard to find a similar document from this period that pulls so few punches. Vasconcelos gently chides the martyred Madero and others for limiting their goal to a transformation of the political system and failing to recognize the priority of the revolution’s economic imperative—a necessarily violent process of redistributive justice that can and only ever could occur outside the limits of the law. Much as the conservative jurist Carl Schmitt would do a few years later in Weimar Germany, Vasconcelos defines sovereignty as the power to suspend the legal order, or to declare a state of exception; in contrast to Schmitt, however, he refuses to grant this right to any individual leader, and he identifies the enemy of “national interests” as the state. Only a revolutionary assembly such as the convention can exercise the sovereignty of a people that exists by virtue of having cast off the shackles of government, forcibly taken possession of the land, and “hurl[ed] themselves against everything which has restrained the infinite longing which each soul carries within him, haughty and victorious” (9). For all the idealism at work here, it is also a hard-nosed acknowledgment that any subsequent legally elected government would work against the interests of popular sovereignty: barring a revolution on an international scale (a possibility Vasconcelos never entertains), even a regime with the most egalitarian pretensions would have to reckon with the threat of U.S. invasion and the exigencies of imperialist capital. Thus just as Schmitt compares the exception to the miracle, an event impossible to
rationalize or accord with the rules of reality, Vasconcelos describes it as an almost otherworldly, mystic experience.\textsuperscript{28}

In fact, Vasconcelos and Villa (both notoriously contentious) quickly butted heads, and the coalition between Villa and Zapata collapsed within months: exercising sovereign power at the national level seems to have held little appeal for the two regional leaders, who were probably all too aware of the contradiction Vasconcelos had signaled in his text.\textsuperscript{29} After two more years of warfare Carranza retook the presidency, and although the Constitution of 1917 made history for its guarantee of basic “social” rights, he resisted implementing its provisions on land reform and labor. Villa was increasingly marginalized, and while Zapata and his followers carried out appropriations of land and sugar mills in Morelos (as well as an experiment in communal self-government), he was killed in an ambush in 1919. Meanwhile Vasconcelos stayed far from the fray. During five years of exile he did a stint teaching English in Peru and hopped from one U.S. city to another, watching on as his vision of the convention as a utopic resolution of revolution and governance grew ever more remote. Cut off from any direct ties to popular struggles, he made a seeming 180-degree turn toward the “aesthetic”—though a similar preoccupation with laws and their limits riddles his writings from these years.

Francisco Madero had mixed his politics with a heavy dose of spiritualism and claimed to have begun his campaign against Porfirio Díaz at the behest of the dead president Benito Juárez; Vasconcelos was skeptical of séances, but he shared his idol’s esoteric inclinations as well as his interest in Indian philosophy and modern-day Theosophy, an international movement that sought to synthesize new scientific findings with Hindu and Buddhist concepts of karma, reincarnation, and a seven-stage process of “cosmic evolution.”\textsuperscript{30} The itinerant exile ran with this mystic streak in \textit{Pitágoras: Una teoría del ritmo}, an essay—identified as such in the opening line—written in New York and published in Havana in 1916.\textsuperscript{31} One of the most mysterious of the pre-Socratic philosophers, in part because he refused to commit his ideas to writing, Pythagoras was credited with discovering the laws of harmony and developing a theory of the universe according to which the movement of celestial bodies corresponds to mathematical equations and produces a “music of the spheres.” This synthesis of music and math, along with his reputation as a revered pedagogue, made him an enticing model for turn-of-the-century artists and writers—including many Spanish American modernistas—who were resistant to the growing specialization and segmentation of knowledge and experience.\textsuperscript{32} Pythagorean principles are also encoded in Diego Rivera’s \textit{La Creación}, commonly considered the inaugural work of the muralist movement and read as an allegory of the cosmic race. The mural was unveiled on March 20, 1923, at a ceremony presided over by Vasconcelos and marked with a speech by Manuel Maples Arce, a young poet who had started to make a name for himself as the leader of an avant-garde group known as \textit{estridentismo} and who took the occasion to hurl insults at
defenders of impressionism before declaring the National School of Fine Arts a “brothel of pictorial art.”

The earliest textual evidence of Pythagoras’s teachings dates from centuries after his death, and later commentaries inevitably involve a large dose of speculation. This suited Vasconcelos just fine, since it allowed him to offer a novel “interpretation” of the Greek’s system as governed not so much by harmony as by the kinetic principle of rhythm. As a prelude he outlines two distinct and opposing ways of understanding the world: one “objective, analytic, intellectual, in a word, scientific,” and the other “synthetic, what has been called intuitive but is rather the aesthetic perception of things.” Plato and others after him aligned Pythagoras with the first worldview by overemphasizing the mathematical factor in his correlation of harmonic intervals with numerical ratios. But the conceptual distinction between form and matter (insists Vasconcelos) was not yet established in Pythagoras’s time, and when the cult leader pointed to numbers as the essence of all things, he was really just using the notion of the “number” as a symbol for the phenomenon of rhythm, or a movement that was “regular” (acompañado) but at the same time “indefinite” and irreducible to abstract formulas. In fact, this was surely the “lost secret” of all the Greek mysteries, or esoteric schools: everything in the universe, independent of any perceptible motions it may make, has the capacity to vibrate in tandem with “our intimate tendencies” and “our essence of beauty” (7). Pythagoras spoke about cosmic “harmony,” but he must have intuited that harmony and pitch are first and foremost a function of rhythmic vibrations—a point confirmed by modern physicists such as Hermann von Helmholtz, whose landmark Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen (On the Sensations of Tone, 1865) proposed a theory of hearing based on “cochlear resonance,” or the hypothesis that microscopic structures in the ear similar to the strings of a piano vibrate in accordance with the frequencies of incoming sound.

This appeal to the findings of physiological acoustics muddies the schematic opposition between scientific and aesthetic worldviews, setting up a tension similar to the one rippling through the author’s earlier argument about sovereignty and revolution. As Veit Erlmann has argued, Helmholtz’s neo-Kantian attempt to reconcile an empirical approach to the physics of hearing with a transcendental epistemology was symptomatic of an ongoing crisis of rationality in which the ear became a pivotal site for wrestling with agency and what it meant to “know.” Sympathetic resonance was an observable phenomenon (at least in its effects), yet it destabilized the distinction between subject and object fundamental to the very premise of reason. According to Erlmann, Helmholtz’s revisions to his theory over the course of several editions of his book were related to his struggle to circumvent an entrenched dualism between the “objective” or “physical” mechanics of sensation and the “subjective” or “psychic” element of perception—a problem also tied to his conception of music history and an overarching theory of
knowledge. Like earlier thinkers drawn to the idea of resonance, his work pointed to the “ear as a form of embodied knowledge, as something we think with” while revealing the “deep interpenetration of fact and value, objectivity and affect, and most of all—science and music.”

Ever the synthesizer, Vasconcelos opts to assimilate resonance into rhythm, an equally evocative and even fuzzier concept that was in the midst of a decades-long surge in popularity. As the critic Michael Golston points out in his work on modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, much of the fascination and anxiety surrounding rhythm had to do with its strange ability to stand as the epitome of the organic while also seeming uncannily mechanical. The rhythms of the body—of circulation, the beating of the heart, and respiration—were said to work in sync with the changes of the seasons and other movements of the natural world; yet Georg Simmel warned that new technologies were altering the age-old rhythms that once formed the basis of communal life, and others attempted to harness the power of rhythm, whether to cure the body of its modern ails or to optimize the exploitation of industrial labor. Such concerns were often bound up in ideas about race: as Vasconcelos surely knew, the notion of rhythmic motions propelled by antagonistic forces was integral to the social evolutionism of Herbert Spencer, and Nietzsche opined that each language was distinguished by its unique tempo, which had its basis in the physiological “metabolism” of the race. Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, a closer contemporary, invoked the trauma of World War I in presenting his pedagogical program of eurythmics, which trained children in carefully controlled movements and dance. For Dalcroze, differences of climate, custom, and history had fostered a distinct “rhythmic sense” in each group of people, leading him to propose the segregation of eurythmics centers by ethnicity on the grounds that the “reduction of racial temperaments to a common level would be disastrous for the intellectual level of humanity.” At his Hellerau Institute near Dresden, Dalcroze welcomed musicians and artists, who offered performances at a “festival theater” constructed by Adolphe Appia, the Swiss stage designer known for his mises-en-scène of Wagner. Among Dalcroze’s enthusiasts was Samuel Chávez, an architect who trained at the Hellerau Institute and on his return to Mexico in 1921 was encouraged to introduce “rhythmic gymnastics” into the curriculum of the public schools, where it became essential to the students’ training for the festivals and mass spectacles that were a hallmark of Vasconcelos’s program.

Vasconcelos doesn’t cite any of these ideas (though he does quote Nietzsche on music), and there is not a word about race in Pitágoras. His priority in this text is simply to establish that an ability to tune into good vibrations allows certain special individuals to transform not just minds or even souls, but also flesh and blood. Pythagoras may have been the leader of a secretive cult, and his rarefied ideas about the cosmos might seem distant from everyday concerns, but just as rhythm (like resonance) bridges the divide between body and mind, it can also connect inspired geniuses to the common
folk, allowing philosophers today as in the past to overcome the demagogy of “those who fear the masses listening to the voice of the sincere thinker \([pensador]\).” Who exactly the modern-day demagogues are is unclear, but a vague allusion to “legislative abuses” tenuously links the author’s push to supersede the limits of reason and the individual subject to his earlier struggle to transcend the constraints of liberal democracy. Mystics, he suggests, are the “laborers of thought” (los obreros del pensamiento), and while “the collective factor in mental labor is indeterminable,” it is also undeniable, if only because thought—as a form of rhythm—is “contagious.” It is also intensely physical, so Pythagoras and his followers engaged in “collective exercises, music, and dances” in order to beautify their bodies and prime them for the process of “contemplation”—a woefully inadequate word given that what they were doing was nothing less than tapping into el ritmo de lo real, or “the rhythm of the real” (38). If the basic building blocks are atoms, which are made up of electrically charged, moving particles, then rhythm is both the substance and spirit of matter—and this in turn is proof of Henri Bergson’s notion of a shared \(\text{élan vital}\), or vital force immanent in all organisms.\(^43\) In short, rhythm acts as a conduit between our consciousness and the material world, and “music teaches us the secret of art, which consists of freeing matter from the empire of necessity, and imprinting on it, in contemplation, a movement of irregular rhythm, the inverse of that which natural mechanics imposes on it” (45).

Clearly the still-incipient development of quantum mechanics is mixed up in all this, and some of it might not sound so strange today in light of the recent resurgence of vitalist ideas, including those of Bergson: although the “new” materialists (such as Jane Bennett, who writes of “vibrant matter”) generally emphasize the agency of things over people while Vasconcelos does the inverse (at least here), their mutual destabilization of the boundaries of the human means that this very distinction tends to break down.\(^44\) But a grumpier sort of materialist might feel compelled to ask: what is all this mystical business about “rhythms” and “vibrations” actually about? Golston points out that the ability of rhythm to mean almost anything and its opposite makes it the “ideal ideological cipher, since it can so easily signify.”\(^45\) This is a tempting explanation given the subsequent fate of Vasconcelos and his larger-than-life idea, yet it assumes there was already something there to cipher. At no point during his time in government or even long after did Vasconcelos ever retract his views on the need for a radical redistribution of resources, and considering his warning about the limitations of any post-revolutionary government, it is hardly a surprise that his relationship with the Obregón regime was always tense. Far better than any of his peers in the budding intelligentsia, and far better than a lot of his later critics, he saw the paradox in which his own identity as an intellectual was enmeshed. The revolutionary assembly had afforded a momentary solution by enabling his vision of an exceptional form of sovereignty, a law unbeholden to the unjust
social system. In his text on Pythagoras he turns to the “irregular rhythm” of aesthetics as another way of imagining the exception, another way of imagining collective power, and another way of imagining the material world as capable of change. Conveniently, of course, the key to making things move is the philosopher, who “interprets the whole” and thus acts an *artista en grande*—an artist on a large scale (40).

Vasconcelos had a thing for tragedy, and his own fatal flaw was his inability to see politics in terms other than those of national sovereignty. Yet as in Greek tragedy, his *hamartia* was not simply a subjective failing but also in part the result of objective forces and constraints (i.e., “the gods”). In *El monismo estético* (1918), a series of three essays—again identified as such in the first line—some of these real-world pressures begin to surface and his ethereal argument about rhythm acquires more (literary) shape. He starts out in the introduction on a familiar note, explaining that what follows should be taken as preliminary remarks meant to “prepare the path” for a system of aesthetic metaphysics that will someday supplant dialectical reasoning with a form of cognition based on a Kantian “intuition of synthesis.” He also devotes several long paragraphs to his future plans for a series of essays inspired by Nietzsche’s book on the birth of tragedy, which will address the topics of evil and irony, “auditory mysticism,” and dance. The overriding concern in this book, however, is literary genre and form. The volume’s first essay, on the “symphony as a literary form,” follows the evolution of philosophical genres through time, starting with the epic poetry of the Greeks, from which the dialogue and the discourse are “born.” The author soldiers on through the medieval treatise, and eventually all the way up to the very genre in which his own thoughts are expressed—at which point he suddenly emerges as his own antagonist.

Yes, it is true: the man known as the author of a famous essay hated the essay genre. Vasconcelos scorns it for all the same reasons its defenders are wont to cite: it is an “incomplete,” “pluralist” form that “neither obeys rules nor proposes to create them,” a genre “marred by mediocrity” that merely expresses personal opinions or critique without proposing to construct a system of its own (24–25). He concedes that a few exceptional essays (ahem, ahem) manage to exploit their “formal indetermination” to open up new avenues toward a “total vision,” but as a rule, he says, “the essay is nothing but a transitory genre, from which it becomes necessary to liberate ourselves” (24). If it sounds like something more than stylistic niceties are at stake here, sure enough—it turns out the essay is also the favored form of “the English, empiricist, evolutionist school” whose “minor brains” lack the ability to establish “fundamental principles” (3–4). For all its humble appearances, it is an agent of oppression, a vehicle for a discourse of biological racism that consigns Latin America to the primeval past and an incomplete form that imposes the worldview of an “anti-mystic, anti-heroic, and anti-religious race of businessmen” (12). This pernicious influence is the bête noire against which
the Mexican writer conceives his own system of “totalist thought, intoxicated by an infinite, mystic essence” (5). Vasconcelos extols lyric, tragedy, and the Platonic dialogues (insisting that Plato was a Pythagorean despite his claims to the contrary), yet rather than advocating a return to any of these forms, he proclaims that today’s “modern mystics” are on the verge of creating an entirely new one—the “literary symphony,” which will do in writing what Beethoven’s Fifth (a “modern tragedy”) does with music. Philosophers should act like composers and “arrange ideas like orchestral themes, developing them through endless paths and profound analogies” (39). As examples of works that have begun to hew this road, he cites Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*—an unorthodox “essay on the relation of body and spirit,” a philosophical parable “for all and none,” and a fantastical play originally written to be read rather than performed onstage.

What do these examples have in common? For one, all three are generic oddballs; second, all call into question the ability of the human form to serve as a stable medium of signification. Vasconcelos’s “aesthetic monism” seeks a new mode of thought as well as a new mode of expression, a genre that subsumes all those currently existing in order to surpass the limitations of form. Yet these dual objectives also imply a third: the task of creating new bodies. “Within a profoundly biotic sense,” the author proclaims, his notion of the aesthetic “reforms the law of sensation, replacing its practical sense with one that is disinterested and aesthetic” (43). Physiology. Knowledge. The work of art. Where does the connection lie? As his musical model suggests, rhythm once again provides the key. Recapping his argument from *Pitágoras*, the author states that an imperceptible “energy” lies latent in the physical world, waiting to be stimulated into action by the rhythm of consciousness. The task of his literary symphony is to make things “move in unison with the spirit”—or, extrapolating just a bit, to create a shared experience of the aesthetic that alters the vibrations of individuals’ electrons and atoms, bringing all men into “biotic” accord (18). The final text in *El monismo estético*, titled “The Mystic Synthesis,” is presented as a first attempt at enacting these ideas, though Vasconcelos coyly admits that his transcendence of generic conventions remains incomplete (“Perhaps this is an ensayo for a literary symphony”). It makes a strenuous effort to meld religions and aesthetics, to augur the existence of a “Jesus Christ Buddha” that would “exceed the human form” (100), but it never frees itself from the imperative of logical argumentation. Far from mystical, it is the most lackluster text in the book.

The language of race, the obsession with synthesis, the cosmic debris: enough of the key elements are there to surmise that the cosmic (“synthetic”) race will be born not through acts of sexual miscegenation, but through a mixture of genres that sets all bodies vibrating on the same frequency. Lest we rush ahead of history, however, it is important to insist that this is not exactly “ideology.” As Louis Althusser argued, “Ideology has a material
existence”—it is as much a matter of institutions, apparatuses, and bodily practices as of ideas. In his example of a person on the street who is hailed by a policeman (“Hey, you there!”), the interpellation of the subject takes place by means of a “one-hundred-eighty-degree physical conversion,” or the almost automatic motion of turning to face the voice (118). Martin Harries points out that Althusser highlights the theatricality of his own example, referring to it as a “mise en scène” and “my little theoretical theater.” This imaginary stage is what enables Althusser to narrativize a process he emphasizes has always already taken place in ideology and outside time, since “ideology has no history.” As Harries explains, “Such a translation from unthought, timeless ideology into aesthetic medium is necessary in order to recognize how ideology works: the model of the theater makes it possible to imagine in temporal sequence something that does not belong to the order of time at all.”

Vasconcelos, of course, was coming at things from a different angle, and not only because the voice in his scenario was that of the philosopher rather than the police. Written in exile, in the middle of a decade-long revolution when most of the state apparatuses Althusser refers to were not in place, these early writings can be seen as attempts to imagine how ideology works, in ways remarkably consonant with Althusser’s observations. The Pythagorean rituals, the model of aural interpellation, the inseparability of thought from the body: even Vasconcelos’s attraction to experimental physics resonates with Althusser’s broader struggle to redefine the relationship between science and philosophy. And so it is perhaps no coincidence that just two years after his text on aesthetic monism, Vasconcelos too would construct his own “little theoretical theater.”

Cosmic Upsets and Promethean Failures

José Vasconcelos wrote his first play sometime around 1918 while in the seaside city of San Diego, California. As he tells it in a brief foreword, he started out writing an essay on the subject of evil and irony—part of the series of projected works inspired by Nietzsche that had been announced in the introduction to El monismo estético. For some reason, the essay simply wasn’t working. So the future cultural caudillo wrote, rewrote, and changed course several times until he came up with a “modern tragedy” about an anti-imperialist prophet who exhorts his followers to shun procreation in preparation for the advent of an “aesthetic” era. His mea culpa: “I must acknowledge that I set about doing one thing and ended up with something else.” This struggle with form has to do with the fact that he “deviated” a bit from the question of evil in order to put forth a tentative “doctrine” that his cohorts had previously dismissed as too tétrico (“gloomy,” “pessimistic,” or “funereal”). Once he presents his embryonic idea in this new guise, he
wagers, even the skeptics will concede that it possesses “enormous possibilities of beauty” (6). Though it may fail to meet the demands of discursive thought, it is justified by its potential as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Seventy years later Prometeo vencedor is still waiting for its day to dawn. It is hardly a surprise that the book had few readers when it was first published in Mexico back in 1920—after all, the country’s infrastructure was a mess after a decade of war, and all those libraries, schools, and journals Vasconcelos would go on to create were still just hazy ideas. But in the voluminous pages of criticism devoted to extolling, decrying, and deconstructing his legacy, this strange relic of the revolution receives little more than the occasional footnote, the odd sentence tacked onto the end of a paragraph as an afterthought that acknowledges, “Ah yes, and he also wrote that unfortunate play.” Indeed, even the most open-minded reader is likely to wonder how a paean to beauty and idealism could go so awry. Suffice it to say that the play’s most enduring legacy is having served as the ironic inspiration for Renato Leduc’s Prometeo sifilitico, a scabrous masterpiece of obscene antipoetry in which the Greek hero’s crime against the gods is not stealing fire, but revealing the divine secrets of sexual innovation to humanity, whose carnal knowledge has failed to progress from the dark ages of the missionary position. (Rather than being tied to a rock and having his liver eaten every day by an eagle, he is punished with syphilis and castration.) If Vasconcelos had only known, maybe he would have stuck with that essay after all.

The abandoned origins of Prometeo vencedor still haunt it in the form of a lengthy prose “prologue” appended to the dramatic text. Like his future, far more famous prologue-cum-essay, this prologue to a play that could/would have been an essay sets itself the distinctly unessayistic task of telling the entirety of world history. The text begins by describing a pre-ethical phase of human development—the material, or warrior stage, if La raza cósmica’s schema is projected back onto this text, the first line of which announces with pseudo-biblical pomp: “Happily wanders the beast, ignorant of pain.”55 Humans, meanwhile, are lowlier than beasts because although they possess consciousness, they do nothing to alter the injustice they suffer under an unnamed Tyrant. Prometheus steps in to “initiate the order of will over the order of necessity” (10), but after two brief paragraphs he is shuttled off the page and immediately eclipsed by a more intriguing icon of rebellion: Satan. In a strange blend of everyday language and philosophical cant, the text recounts the devil’s fall from grace, relays his unsatisfactory encounter with a Tiger (the King of Beasts), and justifies his decision to align himself with death as a means of spurring humans out of their renewed complacency. Adding to the odd mix of registers and cultural referents is a subtle slippage in pronouns, so that by the last few pages phrases such as “Satan observed” and “he climbed Olympus” have given way to “I rest,” “I meditate,” and “I was in the valleys of the Ganges.” A voice that is identified as the Devil’s but might also be the author’s breezily ponders the problem of evil, scoffs
at imperialist tyrants, and so on, until the storyline with its fictional figures fades away entirely and for long stretches it seems as though the text we are reading is not the prologue to a play but a—well, an essay.

This awkward allegory is no centaur, however. Humans may be shown lapsing into bovine existence, but the goal is to transcend man’s creaturely half, not domesticate it. Culture is neither an extension of nature nor its double but rather its antithesis, and at this point, after years of warfare in Mexico and a world “war to end all wars,” there is no illusion it already exists. Just a few years later, Vasconcelos would espouse similar notions in a text that, though eccentric, looks enough like a Spanish American essay to be widely (mis)taken for one, but his earlier prologue is clearly uncomfortable in its own skin. Narrative passages sit uneasily alongside essay-like ruminations, the colloquial tone jars with the universalizing intent, and the author’s voice never fully emerges from behind its satanic mask. Given his prefatory commentary on the play’s origins, its incomplete identity with the essay genre is surely part of its point. It is as if the prologue were meant to exemplify the struggle through which its own ideas sought to free themselves from the essay’s morass, as if generic conventions were akin to theoretical concepts and their interplay was itself a kind of argument.

So it is that Satanás, convinced by neither angels nor beasts, decides to join forces with his Greek counterpart and search for “vigor” and “audacity” among men (15). The final paragraph slips back into narrative mode as he surveys the landscape and spots a shooting star whose tail, pointing toward earth, “signals in the direction of Egypt, in the direction of Judea!” (21). He hits the dusty trail, and when the reader turns the page the prologue has given way to a stage and the sight of the Promised Land: not Judea, but the peaks of the mountain chain that joins the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, with a view of Puebla in one direction and Mexico City in the other. Prometheus sits on a rock, “with his fist under his chin, in the pose of Rodin’s thinker and maintaining, to the extent possible, his robust pagan nudity”; by his side is Satan, “with the angular figure the legend has bestowed on him” (23).

The stage is thus set for the events that will usher in a realm beyond good and evil. Yet in keeping with its speculative nature, the bizarre plot about to unfold hardly seems designed to play out on a “material” stage: there is nothing to suggest that Vasconcelos ever desired to see Prometeo vencedor performed, and the nondramatic prologue is itself a sign that this is a drama for readers, not a script to be represented by actors for a theatrical audience. The obvious model in this opening scene is Plato’s Socratic dialogues—a genre central to Nietzsche’s account of the death and rebirth of tragedy. Although Vasconcelos remains strangely mum on the relation in his own genealogy of genres, the Platonic (and Socratic) antagonism toward the flowering of tragedy and comedy that accompanied the rise of democracy in Athens is hard to overlook. Nietzsche lambasts the dialectical logic of
Socrates as the antithesis of the Dionysian spirit of tragedy; at the same time, he grudgingly concedes, Plato’s dialogues were the “ark” on which poetry survived in an increasingly rational age. Like tragedy before it, the dialogue was created by “mixing all available styles and forms together so that it hovers somewhere midway between narrative, lyric, and drama.”

Not only is the dialogue itself a quasi-theatrical form, but Socrates frequently builds his arguments around examples drawn from particular plays. Indeed, the dialogues as a whole subtly parody, revise, and/or overturn a number of tragic and comic conventions. As Andrea Wilson Nightingale argues, “When Plato constructed the specialized discipline of philosophy . . . he did not sequester it. Rather, he staged an ongoing dialogue between philosophy and its ‘others.’” To put it another way: the father of philosophy elaborates his theory of ideal forms by at once indulging and disavowing what Nightingale calls a “hankering for the hybrid” (2).

*Prometeo vencedor* is less bashful in engulfing the dialogue in its own generic blend, and it quickly outstrips its more sedentary predecessor with its elaborate plot, settings, and cast of characters. Among all its other affiliations (modern tragedy, literary symphony, post-Platonic postdialogue), Vasconcelos’s text is also sort of a closet drama, a term often employed by critics for dramatic texts meant to be read rather than staged. Here again he is working from some obvious (if unacknowledged) models. With all the other met literary allusions in this play it is hard not to see its Mephistophelian Satanás and triumphant Prometeo as attempts to one-up Goethe’s *Faust* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, two of the numerous closet dramas by Romantics that put pressure on the Platonic ideal by bringing its dependence on the dramatic to light. Scholars often smile at the derivative, old-fashioned air of Vasconcelos’s aesthetics, and his turn to this arcane genre could be seen in such a light; yet the recent renaissance in the study of closet dramas offers reasons for seeing it as a modern(ist) move. As Martin Puchner has pointed out, Mallarmé sought to create his own “total” genre, a goal he pursued in his “theater-book” *Livre* and his poetic dramas *Hérodiade* and *Igitur*. Later figures such as T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound would also write awkward plays often classified as closet dramas (even if some were actually staged) because of either a lack or excess of action that defies what can convincingly be performed. Puchner traces this modernist suspicion of embodied mimesis and the public aspect of art back to Plato, even as he also positions it as a countercurrent to the “total theatricality” championed by the avant-garde and a textual bulwark against new forms of mass spectacle. In his words, the “resistance to the theater also produces a theater, one that breaks apart the human figure and rebels against the mimetic confines of a stage and theatrical action.”

Not unlike the essay, the modernist closet drama establishes its autonomy as a textually mediated mode of performativity. As with the essay, however, *Prometeo vencedor*’s formal convergence with the (anti)tradition of the closet
drama also marks a discrepancy in social function. Like Plato, Vasconcelos defined himself as a philosopher; like Shelley or Mallarmé, he was also a writer. At the same time, he was an intellectual who had served as a scribe for the leaders of a revolutionary army and was already looking ahead to the possibility of establishing a new cultural order founded on the principle of mass education. He would deliver speeches on aesthetics before audiences in the thousands, build a sixty-thousand-seat “stadium theater” to serve as the stage for mass ballets and political spectacles, and promote the “art of the future” as the only antidote to economic imperialism. Prometeo vencedor’s resistance to the “mimetic confines of a stage” also produces a theater, but it is one with a far more instrumental intent.

As is clear from the opening tableau of Prometeo and his satanic sidekick looking down on humanity from their mountainous perch, this modern tragedy will not be an exact replay of the old defy-the-gods-and-suffer-for-eternity routine. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche invokes Aeschylus’s Prometheus as the archetypal tragic hero, a figure born of the struggle between Apollonian representation and its Dionysian dismemberment. Like the art of tragedy itself, Prometheus is a redemptive illusion, a constructive force driven by a desire for justice, yet he is ultimately a mask for Dionysius, essence of the primordial unity, god of music and all that eludes figuration. Prometheus is the ideal protagonist of the impossible theater Nietzsche desires—in the words of Puchner, a “theater without representation, actors, and beholders, the hallucination of an invisible theater that isn’t one.” Inevitably, he has to undergo a transformation in his transposition back to the stage, purely textual though it may be. Vasconcelos’s Prometeo is no longer the suffering Dionysian martyr; rather, he is a victorious hero and the perfect picture of Apollonian repose, likened to a sculpture (the sun god’s signature art) that is also an oft-parodied image of philosophical (non)activity. The rebel has become a respected member of the classical canon—indeed, the sly instruction that he should “conserve as much as possible his robust pagan nudity” points to his conformity with the conventional mores that circumscribe what can be shown even on a virtual stage.

Prometheus triumphs. And then? The tragic hero and mythic maker of men, the West’s symbol of knowledge, creativity, and technological progress, loses the ability to embody the eternal contradiction at the heart of the world, and another element is required to set the dialectic in motion again. This is the role of Satanás, the inveterate naysayer who is defined by what he is not, a figure described as a shadow and a “murky liquid”—a demonic character who, were the play ever performed, might prompt the use of cinematic projections or some other technological media. In truth, Satanás only exists as mediation: his modus operandi is irony, the product of an incongruity or gap between literal meaning and intent, and so he has no ideal form. Yet he does have a genre. Throughout the play, he invokes comedic forms from the Spanish tradition: “minor” genres such as the theatrical sainete, which operate
according to a logic other than that of artistic autonomy. One character calls him an “old pícaro”—the roguish protagonist of a picaresque narrative—and another a “devil from a pastorela”—shepherd’s plays that live on in the realm of Mexican popular performance. Nearly the entire first act consists of long colloquies in which the two icons of iconoclasm debate the merits of their philosophical and stylistic predilections:

prometeo: Pleasure is sterile. Suffering is fecund, because it forces one to be grave, to struggle and discover power.
satanás: Have you tried irony?
prometeo: You’re the prince of irony, I know, but irony is incapable of building anything. However, irony does serve to denounce our shady intentions and draw us away from incomplete ideals and false gods.

prometeo: El goce es estéril. El sufrimiento es fecundo, porque obliga a ser grave, a luchar y a descubrir poder.
satanás: ¿Has probado la ironía?
prometeo: Sé que tú eres el príncipe de la ironía, pero la ironía es incapaz de construir. Sin embargo, la ironía sirve para denunciar nuestros propósitos turbios, y para apartarnos de los ideales incompletos y de los dioses falsos. (26)

Prometeo’s analysis of irony as an inferior force that de(con)structs without constructing any principles of its own is clearly a judgment on the comedic modes of satire and parody, which rely on imitation and are therefore bound to what they critique. At the same time, it echoes the author’s own description of the essay, that “incomplete” form cultivated by a race whose “minor brains” and disinclination for “fundamental principles” were also to blame for George Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie—both exponents of an abominable form of humor a la inglesa that “brings ideals down to the level of buffoons.” Vasconcelos’s commentary on English humor is only a brief aside, but it is worth recalling that Adorno describes the essay’s tendency to “devour” ideal theories as parodic; devoted to critique rather than creation, “the essay does not in fact come to a conclusion and displays its own inability to do so as a parody of its own a priori.” Vasconcelos sought to transform Latin America into a creative principle, the privileged bearer of universality—everything the essay is not. Yet the essay is the necessary foil for his literary symphony, the fragmentary medium through which he projects his own invisible ideal, and in a similar way, his essay—that-becomes-a-tragedy has to pass through parody. Prometeo vencedor can’t simply assume the mantle of the tragic tradition at the outset because its own tragedy is an endpoint, a goal it hopes to achieve in overcoming this tradition while taking it to a higher—and bigger—stage. The play allegorizes the aesthetic and objectifies the privileged
symbols of Western culture, exposing them as historical constructs that are no longer and not yet universal, and this incomplete totality, this gap, is the shaky ground on which it founds its own claim to the tragic legacy. Prometeo needs Satanás; in a relation reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, one of the inspirations Vasconcelos cites for his play, the tragic ideal and the ironic ensayo are not enemies but intimate accomplices.

In fact, only after their tête-à-tête can the play begin to articulate its own nascent “theory.” When a noise resembling the vibration of a telegraph interrupts the dialogue, Prometeo explains to a quizzical Satanás that he has received a message via a system of mental communication “more perfect than any device”—impulses of energy shared by those of a like nature, “as the vibrations of a similar order [un orden afín] join together in an orchestra: violins with violins, brass instruments with brass instruments, to form phrases and themes” (39). Pythagorean rhythms are clearly in play here, as is a more general association between spiritualist practices and new technologies such as telegraphy. As Vasconcelos stresses in his essay, Pythagoras himself was a believer in metempsychosis, and if souls can transmigrate from one body to another, the literal transference of thoughts should be a simple operation. In this scene, the triumphant hero already resides in the realm of the aesthetic; he already thinks as part of a symphony. Now the task is to extend this community beyond mythic figures and a few mortal mystics to include all men, to generate a genre of thought that the scene encourages us to envision as mass communication with no external mediating device. As if on cue, “a shadow appears, which is at first tenuous and then becomes clearer until its outlines are precise and meld into those of a man in everyday attire” (40). It is a recently defunct Philosopher of the Earth, passing by en route to the afterlife to spread the word: the world war spelled the end of an era, and in the future “empires will not be formed by the sword or commerce but by taste and sympathy,” while “nationalisms, which are the work of politics, will gave way to pan-ethnicisms,” collectivities organized by languages. Spanish America, the world’s melting pot, is the natural epicenter of this movement: “The men of all races who have gathered there speak of forming a new humanity with what is best of every culture, harmonized and ennobled within the Spanish mold.” (41).

This cameo appearance by the Everyman is the only moment in the plot when the play acknowledges its own historical stage, the only thread that ties its philosophical banter and prophetic visions to an identity claim. The Philosopher’s predictions are short on details, and some of the details differ (Vasconcelos had not yet been to Brazil or concocted Universópolis), but he already has the gist of the idea that would become the cosmic race. What is missing is the unifying figure. Spoken by a dead man who materializes out of thin air, a feat impossible to perform on the material stage in which humanity is stuck, these words aren’t mediated by the authorial voice and incipient institutional apparatus that would shape La raza cósmica into what
some now perceive as an essay. Their only grounds of justification are the future. The Promethean task of this tragedy over the next two acts will be to bear them out in the mimetic mode—to create the beautiful illusion. First, however, the Philosopher has to contend with Satanás, who mocks the man as naive and asks: How could the future of freedom lie in Spanish America, where “run-of-the-mill despots” (los déspotas más ramplones) rule? The scene nearly devolves into an absurd fistfight when the diabolic jester likens the dreamer to an “ape recently come down [descolgado] from the tropical forest,” evidence that the devil is in cahoots with the English, evolutionist essayists (42).

But in fact, this scene suggests an affinity between Satanás and the phenomenon known as relajo, a form of mocking, frequently physical, and sometimes violent humor that is regarded as peculiarly Mexican. Like a similar mode of Cuban humor called choteo, relajo had become an object of intellectual interest by the late 1920s and early 1930s and was often depicted in ambivalent terms, as a kind of ironic comedy endowed with a critical value but ultimately dependent on what it critiqued and innately hostile to the construction of autonomous ideals. In pseudo-Socratic fashion, Satanás reminds the idealist of the political obstacles that relegate his vision to the realm of fancy, even as he exposes the political dimension of the play’s effort to enthrone art as an ideal. Vasconcelos already knew that foundational acts are messy—they always play out on the political stage. Furthermore, unlike most modernist closet dramas, Prometeo vencedor is driven by the irreducibly political desire to claim aesthetics as an agent of anti-imperialism. As a consequence, its own autonomy can only be a precarious illusion, which the play registers through the figure of Satanás. It then goes on to prefigure his defeat by excluding all trace of politics from the space of representation. When the second act opens, Satanás has dropped out of the picture, and the rough-hewn naturalism of Rodin has given way to a stylized forest scene, with characters “richly dressed according to the style of Botticelli’s Primavera. At the same time, there should be details of the most refined modernismo, as the action takes place in a future thousands of years from now” (46).

Presumably, this is it: the aesthetic era, when nature is remade in the image of art and the artistic styles of the past are recapitulated as reality. It could in fact be the poetic world of Mallarmé or Rubén Dario: the scene begins with a choir of nymphs who entice Prometeo (now flying solo) with a siren song that touts the advantages of being beautiful but barren. Nowhere else in the play is race linked to phenotype, but these lovely ladies wax poetic about their skin tones, all shades of white: “We are white like the clearest marble . . . Others of us are white with a bluish tint, whiter than the white of a blond woman and more provocative . . . Others of us have been burnished by the sun’s golden rays” (47). Evidently some cosmic mixing has occurred through acts of aesthetic gratification, though indigenous cultures must have been consigned to the sphere of nature, just as they are excluded from the play’s
own generic blend. Stage directions describe Dionysian choirs and dances that look oddly like the mass choirs and dances the author would later organize as secretary of public education—performances that sought to create a “new artistic genre” in which the thousands of participants would be “at the same time, spectators and actors,” a fusion that would signal “the triumph of our race.”65 A prophet named Saturnino, a more advanced incarnation of the Philosopher, descends in an airplane and addresses the masses, just like the globetrotting pedagogues of La raza cósmica. He recaps the history of how this marvelous new world came to be—the political stage readers were not allowed to see—and urges his people to remain strong in their will to defeat materiality, to deny the instinct that compels procreation and become a truly universal race. Not through force, not through violence—rather, “the resolution of abstinence must well up from the depths of love [or “wanting,” de lo hondo del querer]” (61).66 (Vasconcelos frequently associated aesthetic creation with the refusal of biological procreation: it comes up in his essay on Pythagoras, and despite his very public love affairs, he would later recall in his autobiography that on learning his wife was pregnant with their second child, he experienced a “sense of failure” and “physical repugnance” that led him to hole up in his room and write the “hymns to sterility” out of which Prometeo vencedor was eventually born.)67

No critic has done a better job of exposing the ideological intentions of the cosmic race than its author does here. From now on, readers of La raza cósmica can spare themselves the trouble of proving that mestizaje is really a code word for whitening or that Vasconcelos’s anti-imperialism is secretly trying to do European universalism bigger and better. All the secrets are on the surface in this allegory. A bystander explains the source of Saturnino’s power to Prometeo: the Philosopher’s doctrine is nothing special, but “he knows how to state it [exponer, also to display or show] with dramatic characters; he takes it to its extreme consequences” (49). Everything is out in the open because here, on a virtual stage, Vasconcelos theorizes with dramatic characters the way ideology works, and as is true of Saturnino’s creed, the power of his theory lies not just in its “content” but in its style and its form. On the one hand, Prometeo vencedor presents itself as a prefiguration of the aesthetic future it prophesies—within this textually mediated world, millennia are like a day, people can become white by singing the right songs, imperialism is defeated through sheer will, and dead men can reappear. Yet the extravagance of these feats also ensures their impossibility. The cosmic race is so tragically powerful because the illusion can’t actually be performed, though it can call forth desire.

But this is only the second act, and no Paradise is ever perfect, especially one that requires a stage. Although the bodies in this play are purely textual, a textual body is still a body of a certain sort, still haunted by the specter of the flesh. As a “theory” that hinges on the metaphor of race, Vasconcelos’s cosmic idea also needs the body: racial miscegenation is what enables his
identity claim on behalf of Spanish America, but it also stands in the way of
the triumphant march toward universality. And so, before long, this fragile
illusion begins to break down as the outlines of familiar genres reappear.
An Old Man pokes holes in Saturnino’s philosophy, Saturnino responds, the
Old Man answers back, and suddenly it’s a Socratic dialogue all over again!
Melodrama is thrown into the mix with a weepy monologue by a mother
whose only son has died. And though a choir sings of the “ill-fated tragedy”
that is unfolding, the act ends on a comic note when a group of “the ugliest
women” threatens to go procreate, to which Saturnino scoffs that they will
never find willing partners. Looking back on it now, their response is more
than a little ironic: “We’ll search for centaurs! Strong centaurs! Beautiful
centaurs!” (70).

Act 3 brings us to the grand finale. Flanked by Prometeo and Satanás,
perched atop the Himalayas, a now-elderly Saturnino delivers a comically
overblown performance of tragic suffering: “Here I sit on the world’s high-
est rock, like a new Prometheus, tormented, no longer by the Olympic furies
but by the rigor of my own thoughts!” (71). Surrounding him are “strange
apparatuses,” among them an audio device and telescope-reflector that allow
him to see and communicate with any site on earth, though the only people
left are Saturnino, a man in Africa, and a third in the Americas: an untimely
Third World alliance whose members toll a bell every midnight to let the
others know they are still alive. Saturnino and his mythic companions wait
for the hour to arrive. They listen. There is only silence, “the negative signal”
(78). This is the prophet’s cue. “Oh! Race that suffered such ardor [afán],
your final cry will be a cry of triumph, expressed in a vibrating, celestial mel-
ody!” He carries on for page after page, proclaiming “the end of the tragedy
of man! . . . Nature has concluded its ensayo!” Finally his well of Dionysian
exclamation marks runs dry and he drops dead (79).

Surely this ecstatic frenzy is the single moment when the race that does
not yet have a name but would later become “cosmic” actually exists. This
is the death that gives birth to the synthetic race, the Genre formed from
the mixture of every conceivable medium and genre, the moment of agony
when Nietzsche’s invisible theater seems to be in sight and all the incomplete
ensayos give way to a total, tragic performance that will abolish the stage.
This is what should take place, in theory, but even in the skewed world of
this play it doesn’t happen that way. For one, Saturnino’s solo still rides the
line where tragedy meets its parody. And while he may be the sole representa-
tive of the Race whose song he sings, actor and audience can’t collapse into
the primordial unity, because Satanás and Prometeo are there to witness his
show. Indeed, they are still dissertating over his inert corpse when all of sud-
den a young man clad in kangaroo hides bursts onto the scene, “with a not
very intelligent appearance but a strong body and resolute gestures.” He com-
mandeers the global speaker system and announces, “We have triumphed,
the world is ours!” (84). Lo and behold, it turns out that hordes of lusty
women and a few feeble men escaped Saturnino’s influence and went to live Down Under, where they bred like rabbits in the forest and created an artificial fog to thwart the guru’s surveillance devices. (Note from the author of this book: I am not making this up.) In other words, the technological mediation of the globe was faulty and incomplete; the prophet’s achievement of absolute consciousness was an illusion. Even Satanás is dismayed to discover that “this whole beautiful tragedy of Saturnino and his heroic generation has been nothing but a *sainete*, a decadent *entremés* in the majestic and fatal course of life” (86). In a split second, *Prometeo vencedor* falls apart, its title is unmasked as ironic, aesthetic form collapses into “minor” theatrical genres from the Spanish tradition, the universal race falls prey to Anglo-Saxon imperialists, and the sublimation of thought is bested by the body’s desire. Tragic pathos is upstaged by the comic.

Or is it cosmic? Prometeo, for one, refuses to concede defeat—he insists that even if it was all just a rehearsal, there is a “yearning that is noble but blind, there is a sublime order of force, a new rhythm we call aesthetic” (91). On the heels of the Australian bushwhacker’s scene-stealing debut, his lofty speech seems absurd. What is this if not parody? Even so, maybe Prometeo is right—what takes place onstage may be funny (or trying very hard to be), but tragedy was never meant to be the “content” of the cosmic race. *Prometeo vencedor* mixes genres high and low, conjuring up the possibility of a moment when all distinctions will disappear; it tries to turn the West’s symbol of progress against itself; it promises to trump injustice, race, and imperialism through art. It fails, but it does so in a spectacular fashion, and this tragic gap between the universal ideal it evokes and what we see on the virtual stage is Vasconcelos’s own “theory” of ideology. But as even Prometeo seems to know, a speculative theory of ideology is not ideology itself, and so he tells Satanás to roll up his sleeves and descend once more among men—not unlike Vasconcelos would do, laying the uncertain foundations of institutions that, over time, transformed all of these contradictions into an identity.

¿Vasconcelos vencedor?

When Saturnino drops out of the sky in the second act of *Prometeo vencedor*, he is already an accomplished orator able to change the course of human desire (or so he thinks). By contrast, there were no crowds of jubilant masses waiting for Vasconcelos when he swooped into Mexico City in July 1920 to become rector of the National University. A few months after his return *Prometeo vencedor* made its appearance in print. The response? Several readers praised the first act, the author wrote to Alfonso Reyes, but they had nothing to say about the second, and only one—one!—understood (or claimed to understand) the third. Over the next year he used his post to drum up support for the vast expansion of infrastructure necessary to carry out the
mandate of free and compulsory education in the Constitution of 1917—no small task in a war-torn country where at least 80 percent of the population was illiterate, and where large numbers spoke one of multiple indigenous languages instead of Spanish. In February 1921 the legislature debated his proposal for the creation of a national Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). At this stage the power of the government was precarious, diplomatic recognition from the United States was still over two years away, and foreign investors and lenders were wary because the regime’s agenda was not yet clear: after the assassination of Zapata, his followers had aided Obregón in driving out Carranza, and the new president had to negotiate a range of competing interests, including a growing urban working-class movement. Expanding access to culture and education was one of the few things on which most of his tenuous allies, for diverse reasons, could agree.

It easy to forget that Vasconcelos only led the SEP for three years and that it was an “exceptional” time. There are plenty of reasons to think he himself believed he was making a Faustian deal. One thread he returned to in many of his speeches was his support for the socialism of Karl Liebknecht, the cofounder of the Spartacus League who had been murdered alongside Rosa Luxemburg by the new democratic German government in 1919. Vasconcelos was notoriously quixotic in his interpretations of others’ ideas, but what drew him to Liebknecht was the latter’s critique of militarism and its role as the linchpin of imperialism, nationalism, and the class system. Increasingly hostile toward the tradition of military strongmen in Mexico, Vasconcelos thought culture could act as a check on this tendency and create an alternative basis for national sovereignty—though alas, in order to build the enabling institutions of culture, he needed the generals who ran the new regime. He was uneasy in August 1923 when the government pledged not to nationalize any properties of foreigners acquired prior to the signing of the Constitution of 1917, and even more displeased the following month when Obregón nominated as his successor General Plutarco Elías Calles, another member of his military circle and a man Vasconcelos intensely disliked. As attention shifted toward rebuilding the economy and rejoining the world of international diplomacy, it was also clear that cuts to his budget loomed; he departed his office along with Obregón, and not long after that La raza cósmica was published in Spain.

The mass literacy campaigns Vasconcelos initiated with the help of enthusiastic young volunteers and poorly paid maestros ambulantes are now the stuff of legend, but the gains they made were arduous and slow. He was the Medici of the muralist movement, yet the number of people who saw the murals on a regular basis was relatively small. The performing arts, on the other hand, could involve large numbers of people as both participants and spectators, including those who had no formal education and spoke little Spanish. Like the literacy campaign, the SEP’s theatrical activities were inspired in part by the policies of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment
Rehearsals of the Tragi-Co(s)mic Race

(Another man with an interest in the occult who had written a strange play about a secular prophet). In Mexico City, the SEP immediately began to sponsor “cultural festivals” featuring choirs, music ensembles, and “popular” dances; it also set about building small open-air theaters in the city’s neighborhoods and parks and encouraged teachers setting up new schools in rural areas to lead the locals in building outdoor theaters. In other cases the SEP stepped into fund projects already in the works. The next chapter, for instance, discusses an open-air theater in San Juan Teotihuacán, not far from the Toltec pyramids then in the process of excavation, where it partnered with the Department of Anthropology to fund artist-ethnographers who studied the customs of indigenous people and created short sketches often labeled as ensayos—stylized representations of their subjects’ daily lives, which indigenous actors performed for their peers and for tourists with the goal of fostering the development of a “national” theater.

Not long after assuming office, Vasconcelos began to concoct an urban counterpoint to these short, modest slices of “real” indigenous life. In February 1922, he took to the pages of El Universal Ilustrado to tout his idea for an enormous open-air theater near the Chapultepec forest on the former grounds of Parque Luna, an amusement park built by U.S. investors a few years before the revolution began. A weekly magazine soon to become an outlet for writers linked to the estridentista avant-garde, El Universal Ilustrado often devoted articles to the vexing absence of “national theater” and surveyed prominent intellectuals on the topic. Never before, however, had anyone proposed a stadium-theater “with a vast stage like a bullring” where twenty to thirty thousand people would gather to witness “profound dramas, scenes of dazzling beauty, which first drown and then explode in rhythms of jubilation”—and all for little or no cost. Vasconcelos began his full-page article by contrasting his plan with the theatrical endeavors of the ancien régime: the rotunda in Chapultepec park, for instance, only held the five hundred “lackeys of the dictator who attended official ceremonies,” though it was referred to as monumental “because everything in that era was measured by the moral size of Porfirio Diaz, which was very small.” Even the Teatro Nacional, a lavish building begun in 1904 but stalled by the revolution, would lack sufficient space after it was finished (which was not until 1934, when it was rebaptized the Palacio de Bellas Artes). In fact, all modern theaters suffered from the same defect; all were “enclosed theaters” that sequestered spectators from the sun and subjected them to “psychological dramas, dramas of the salon or interior problems” rather than expressing “collective ideals.” Never one to waste an opportunity to fan the flames of anti-imperialist sentiment, Vasconcelos decries these indoor, egoistic theaters as “absurd importations” from the cold countries of the North and insists that Mexico must draw inspiration from the Greeks and other Mediterraneans to create a blend of open-air theater and “modern” stagecraft.
Here Vasconcelos made no reference to Soviet mass pageantry, but two weeks later he cited it as a model for Mexico in one of El Universal Ilustrado’s surveys, railing against the vulgarity of the “bourgeois” and the “wealthy classes that do no work” and therefore “do not live the intense life that is the mother of art.” Eventually some rather hazy invocations of Aztec ritual pageantry would also make it into the mix. In his initial iteration of his idea, however, he relies on the familiar language of tragedy and genre in projecting a plan for the “progress and triumph of our race.” The new theater he intends to build will not simply be “a bullfighting plaza where opera is sung” but will give rise to a new artistic genre that will spell the end of both bullfighting and the “conventionalisms” of German and Italian opera. (Bullfighting, he says, is noxious because it encourages the audience to remain passive while taking vicarious pleasure in another person’s bravery, and the only operas still worth listening to are Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde and Rossini’s Barber of Seville). He boldly declares solos and arias elitist forms destined to disappear—as a matter of fact, he has already eliminated them from all open-air festivals, in accordance with the principle that “the highest things have humble origins.” While the stadium will one day host a “great ballet, orchestra, and choirs of millions of voices,” these new forms of mass spectacle can only grow out of “popular dances” and “the freshest shoots of popular art.”

Puchner notes that avant-garde theatricalism and modernist antitheatricalism converge at the point of their shared resistance to embodied mimesis. Although he never imagines a single person as the site where this convergence occurs, the performance Vasconcelos envisions here is something like his quasi-modernist closet drama turned inside out. If Prometeo vencedor resists—even as it represents—the material stage in order to establish the autonomy of its ideal, this is a direct call for a kind of “total theater,” the quintessentially avant-garde ideal of an all-encompassing spectacle that revolutionizes the Real by mixing and superseding every known genre and medium. The lingo of totality is there, along with all the motifs common to the European theatrical vanguard, and Vasconcelos draws on the same sources, among them Greek tragedy, Wagner, Nietzsche, Soviet pageantry, and the “people’s theater” of Romain Rolland. Two key differences: he held a political office, and unlike the TotalTheater designed a few years later by the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius in collaboration with Erwin Piscator, his dream of a gigantic theater-stadium would (sort of) come true.

Plans for the project were temporarily delayed by other priorities, including Vasconcelos’s diplomatic trip to South America for the centenary of Brazil’s independence in September 1922. The Parque Luna site also fell through, but in its place the president gave him a large plot of land in the well-to-do neighborhood of Colonia Roma (a former municipal cemetery from which the remains had been removed). The biggest obstacle was money: given the need to rebuild damaged infrastructure and the lack of access to foreign capital, the Obregón regime was perpetually short on cash. Vasconcelos was set
on using reinforced concrete—the most modern material—but the cost was prohibitive, so he had to settle for a metal framework from a foundry in Monterrey, which was then covered in cement. His solution to the budget shortfall was to ask all of the SEP’s employees (including teachers) to sacrifice one day’s salary, and to urge students to collect contributions. As for the design, he had ideas of his own, which may be why the task of coming up with the initial blueprint went to José Villagrán García, a young draftsman in the SEP’s construction division who was still finishing his degree and had never before designed a building for construction. Vasconcelos favored the dominant neocolonial style, but other exigencies, both aesthetic and practical, also influenced the final product. At his request, the simple horseshoe plan and series of arcades gave the structure an appearance similar to a bullring—that vile form of entertainment he aspired to drive out of business. True to his Pythagorean principles, he insisted that its acoustic qualities were more important than sight lines or visual appearance, and rather than relying on electrical amplification (still very new at this time), the design should allow the sound of a single voice to reach each and every spectator.79 (For this reason the original dimensions of the interior—172 meters long by 90 meters wide—were altered to 172 by 60.)80 The sculptor Manuel Centurión was hired to design and execute a series of bas-reliefs around the façade, and few were surprised when Diego Rivera was announced as the winner of a contest to paint murals of the figures Videncia (Clairvoyance) and Voluntad (Will) on either side of the main entrance.

Well before the disastrous rehearsal where dehydrated schoolchildren withered in the weltering sun, the National Stadium was a source of controversy. The architectural establishment was none too pleased about being shut out, and they found fodder for their resentment when, after construction began on March 12, 1923, it was discovered that calculations for the multi-tiered, pyramidal stairway leading up to the stadium were wrong. Vasconcelos sought suggestions from several people, starting with Villagrán García, but every potential solution presented other issues, until Diego Rivera weighed in with an idea, and while he was at it also requested a minor adjustment to the angle of the balustrade to coordinate with his murals. A committee made up of two architects, an art history professor, and two painters declared the new design feasible, but then the real headache began. A member of the local architectural society named Juan Galindo published a series of scathing attacks in the pages of the notoriously conservative Excélsior, denouncing the stadium as a “disaster” and accusing Vasconcelos of infringing on the architect’s authorial rights by allowing engineers, sculptors, and painters to each add their own little bit, making it a veritable cena de negros (a “dinner of blacks,” or utter disorder).81 With the inauguration drawing nigh, all of the key players—except Villagrán García—engaged in an all-out bout of public mudslinging. Architecture, scoffed Diego Rivera, was a plastic art organized around the same essential laws as sculpture and painting—though Galindo
could hardly be expected to know this, because he had gained his fancy credentials by copying ancient buildings and designing bad knockoffs of the colonial style perfected by the Yankees in California. For his part, Vasconcelos pleaded guilty as charged. Yes, he said, the National Stadium, like other works of the SEP, had involved painters, sculptors, and lawyers, and even “businessmen would have been able to intervene if by some chance they had good advice, because I have no prejudices of professional caste, nor do I look for diplomas, but only stones and lines that attempt to achieve music.”

Two days later, on the morning of May 5, 1924, the director of the SEP stood in his theater-stadium before a sea of sixty thousand spectators and thousands more young performers. Following a few forgettable words by the president, Vasconcelos assured the crowd that the Estadio Nacional was no mere imitation of Greek and Roman amphitheaters, nor was it a nostalgic bid to resurrect the “archaic ceremonies” of “remote” Indian ancestors, because within its concrete walls “stammers a race that yearns for originality.” Funded by contributions from students and teachers, designed by architects and engineers, decorated by painters and sculptors, and built by manual laborers, the stadium would serve as the stage for mass choirs, cosmic music, symbolic rites, the recitations of great tragedians—the “art of the future.”

Judging from the newspaper accounts, the show went off far better than expected. Vasconcelos made sure containers of fruit water were on hand to forestall any unfortunate repeats of the rehearsal; the one thousand couples dancing the *jarabe tapatío* were reasonably well in step; the gigantic human pyramids may have wobbled a bit, but no disasters occurred; and if any of the vocalists belting out the national anthem hit a false note, the other 11,999 choir members must have managed to drown them out. Even the *Excélsior*—after all the business with the touchy architects and hysteria over the fainting schoolgirls—ate its words in a headline declaring the inauguration “a poem of sun, of color, of rhythm” and proclaiming “Never Before Now Has Mexico Contemplated a Similar Spectacle, the Portent of a New Race.”

Not that all was forgotten: Galindo still managed to get in an occasional jab, and the incident did little to endear the old guard to Rivera, who had been censured in an *Excélsior* editorial for praising unlettered rural folk as more enlightened than the idiotic architects of the bourgeoisie and for fancying himself a *genio estridentista*, or “estridentista genius”—one of those artists from that new “vanguard” movement who felt entitled to spout off about art just because they had a benefactor in the government. Clearly the theater-stadium, in conjoining all of the arts, had touched a nerve among the defenders of disciplinary autonomy, and the threat it posed was perceived to be linked to the avant-garde.

So how is it that the National Stadium came to be deemed the very antithesis of the avant-garde? By the 1930s, Villagrán García would be renowned as the country’s foremost theoretician of international modernism, and his design for the Granja Sanitaria de Popotla, a hospital complex completed in
1925, is often seen as marking a shift toward functionalism by virtue of its similarities to the work of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus school. Yet his first project—finished just one year before—is often omitted from chronologies of his work. The few discussions of the National Stadium tend to attribute its authorship entirely to Vasconcelos, as Salvador Novo did in the early 1960s when he derisively stated that the building “united the Aztec and Conquistador in surrender to architectural neocolonialism.” More recently, Rubén Gallo has taken it up a notch by depicting the stadium and its inauguration as a totalitarian expression of the cosmic race and a prelude to the seven decades of the single-party state starting in 1929. (Never mind that this event actually coincided with Vasconcelos’s defeat in a presidential election marked by fraud and his subsequent exile and marginalization.) Pointing to Vasconcelos’s editorship of the journal Timón, a journal financed by the German embassy in Mexico for a few months in 1940, Gallo spots striking similarities to the opening ceremony of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the Nazis’ plans for a 400,000-seat stadium at Nuremberg. What does this tell us? “Fascist ideology” was already at work in his cultural program for the SEP—as evidenced not by anything he said (he roundly rejected fascism at this time), but by the stadium spectacle, with its “perfectly aligned bodies” and “civilized masses, educated in Vasconcelos’s schools, who subjected their every movement to the strictest rules of order and reason.”

The one problem for Gallo is that avant-garde artists were fascinated by the stadium. The critic traces it across media and genres, spotting troubling signs of Vasconcelos’s vision of “order” and “harmony” in Tina Modotti’s abstract photographs of its sloped concrete steps and sounding alarm bells over the image of masses of people moved by a “single idea” in Kin Taniya’s estridentista ode to the building. Strangely, though, both the man and the architectural object at the center of all this experimental art are anything but: Vasconcelos was a “conservative,” and as a classicist he sought to impose a singular, monumental style on a structure he envisioned as a “return to the past” (206). In the end, he failed, and the stadium was a “mishmash” and “hodgepodge,” probably because he interfered in the design. The National Stadium cannot be art because it is ideology.

This hyperbole has the virtue of highlighting Vasconcelos’s ex-centric role in relation to the avant-garde. Vasconcelos acts as a limit case where political and aesthetic power appear poised to converge—a theoretical totality that enables the very notion of “art” as the avant-garde of society but against which the avant-garde must also be defined. This specter of the “aestheticization of politics” also haunts the avant-garde as a whole, and it is little wonder it so often takes a theatrical form, because the idealization involved in envisioning a perfectly coordinated spectacle in which bodies are mere conduits for ideology requires a willful, imaginary transcendence of the material stage. Less than two months after the inauguration Vasconcelos would present his resignation, and he knew as he stood there that day that his window was
about to close. He had rushed construction of the building, and on the big day Rivera’s murals were only partially done, while half of the grand staircase over which such a ruckus was raised was still missing. Even in his speech Vasconcelos emphasized that the stadium was to be the “cradle” of the art of the future—not the stage on which this totality would be performed. And what actually was to happen that day? In the final lines he told the audience to have faith in this “oppressed race” as they “watch it rehearsing [ensayando] the victorious gestation!”

Decades later, critics pick apart his “essay” La raza cósmica as though the truth lay within it. Meanwhile Prometeo vencedor and the real drama of his theater-stadium have become tragicomedies hidden from sight—not quite philosophy, ideology, or art, but rehearsals and remnants of an invisible stage that correspond to no genre we know.