

Ramón Acín The Journalist

José Carlos Mainer

Professor and literary critic with multiple studies focused on the literature of the late 19th and 20th centuries, among which is outstanding his deepening in the "Spanish Silver Age" with those artists and writers who forged the best and most innovative letters in a time that was swept away by the Franco uprising.



Photomontage of Acín and press covers where he wrote

Not infrequent in the Spanish art of our century are cases of painters who have turned to the pen, and, likewise, writers who have taken up brushes. Gutiérrez Solana's paintings find a splendid counterpoint in the very effective plastic prose of *Madrid: Escenas y Costumbres* (*Madrid: Scenes and Customs*), and it is difficult to establish a precedence between the engravings of Ricardo Baroja and his novelistic imaginings, or his memories of the *Gente del 98* (*People of '98*). Among the celebrated Generation of 1927, characterized by its refusal to forego anything, the multi-faceted José Moreno Villa was as fine a painter as he was a writer, just as we would hardly understand Lorca's exuberance if it were not captured in both drawings and *Canciones* (*Songs*), almost always at random, with the same communicative capacity. Max Aub, meanwhile, literally created the painter Jusep Torres Campelans and even ascribed to him some apocryphal paintings containing more than a modicum of charm. The young Miguel Mihura brought much of his intellectual and absurd humor to the caricatures he signed as "Lilo," and Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Enrique Jardiel Poncela conceived of some of their books as combinations of words, drawings and the subversion of standard typefaces.

In all the cases mentioned above, and in more that could be cited, there is the same impulse to transcend the limits of artistic language, and the same joyful transgression: art is plurality, bold experimentation, a buoyant gesture that refuses to acknowledge conventions. But, what in most of those mentioned is a search for an escape, the need for a complement, or a double formulation of the same identity (as in the case of Salvador Dalí's writings and paintings), in a few of them constitutes a case of an amphibious or twin nature; an organically dual disposition, and



this seems to me to be the case with Ramón Acín Aquilué's art (with a daring neologism, Miguel Bandrés Nivelá has spoken of "artigraphic work"), just as it was with Alfonso Rodríguez Castelao.

While we should not exaggerate the possible parallels between the Galician, whose centennial was commemorated in 1886, and the Aragonese, whose birth we now mark the centennial of, neither would it be inappropriate to underscore some chronological and intentional similarities: Castelao started out as a caricaturist in his time as a student in Santiago de Compostela, and by 1910, when he finished his medical studies in Madrid, he was already "professionalized" in the field of illustration, humorous prints and short articles. Acín, meanwhile, also studied (Chemistry, which he did not complete), and spent a bohemian period in Madrid, from 1910 to 1912, when, it seems, he was comfortably integrated into the world of graphic caricatures and humorous journalistic features. We might point out, in passing, that the three great Catalan caricaturists of our century — Luis Bagaría, Feliu Elíes "Apa" and Xavier Nogués — had begun their careers ten years earlier, but both they and Castelao and Acín, exposed to the plastic innovations of Modernism, were quite familiar with the golden age of European graphic humor and, moreover, benefited from the journalistic demand for the new genre and its modalities (political and ideological criticism captured through caustic depictions, interpretative caricatures of popular figures, and symbolic syntheses of editorial aspirations). As gifted with the writer's pen as with the artist's, Acín and Castelao never bemoaned their destiny or considered it beneath them, proving capable of rendering it compatible, as time went by, with more important endeavors (the Galician, in literature, and the Huesca artist, in sculpture). Their shared secret was to consider art a vital manifestation, an almost organic extension, of their capacity to be moved, or outraged, before the spectacle of life; a gift, and never a privilege, which should bring the artist closer to reality.

Seldom is this symbiosis of vitality and aesthetic experience, inextricably linked, better appreciated than when we read the impression that Goya's *La maja desnuda* (*The Nude Maja*), beheld in the dim halls of El Prado during his trip to Madrid as an adolescent, made on him. The text is from 15-12-1913, and appeared in the newspaper *El Porvenir* under the title "Yo no he estado en Madrid" (I haven't been to Madrid). He did not remember all the hustle and bustle of the capital ("Madrid, absurd, brilliant and hungry" Valle Inclán would write), its traditional *verbena* festivities, its aggressive *chulapona* women, its shabby theaters. Rather, he only remembered the *maja* and her mesmerizing body:

There you have two eyes that I don't know how they look, and two nostrils that breathe in I don't know how, and two arms that it is not clear what they're for, and two nipples that are like I don't know what, not to mention the eyes, with a gaze like a 15 year old's, and windows breathing with the air of fifteen springs, and those arms seem to want to embrace you with the strength of one of 15, and those nipples like seeds budding in the month of May. My God, my God, that's not a canvas and colors, that's flesh, flesh, like the flesh of our lovers!

This wide-eyed enthusiast of Goya's girl — with her voluptuous curves, but also her winter colds and derisive sneers — would later be the artist who conceived of his profession as a way to live more intensely in a world in which he protested energetically but that, above all, he loved with the innocent joy of natural goodness, and with the absence of reservations of one who was happy throughout his life. Only in this way is it conceivable that he was able to evoke his child-



hood with such vivacity, and that he never denied his passion for children, for the playful and the imaginative, in all his work. He was a young man of 26 when in his writings in the section "Con cursiva del diez" for the *Diario de Huesca* he recalled the blissful days, still not far away, of "Mis años de chiquillo" ("My childhood years") (17-6-1914), and urged Huesca's authorities not to burn three of the city's traditional giant figures rolled out for its festivities, which, for him, were "Fantasy, Memory, and the Ideal." Barely half a year later, in the same section and under the heading *No os olvido (I haven't forgotten you)* (4-12-1914) he spoke again of his memories of the St. Laurence festival and then, with Machado-like nostalgia, evoked the little horses of the carousel, "a wheel of hope that goes round and round, weaving a skein of dreams" (Antonio Machado, prompted by a beautiful poem by Verlaine, called them "Pegasi, pretty Pegasi"). It is not surprising, therefore, that in the last article of his life, appearing in the *Diario de Huesca* (14-6-1936), on the death of *Mi hermana Enriqueta (My sister Enriqueta)*, he transcended his piece's somber theme, finding in their shared childhood a necessary source of joy, and that this nostalgia would infuse a touching ending in which mutual affection and the inaccessible richness of a shared happiness overcame the recent catastrophe, and even the cosmic one that could ensue:

When life ends on the face of this poor earth, abandoned by all the suns that roll over and shine upon it, a contest should be held to reward good siblings. And you would all see, in the hereafter, the shadow of my sister Enriqueta, and mine, holding hands and advancing calmly, serenely, securely, collecting the top prize.

He who was capable of feeling this way, who was a sanguine soul open to all stimuli, would perish just a few months later in front of a firing squad, the victim of a stupid but vicious and implacable iniquity. From his particular point of view, the assassins did not err in their choice, because Ramon Acín had dedicated all his enthusiasm, and the most lucid of that innocent and solidary stance with which he embraced the world, to, precisely, the cause of anarcho-syndicalism — which was then something very different from what the label is attached to today. If to paint was to live, and to love, and to be passionate, it could also be wielded to chastise the dead and lambaste the evil. The same Goya who taught him that painting was about reveling in the sight of a 15-year-old girl, also showed him, at the 1928 centennial, that artists had other responsibilities too, as Acín would realize that those in charge of the event, officials serving the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, hacks like Zaragoza's sanctimonious Albaredo brothers, were not qualified to commemorate one whose convictions should have made him a far thornier figure. That almost solitary defender of Fernando Garcia Mercadal's brave "Rincón de Goya" (Goya's Corner) wrote in the pages of the Aragonese magazine *El Ebro* (April 1928), under the revealing title "Centenario de Goya?"

His bravery and unabashedness clashes with the holier-than-thou cowardice of the most effusive panegyrists (...). Goya's centenary should have been celebrated in silence. He has been awakened and he's going to believe that the first anniversary of his death is being celebrated. He's going to believe that we are still in 1829. In Zaragoza, one after another, three men were executed (one of them, by the way, leaving an appropriately Goyaesque quote: "My God, what barbarism is this?!) In the bullrings they keep asking for horses and more horses (...). If they don't secure his tomb in San Antonio de la Florida with three locks, Goya will go off to Bordeaux again.

The fact is that, throughout all his written work of more political content what predominated



was a defense of life, calls for an end to cruelty, and a refusal to submit. One of his first collaborations in the short-lived Barcelona newspaper *La Ira (Rage)*, founded by fellow Aragonese Ángel Samblancat, featured a fierce diatribe against the war in Morocco (18-7-1913), in which he called for the soldiers known as *soldados de cuota* to fight; these were affluent gentlemen who avoided military service by paying a stipend, since the poor peasants who reported would "find it more painful to raze and pillage, and burn the crops, for they who know that each grain of wheat is earned by a drop of sweat." Because, as his friend Ramón J. Sender would do in some splendid essays found in the compendium *Proclamación de la sonrisa*, Acín wanted to see the world of hopes and miseries, of humanity and suffering, that the armed Kabyles defended. In the series "Florecicas" (Little Flowers) in Barcelona's *Solidaridad Obrera (Worker Solidarity)*, the famous *Soli*, he would write on 25-8-1923, with reference to the colonial army's blustering war reports:

Those two hundred and thirty-one shells ... that the "Alfonso XIII" cannons launched should have been ... teachers ... Those two hundred and thirty-seven shot from the "España" should have been ... doctors to remedy the dearth of hygiene there ... those forty-five shells from the "Reina Regente" should have been loaded with books and bread, the much-vaunted school and pantry.

His views on the First World War fell along the same lines. Shortly after it broke out, in his section "Con cursiva del diez" in the *El Diario de Huesca* (4-10-1914) newspaper he was already asking, very rhetorically, whether "Jaurés, and Bebel and Tolstoy, and the modern apostles of peace, had preached in a barren desert of illiterate brains and in a frozen desert of cold hearts. Did the word of Paul of Tarsus, and Peter the fisherman, and Santiago, and the old apostles, not reach Germania, or Gaul? And on January 7, 1915, remembering the Three Maggi (childhood memories were always there), he compared those who had just given Aragon their approval of their own irrigation plans with the "Williams and the Franz Josephs of the great empires and of the dreams of even greater ones." When in 1923 he published his only book, *Las corridas de toros en 1970 (Bullfights in 1970)*, one of the albums he announced had the revealing title of *¡Guerra a la guerra! (War On War)* which, no doubt, would transmit the same ideals that encouraged the pacifist campaigns sparked by the war beginning in 1914.

That evangelical appeal that someone may have found exotic in the 1914 text, when he speaks of "Paul of Tarsus and Peter the fisherman" has more implications than it might seem at first glance, and should be retained as a first explanation of an essential ingredient in Ramón Acín's libertarian thought: anticlericalism. His was a particularly Spanish strain of this school of thought, like that of Antonio Machado, or even that of Baroja, one that rejected corrupt priests, deceitful friars, and hypocritical nuns, upholding a spirit of evangelical egalitarianism, a God of generosity and understanding. A very precocious article in *La Ira* (26-7-1913) stridently admonished the priesthood and threatened it with a reckoning four years after the events of the Tragic Week in Barcelona:

Do not laugh, Augustinians, Piarists, Capuchins, Trappists, Dominicans, Carthusians, Carmelites, Jesuits (...) those of you who left the hut of Peter the fisherman to settle in palaces of masonry (...) the smoke will not always be incense; the day will come when again your cells, your prayer rooms, your dining rooms, your reception rooms will be full of smoke and flames, like the old pipes of the old sailors.



Another article in *Floreal* (January 1920), written when he was planning a manifesto for the youth of Huesca to create a "free group" "in this city, cradle of oligarchs," revisited true Christianity to draw attention to the horror of false religious piety:

Doesn't it make your heart skip a beat when you read that sixty percent of the children in these asylums die? (...) I have an unpublished drawing that bears the words of Christ "Let the children come to me." An enormous line of nuns in white robes and black sackcloth, like doves grafted on crows, extend their chubby hands to some little ones who are passing under the ogival arch of the pubic bone of an enormous skeleton.

But this anarchist at heart who, in reality, was a sort of primitive Christian had as friends the good Luis López Allué, author of the novel *Capuletos y montescos*, a portrait of customs in an Aragonese town; and the reform-minded "regenerationist" Manuel Bescós, aka Silvio Kossti, who was a free spirit, a Germanophile in 1914 and whom the bishop condemned for his *Las tardes del sanatorio* (*Afternoons at the sanatorium*) in 1910, but who was, nevertheless, appointed mayor of Huesca by the dictator Primo de Rivera. Thus, Acín was a curious anarchist who also adored Joaquín Costa, who was far from endorsing any kind of anarchy, and he would reveal a similarly liberal disposition in 1918 when he published pieces in *El Ideal de Aragón* on the anniversary of the death of the León de Graus (8-2-1918), calling him a "giant," a "Savonarola," "butcher-surgeon and our loving nurse," "our Danton and our Elizabeth of Hungary" — terms denoting a moral authority and patriotic cachet that seem to fly in the face of what one would expect from a more orthodox anarchist. But, as I have already suggested, the passionate world of the turn-of-the-century libertarian was a far cry from the hodgepodge of sheepish gregariousness and systematic protests of today's self-styled anarchists. Rather, Ramón Acín's deep-rooted *Costismo*, inspired by the forward-looking ideas of Joaquín Costa, was a reformist philosophy that accorded with the agrarian, hydraulic and individualist tradition of the best regional progressivism, and he would also endorse the federalist positions of Pi y Margall, even standing against Francesc Cambó i Batlle and that Catalan regionalism that in 1918 attracted many political projects of the localist bourgeoisie (all of which is alluded to in the important work "Cristos-Judas. Para Demócrito" in the *Diario de Huesca* of 19 February, 1918, in which he suggests corrections to some of the proposals in Kossti's regionalist manifesto). Water in the reservoirs and irrigation canals, small landowners, decent schools and respect for tradition: this is a far-from-revolutionary political agenda that the drawing teacher at the Escuela Normal de Huesca would have supported.

Even tourism — an economic discovery of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera — mattered to the surprisingly buoyant *regeneracionista* Acín, which is why he wrote, in his usual *Diario de Huesca* (11-2-1928) a proclamation in which he called for the promotion of "the great world of the Upper Aragon," comprised of the "ancient forest of Oza", "the Romanesque in Siresa," "the unique charm of Fraga, gateway to the Mediterranean" and "the strong 15th century emotion, alive and well, in the architecture, clothing and customs of Ansó" — although he did caution innkeepers, guides, and those who would drive away tourists, against greed, a warning as germane then as it is today.

Acín would encourage this same spirit of reform, of *regeneracionismo*, in his friends in Barcelona, such as Felipe Alaiz (his future biographer), Isidoro Comas ("Almogávar") and the other edi-



tors of *El Ebro*. His conception of the region was made explicit like never before in a series of statements found on a flyer he wrote in 1928, on the occasion, once again, of the centenary of Goya's death:

Aragon ended with the Aragonese party of the Count of Aranda and company. Since then, all that remains is the name; Aragon sounds good. After the Aragonese party, the jota dance and reverence for the Basilica were invented, and only Goya and Costa were spared, burned alive in their own fire before the others' coldness.

But not everything was backward-looking rhetoric. Out of conviction, Ramón Acín knew that regional redemption was a work of culture and reason, and this is where his original progressivism, his faith in the Enlightenment, was vigorously rekindled. On April 20, 1923 he said so in his section "Florecicas" in Barcelona's *Solidaridad*:

They will say that they are strong because they have a staff with tassels, and a crozier and a sword, but we can tell them that we are stronger, because against the governor's staff, and the bishop's crozier, and the general's sword we have erected a free and new and secular school, and against it the general's sword, the bishop's crozier and the governor's tasseled staff will all pale.

That this was not to be is recorded in the bitterest pages of the history of our people, now forever linked to the names of Ramón Acín and Conchita Monrás, his wife, the most needless and cruelest victim. But one hundred years later, the words of that man who loved life are once again in print and, hopefully, someday his caricatures and his drawings of the corners of the Huesca that he loved will grace the walls of his people's homes, in a way similar to the fate of his colleague Castelao in Galicia, fondly remembered by posterity and a loyal contingent of admirers. □

