

## Remembering an Exemplary *Oscense* (Huesca citizen) Félix Carrasquer (Albalate de Cinca, Huesca 1905- Tilh,France, 1993)

Pedagogue, writer and anarchist disciple of Ramón Acín, in pedagogical concepts and anarchist ideas. Exiled after the Civil War, he suffered several arrests after clandestinely returning to Spain to continue fighting for freedom.



Photomontage with Carrasquer on the left and Acín on the right

To paint a picture of our great Acín in the limited space of just a few pages is a tall order, not only because he was a multifaceted individual, as many people are, but because Acín's multifaceted nature was complemented by the quality of his work, which was extraordinary. Endowed with an exuberant imagination, he was brilliant in everything he undertook.

To properly appreciate his art, more eloquent than words is, undoubtedly, the exhibition of his work itself: diverse, original and daring like few others, largely escaping fascism's destructive wave. Along with his plastic art, his literary production occupies an equally significant place, characterized by its elegance, beautiful metaphors, and rich shades of deep irony, in which Acín often surprises us with his droll and clever irony, articulated with sly wit typical of his region, in thoughtful and cultured language.

But Acín's art — a physical manifestation of his incomparable creative imagination — would amount to very little if we were to divorce it from the intense humanity that he emanated, infusing all that he did. When we focus our attention on his artistic work, however, we tend to overlook those other facets of his personality that undeniably elevated him to the category of a MAN, furnishing this dimension with the most authentic human content.

I will seek to address those other facts, then, below, but, aware of my own limitations, and fully



convinced that before a figure as formidable as Acín, I will be capable of producing but a pale reflection of what he was, nothing more emerging from the pen of this humble and faithful follower who knew him as an active member of the CNT, and upon whom the artist's honesty and loyalty to the cause of the oppressed would leave a deep and indelible impression.

Very little has been said, for example, of his remarkable pedagogical skills, despite the fact that his role in this respect placed him on the forefront of innovations during his time. Having grasped very early that freedom plays a decisive role in education, he possessed the wisdom and courage to break old molds by giving his students a voice and the opportunity to practice responsible and magnanimous participation and cooperation.

Though much has been said about his stances taken against privilege and his solidarity with the dispossessed and underprivileged, they cannot be overstated. Imbued from a very young age with a deep feeling of love for man, he could not stand idly by in the face of the chaotic panorama that prevailed in his era, characterized by injustice, abuse by the powerful, and the demeaning misery of the oppressed and disinherited — phenomena all too timeless. Hence, already during his time as a high school student at the Instituto de Huesca, Alaiz graciously tells us that he spoke out against the prevailing *status quo* and strived to find fairer alternatives and solutions of greater social harmony. Given these circumstances, and Acín's prodigious sensitivity, when he discovered (I know not where or how) the social agenda advanced by the Anarcho-syndicalism Movement, he joined its ranks and supported it in a responsible and active way, side by side with workers, struggling in favor of justice and accepting this commitment's ultimate consequences.

Yes, Acín was always consistent. That is, he conducted himself in accord with his principles until the end of his life, an attitude that is, unfortunately, rare in a world where inconsistency permeates conduct at every level of society, as freedom is extolled by the same people who suppress it, solidarity is solemnly upheld while a few squander what the many need just to survive, and there is talk of equal opportunity at the same time a fierce struggle rages to gain access to positions of privilege, and too many ambitious people succeed in prospering at the expense of the marginalized and the indigent.

In the face of such rampant hypocrisy, Acín's response would be resolute and transparent. He was not unaware that being an open, self-avowed anarcho-syndicalist jeopardized his position as a teacher. Nevertheless, faithful to his ideal and to his notion of human dignity, he opted for honesty towards himself and others. Persevering in his struggle against iniquity and tyranny, he collaborated in the bourgeois press and served as spokesmen of the Libertarian Movement with his incisive and audacious pen and tongue, giving talks on union information and civic education, and responding with great diligence to the frequent appeals of his CNT associates in Barbastro, Jaca, Monzón, Angüés and other towns in the province, where he generously spread his knowledge and raised the people's awareness of and disposition towards human solidarity.

Many years ago some acquaintances of mine in Huesca shared with me accounts of his regular and discreet support of the humble. On more than one occasion, they explained, he quietly allayed the distress of a worker who had fallen on hard times with the help of a few pesetas, even though Acín was not a wealthy man, nor did he receive any privileges extended by any party. Moreover, he was a steadfast friend ever ready to support any project that promised to promote culture, as is vividly illustrated by his daughter Katia's account of her father's friendship with Buñuel: "*Luis Buñuel was*



*looking for money for the film Las Hurdes, Tierra sin Pan (Land Without Bread) and my father - half serious, half joking - told him that if he won the lottery jackpot he would pay for it. This turned out to be a bit prophetic, as, although he didn't win the jackpot, he did win a few thousand pesetas, and Acín, just as he promised, put them towards the film."*

This Buñuel production would serve as a litmus test gauging the Republic's levels of tolerance and the degree of freedom it was willing to grant its citizens. Alas, the film was banned, revealing that the government was afraid that the people would be given a window through which to view the Extremadura region's neglect and destitution. Instead of remedying such misery, it opted for the easiest remedy: to silence and conceal it.

Acín's loyalty to the cause of labor may be appreciated in his articles written for *Solidaridad Obrera (Workers' Solidarity)*, a publication put out by the National Confederation of Labor of Catalonia and a platform for the National Confederation during times of great social upheaval and serious threats to the most committed activists. In fact, on March 10, 1923 his associate Salvador Seguí was assassinated in the streets of Barcelona by hired gunmen. Acín, Aragonese but with an ethical scope very similar to that of Seguí's, expressed his pain and his indignation in a set of articles entitled *Florexicas (Little Flowers)* and that were published in the confederal press, passionately declaring in that fateful year of 1923:

*"Comrade Seguí, champion of the downtrodden, you spoke as if you loved, as if you forged; sometimes, as Rubén de Jaurés said, in a long gesture, as if you sowed. A great and good champion who placed his tongue and his eloquence at the service of the People."*

*"Comrade Seguí, for your love of free life you spent yours in prisons, and for love of a gentler life you spent yours full of sacrifice, and out of your love of life, you gave yours."*

*"Comrade Seguí, you placed all your virtue and all your courage, which were both great indeed, at the service of the people."*

At the Congress of the National Confederation of Labor held at the Conservatorio de Madrid in June of 1931, Acín attended as a delegate for Huesca along with Cristóbal Canario, taking advantage of this trip to show his works of art at the Ateneo cultural center in Madrid, although without attaching much importance to the exhibition, because "more than being an artist, in these highly human moments, it is important to do one's small part against the storm that is poised to sweep everything away.

I did not come to Madrid to exhibit. It was not worth the trouble and expense. As a delegate at the Congress of the National Confederation of Labor, I have been representing the Trade Unions of the Upper Aragon. With my delegate's credential, along with my pajamas and toothbrush, I have created these works of semi-bourgeois art ..."

When the delegates returned from that Extraordinary Congress, a Provincial Conference was held in Huesca in order to gather information on how it went and the agreements ultimately adopted at it. Acín, more than satisfied with the results of that national meeting, was enthusiastic and brimming with optimism because, among other things, the paper on the need to create Federations of Industry had finally been approved; this document had already been presented at the Congreso de la Comedia, a conference held in Madrid in December of 1919, by the Asturian Eleuterio Quintanilla, but it was rejected despite the prestigious Catalan activist Juan Peiró's support for it, and that



of other prominent associates, including our dear Ramón, who saw two great advantages in said alliances: they would bring together workers in strong blocks of resistance to prevent abuse by bosses, and would constitute, with a view to a new society, the ideal structure to undertake the management of the national economy in a way featuring authentic solidarity between the different regions.

My memory of Acín in the context of the aforementioned Provincial Conference, held in Huesca after the congress at the Conservatory, is shaped by the impact that, once again, the quality of his thought would have on me, unfailingly complemented by his irreproachable and consistent conduct. We had just adjourned the session when Acín approached me in his typically deliberate way, along with a signature smile, and suggested that we go outside so that we could talk for a few minutes. His eagerness to speak with me was owing to the fact that a few days prior Justo Val and I had been arrested by the Guardia Civil and taken before the governor of the province. I will not delve into the details of this arrest, as this does seem an apt place for this, and given the very limited available in these pages. I would like to clarify, however, that we had done nothing to justify this arrest, as evidenced by the fact that as soon as the governor became aware of what had happened, after hearing our story, he released us. The extraordinary events unfolded upon our arrival in Huesca, when the brigade of workers who were working in the El Coso district, seeing that we were being escorted by the Guardia Civil, gathered around the door to of the Governor's office, joining a group of young people from Albalate who had followed us from the town in a truck. Other people from Huesca joined them when they heard what had happened, and all together, in the midst of the ensuing uproar, waited in the street until they saw us leave. At that point I, a little flustered by the impatience of those who were besieging me with questions, began to raise my voice before blowing up and launching into a diatribe against the regime that allowed such outrages. There was a bit of an uproar, but calm was soon restored. Val and I got into the truck and, in the company of the youth from Albalate, who had accompanied us, we returned to the village, while the rest of those who had gathered there formed a kind of peaceful parade, one behind the other.

Acín would refer to this unpleasant incident when, already seated around a table in the nearest café, he turned to me and, in short, proceeded to tell me: *"What happened the other day in El Coso reminded me of other times and other unrest. You see, when I was your, together with Samblancat and other friends, we published in Barcelona, back in 1913, a publication entitled "La Ira" (Rage). You can probably infer from the title the content of our newspaper, which we used to decry injustices, abuses and all the social evils that reached our ears. But this is not what I reproach myself for today. I am saddened, rather, when I recall our language; it was insulting, rife with an aggressiveness sometimes bordering on the rude and coarse. We mistakenly believed in our "sublime" role as agitators when we were just some poor souls possessed by an uncontrolled impulse that detracted from the informative value of our message and discredited those of us who emitted it. I'm telling you this in case the fruit of my experiences and reflections might be of some use to you. Because, even admitting that it may be true that "nobody learns from another's mistakes," I thought that, as I was once a restless young man like you, eager to see the civic and cultural level of his people elevated, at the same time participating with enthusiasm in the libertarian project, you'd understand perfectly that our violent and incongruent expression just ended up scaring people and prompting them to spurn the ideals of liberation and human solidarity that we sought to advance.*



*It seems to me that it is more advantageous and, at the same time, likely to bring us intimate satisfaction, if we seek to attract people through the force of our reasoning, which, articulated with a confident and determined demeanor, but free of hysteria and shrillness, and always remaining open to dialogue with everyone, will make us worthy of the trust and respect of those who do not yet understand us, and, in this way, we will have won the battle against selfishness and indifference that prevails everywhere."*

Acín paused and looked at me as if he expected a comment, but I, who remained open-mouthed and speechless, remember that I could only smile and, with a gesture of acquiescence, exclaim: "Thank you!" from the very depths of my heart — as deep as the influence that Acín's thought would have on my decisions as a CNT activist and in my relations with everyone. Our conversation then turned to small talk until the time came to go our separate ways, which we did with an embrace. I went out into the street with Acín's wise recommendations echoing in my head. His was a paradigm of conduct like few others, and his authenticity had much to do with his commitment to the struggle for a free and united society. I say this because, the more I reflect on it, the more I am convinced that we can only be authentically human by embracing freedom and solidarity; hence the *raison d'être* of the Spanish Libertarian Movement, with which Acín would feel fully identified because he loved freedom and, obviously, rejected power in all its forms, convinced that there can be no happiness for men until the free and beneficent society championed by that Movement was realized, the following being implicit to this:

- 1: The elimination of the State, whose repressive power through military/bureaucratic apparatuses has been oppressing people ever since Neolithic times and generating corruption throughout every hierarchical structure
- 2: The disappearance of the power conferred by the accumulation of wealth, the cause of social inequality and of the eternal conflict between those who possess money and those who lack what is indispensable just to live
- 3: The establishment of equal opportunities for all, thus sweeping away privileges and doing away with, on the one hand, the bluster and pride of those who ascend by stepping on others and, on the other, the resentment of those who now suffer humiliation and derision.

When Goethe issued his famous phrase "man is unfit to command, or to be commanded," he hit the nail on the head, for he who commands feels guilty, experiences discomfort, and is irritated, because he perceives the resentment and rebellion of those who suffer under the weight of his oppression. Consequently, in the field of human relations, the tandem of imposition and obedience can only be a source of discomfort and war. There is, therefore, only one way forward: learning to cooperate, which is precisely what is least done today, as competition is invading all areas of our social activity. It is known, however, that the hominid became man through cooperation, and that only when we are able to cooperate in concert and in solidarity will we be in a position to build a new society tailored to the nature of MAN. This is why Acín had his hopes set on a common project; unlike other bureaucratized organizations, both union and party, the Libertarian Movement's members carry out their actions, in all its manifestations, in a self-managed way, which allows them to learn freedom, magnanimous cooperation and responsible participation through the daily practice of these values that constitute the fundamental and unavoidable foundation of the society to which they aspire.



## Acín the Pedagogue

Many of the students who passed through his classroom at the Escuela Normal teacher training institution, and many of the young people who attended his talks and conferences at trade unions and cultural groups in the province, and those of us who saw him up close, could testify to his pedagogical skills. However, no testimony could be more eloquent in this regard than the words written by the two disciples most identified with him, Evaristo Viñuales and Francisco Ponzán, who, faithful to their teacher's principles, lost their lives in the defense of freedom and a more just society. Fifty years have passed since their death, and the words of these two friends evoking their teacher move us as if it were yesterday. Viñuales said:

*"His pedagogical field was not confined to the classroom, nor to his studio, nor to his lessons. It was open to all wind, as his soul was that of a rebellious artist and a dedicated idealist. A true pedagogue, he taught in class, at home, in the cafe, in the street... in life, airy and clear as a moonlit night (...) he knew how to reproach one with such gentleness that he angered none and convinced everybody..."*

*"You were a man who was born to love, and you have been the victim of your sublime, great love."*

*"One only learns from those whom one loves. You knew how to make yourself loved by many; that's why you were such a pedagogue."*

Ponzán expressed his admiration and affection in similar terms: *"To you, Ramón, my good teacher. To you, whose example marked the path of my life. You initiated me on the path of all rebelliousness. In my adolescence, in that candlelight of a café in Huesca, you told me, with words that I have never forgotten, that I should never grovel or apologize for fighting for what I believed in. You told me that if we could envision the truth like the top of a mountain, when choosing the path to reach it I should choose the straight one, without fear of obstacles, even if along the way I paid a price... You made your home a model. From the clay, iron and paintbrushes of your studio, you created masterpieces that sometimes sparked tumultuous protests in the newspapers and towns, fiefdoms of the clergy and of the powerful... (You could have had it all and did not want to exchange it for a handshake, preferring a heartfelt look from a proletarian...)"*

Referring to the trends of pedagogical reform in those years, I must point out Acín's strong support for the tenets of the Modern School, as he remained very attentive to everything designed to free education from old scholasticisms and routines and to stimulate young people's imaginations and initiative. It was, precisely, in the 1930s when Herminio Almendros, at that time an Early Education inspector in Huesca, obtained information about the printing technique that a French teacher, Celestino Freinet, had introduced in his school with notable success, and proposed to introduce it in schools in Spain. To this end he spoke with Acín, who embraced the project as if it were his own. In 1932 they organized the first National Teachers' Congress to promote the Freinet Technique throughout the Peninsula, and the ancient city of Huesca had the memorable honor of hosting this Congress. Acín, who aware of my concerns with regards to education, would inform me about how it had gone. A year later, taking advantage of my forced stay of a few months in Lérida, I was able to personally confirm the application and the marvelous advantages of this technique by visiting the respective schools of some teacher friends of mine: José Tapia, Patricio Redondo and Ramón Costa. I also had the satisfaction of being able to converse at length with Herminio Almendros, who



spoke to me about Acín with sincere admiration and respect, emphasizing his valuable collaboration, without which, he told me "*it would have been very difficult to hold the Congress.*" He then added, raising his voice a little: "Ah! if only there were a few more men like Ramón Acín in the ranks of the anarcho-sindicalist movement, the future of the workers would surely be brighter, and Spain would reach higher levels of well-being."

It only remains for me, then, to express my most heartfelt thanks to all those — authorities, researchers, relatives and friends — who have contributed to this act of atonement and well-deserved tribute to our beloved and great Acín, to ensure that his memory, in this city so dear to him, will endure over time. Your efforts offer those of tomorrow a look at his exemplary life, a mirror in which they can ponder themselves. It is this desire, no doubt, that has spurred you to name a Colegio Mayor after him, and the street leading to one of the entrances to El Coso, right where his work *Las Pajaritas* exhibit all their beauty and genuine grace. The monument's location, at the very entrance to the city's appealing and much-visited park, takes on, in the eyes of those of us who knew its creator well, a magnificent symbolism: the great love that Acín had for children and his respect for their innocent games that, ecstatic, he often used to watch.

To the memory of Ramón Acín and the victims of obscurantism, I thank you and offer you my most sincere friendship. □

