

Ángeles VICENTE

An Absurd Tale

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Recent research in different countries has brought new life to the work of women authors who had been neglected for different reasons, not all related to enduring patriarchal views among critics. Some of them were mainly forgotten due to the fact that they did not succeed in becoming famous in their own times, especially if they preferred to write in the genres that were frowned upon by the guardians of the literary canon. An example of this could be the fate of Ángeles Vicente, a Spanish writer born in 1878 who died in complete obscurity. Even today her date of death is unknown, although it can be assumed that she died before World War II. Her last known texts are from the 1920s. Vicente had published a few books in the early 20th century, namely a collection of fantastic stories based on Spiritism titled *Sombras* (Shadows, 1910), as well as *Zezé* (Zeze, 1908), a novel of manners of the ‘regenerationist’¹ style, which was quite common in Spain back then, but portraying a lesbian relationship that linked that novel to the copious erotic narratives in Spain, which were as popular among a wide readership as

they were despised by mainstream critics. That relationship was endorsed in the novel. This is why it was reassessed and republished as soon Spanish critics looked for early treatments of homosexuality in their modern literature. Vicente then acquired a new, better status as a writer. This has contributed to the recovery of both her *Sombras* and of another, more varied collection of short stories titled *Los buitres* (The Vultures, 1908). Among the tales of the latter volume, the one titled “Cuento absurdo” (*An Absurd Tale*) is one of the few earliest narratives of anticipation written by a Spanish woman back then. It was also one of the few which were fully science fiction, too. This tale, where irony finely emerges from a simple and non-judgmental style of writing, narrates a global disaster caused by the use of technology by a mad scientist figure. Vicente eschews, however, any caricature of the man who extinguishes humankind by actually using the apocalyptic machine that he has invented, a machine that kills anyone instantly and on the spot, as the poignant but nevertheless mildly humorous descriptions of

¹ *Regeneracionismo* (Regenerationism) was a cultural movement influential around the turn of the 19th century in Spain which sought to find the reason for the backwardness of the country compared to other Western European nations and proposed possible solutions, often related to an ethical approach to public matters and institutions. Narrative was often used to advance regenerationist ideas by showing the defects of the contemporary order and voicing alternatives through fiction, using mostly the realistic mode.

some of its victims in the city show. His global genocide was, however, intended for the greater good, as a matter of course. He wanted to put an end to all social evils by creating a tabula rasa of the old society and building a new, utopian one by saving a few chosen ones who would achieve it. The result is as one would expect knowing

human nature. How the scientist reacts to his failure is something that the kind readers will discover reading the following translation,² but we will still say that Vicente applies the principle that if reality does not conform to the utopian ideal, all the worse for reality, literally...

² This is based on the following edition: Ángeles Vicente, "Cuento absurdo," *Los buitres*, edición e introducción de Ángela Ena Bordonada, Murcia, Editora Regional de Murcia, 2006, pp. 133-146.

ÁNGELES VICENTE

An Absurd Tale

The social problem was definitively resolved by Guillermo Arides, the most incredible and brilliant anarchist of all time—past, present and future.

A passionate cultivator of science, he had devised a way to destroy humanity in a second, utilizing mysterious interplanetary fluids, accumulated and guided with admirable precision through a complicated apparatus he had invented. At a determined, propitious moment, humans (and animals that resemble humans in their physical constitution) would be annihilated. No one would be saved, except for him, Arides, and the chosen ones of his most zealous fellow believers of both sexes.

Since Arides made no attempt to conceal his project, he was detained and brought before a judge. But when he calmly presented his plan to destroy the world, he was ridiculed and thought to be completely insane. Since his madness was deemed harmless, he was set free. Even his own friends began to doubt his rationality, such was the magnitude of the undertaking. Nevertheless, they supported him and obeyed him, influenced by his persuasive eloquence as the enlightened one.

Such was the state of affairs when this momentous day arrived, and the apostle and his chosen ones congregated in his large laboratory.

“Brethren,” Arides said to his followers, “I have called you here today because the time has come to end the existing tyranny, with all its privileges, with all its infamy. In one second, the evil work of so many centuries will be destroyed, and on this planet, no inhabitants will be left

except those of us who are gathered in this conveniently isolated enclosure. We will no longer have any laws aside from our instincts. All of you will be entrusted with the lofty mission of creating a new humanity. Our freedom will be our happiness...

Everyone listened to him in silence. The women were frightened. The men waited expectantly, skeptical, but also not free from fear.

Arides continued his discourse, while moving about his lab from one side to the other to perform some final tweaking of the machines. Then he turned to those surrounding him and asked, “Are you ready? Do you feel detached from the rest of mankind? Do you wish, like I do, for its destruction, so that from its ashes a new free and perfect humanity may arise?”

“Yes!” they all answered, captivated.

“May our wish be fulfilled!” exclaimed Arides, smiling blissfully. Then he approached a propulsion device and pulled a small lever.

All who surrounded him let loose a scream of terror. The atmosphere was inflamed with a vivid light and a violent jolt shook the earth.

Arides turned to his comrades with a triumphant gesture:

“Consummatum est! (*It has been brought to an end!*)” he shouted, raising his arms.

His companions, now recovered, looked at him with shock. They were moved, uneasy, but doubt was reflected on their faces: Could humanity possibly be destroyed so easily, in just an instant?

Arides admonished them: “Do you doubt my work? Doesn’t the absolute silence indicate anything to you? Listen! The old civilization has died!”

In fact, a deathly silence surrounded them, not disturbed by so much as a rustle of wind on that calm day. The carriages and trams circulating, the voices of the street vendors, the birds singing, all the sounds, the complicated harmony of life, which moments earlier had been spreading out in confusion over a wide area, had stopped.

A shudder of terror shook everyone.

“Go and look around town,” continued Arides, “and you will be convinced!”

They followed him, disconcerted.

The streets and plazas were covered with rigid, inert bodies. Trams had derailed because of a lack of steering, one carriage had crashed against a wall, another had turned over with its wheels continuing to spin dizzily in the air... Some pedestrians were still standing, immobile. Ismael, the youngest of the survivors, touched one of these cadavers and screamed in terror when he saw it fall heavily to the ground.

Arides smiled and encouraged them to continue on.

They entered the stores and houses they found along the way. It was the same scene over and over again: There were rigid, inert bodies everywhere. Some had fallen and others stayed in the position they were in when the catastrophe hit. In the stores, shopkeepers and salespeople were gathered in groups, displaying distinct attitudes, some smiling, others serious and stoic, as if they were about to continue their conversation. In the houses, residents had been engaged in tending to their domestic needs. If it were not for the cadavers that had collapsed and for the rigidity of those that maintained a lively attitude, one might even doubt there had been a cataclysm. A servant was bending down

in front of a stove. A young woman was ironing beside her. In an office, there was a serious man that was reading, seated comfortably in an armchair. In another residence, an elegant lady was preparing her headdress...

Back in the street, a funeral procession, whose participants had toppled over, one on top of the other, blocked the way, forcing them to take a detour:

“Even the ones accompanying the deceased are dead!” exclaimed Arides, ironically.

There were a fair number of people stepping out onto their balconies, and hands of beggars reaching out for spare change, seated against the walls or the doorjambs. Here and there you could see dogs, immobile, as if about to race, dead little birds, carriages stopped as if the driver had fallen from his seat because the horse had slipped... In the door of a barbershop, the barber’s assistant was leaning against the door frame, smiling at a seamstress, who was now lying down, sprawled out on the sidewalk...

As they came out onto a plaza, they found themselves forced to stop in front of a compact mass of cadavers clumped together, many of them on foot, with an expectant look on their faces, as if they were listening to a silent orator extending his arms from a large balcony.

“These are the strikers,” observed Arides, “And there on the balcony is the mayor.”

They had to go back, retracing their steps, and as they turned a corner, they found a group of soldiers that were perhaps heading toward the plaza to stop the demonstration of the workers. They were lying on the ground, rifles in hand, resembling a group of heroic combatants that had died under enemy fire. The officer that commanded them appeared to be lying on top of his soldiers, his head positioned upright and his back leaning to the right.

Some distance away stood a church and they headed determinedly toward it, entering

the premises. A priest was standing upright at the altar. The fluctuating lights of the candles vaguely illuminated the static, downcast faces of the worshippers in prayer. Arides and his companions stayed there for a while, examining everything. They had gotten used to the spectacle and felt strong confronting this widespread mortality.

“Have you seen this old man?” said one of the men to his companion.

“He looks like a saint!” she responded.

“That’s why he is better off in the other world,” exclaimed Arides, “Let’s go.”

They left the church and continued on. Street after street, everywhere the same spectacle was repeated.

“Are you now convinced of the success of my work?” Arides asked his companions in the end.

“Yes,” one answered, “without a doubt. But now the bad part will be when the bodies decompose. We’ll have an epidemic.”

“Everything has been anticipated. I could burn everything in an instant, but that will not be necessary. I can just send the same current through space in a few minutes so that all the bodies will be reduced to ashes. Let’s go to my lab and you shall see.”

Indeed, they all gathered together in the lab and Arides turned on his device for a few minutes. Afterwards, they went around the city and saw that the annihilation was complete. Where there had been bodies, now there were only piles of rags.

Arides addressed a long speech to his companions, telling them to settle down wherever they wanted and to do whatever they pleased, according to their doctrines, that everything was theirs and that it was up to them to start a new free and happy generation.

“Take advantage of whatever you find at hand,” he concluded, “but do not accumulate

money, since that won’t help you with anything. The land is ours!”

The group dispersed after brief deliberations, every person scouting around for accommodations, fixing them up according to their tastes. And Arides returned to his house satisfied, bringing with him the companion of his choice.

The new society was established and multiplied at will, but not without a few battles over the distribution of goods and women, even when Arides attempted to avoid quarrels. More serious fights occurred when they had to begin the exhausting work of tilling the land because provisions were running out. Ultimately, it did not take long for ambition and pride to make an appearance, followed by a procession of envy and resentment, and consequently, the struggle for men to tyrannize other men, in which the humble and the weak bore the brunt. It seemed that Nature was pleased with imposing herself on those rebels that had tried to mock her.

The doctrines of Arides no longer held influence.

Arides had fought to establish the new society in accordance with his ideals, but now he was tired: he saw the futility of his effort; he witnessed, regretfully, the resurgence of the most brutal instincts amongst those free creatures, who did not understand that by attempting to dominate one another, they were turning into slaves themselves. He felt compelled to assert himself and he knew that they obeyed him out of fear since he was no longer like a brother to his comrades, but an enemy, and that he himself saw the others as enemies too... and he regretted what he had done.

One night, with everyone gathered around Arides, they started arguing, as was customary:

“I am no longer giving any of you advice about anything,” said Arides, in response to a question. “You are attempting to re-establish

past customs. You don't want to live in peace. You are full of ambition. You are breaking with the tradition that we just started. You are re-establishing property. You are rendering our yearning for perfection futile. You are continuing the barbaric and merciless history of one hundred years of servitude and control, and you wish to pass it on to your children..."

"It's the fault of this man," exclaimed someone, "since he tries to take possession of everything that he comes upon. Like how he has moved into a palace and doesn't let anyone else inside!"

"That palace is my house," responded the accused. "I have taken possession of it just like you have taken possession of other things, and no one else may enter because I have the full right to live in peace and make myself comfortable!"

"I object," stated another person, "to the inconveniences that Manlio imposes on me. He insists on me being his servant, just because he is more enlightened and intelligent than me."

"And what would you do, you ignorant brute, if I didn't provide you with guidance?" shouted Manlio.

"The bad part is," said Ismael, "that the work has been divided poorly, because not everyone has the same willingness to work. If I produce ten of something, I want ten of something in return!"

"If you produce ten," answers Manlio, "you should settle for one and take the other nine from what others produce."

"But if the others don't produce ten or the quality is inferior or if I don't need it, I'll always end up losing in the distribution because I produce more. So there's Sixto, who now fancies himself a poet. Should I give him part of the fruit of my labor in exchange for some verses, which aren't useful to me at all? I don't even know, nor do I care, if they are good or bad! That isn't work!"

"I, for one," interrupted Esther, the most beautiful and coveted of the survivors, "wish to leave my companion Honorio."

"Why?" exclaimed Honorio, with a blazing look in his eyes.

"I am exercising my rights. Arides has said that we are all free."

"You have lost your mind because you are so spoiled by everyone!"

"That's right!" agreed Aciscla angrily, "My man is crazy for you. But you'll be sorely disappointed if you think that I'm ever going to let that happen..."

"Esther is right," observed someone, "she is free, and if she wants to leave Honorio, no one has any reason to stop her."

"She will leave Honorio," shouted a male voice, "but not to be with you..."

"We'll see about that!"

"Not you or the other one!" exclaimed another voice. "Esther has promised to be my companion if she leaves Honorio."

"And do you believe that I am going to allow you to walk out on me?" shrieked a female voice, quivering with rage.

"I'm perfectly in my right to do it!"

"Here, no one has a right to anyone else!"

"But there are obligations!"

"It seems that Esther intends to drive all of us mad. She will want to be the queen!"

"It's because of her beauty!" shouted Sixto.

"Here he comes with his pompous poetry!"

"We don't allow kings or queens!"

"She will belong to whoever wins her!"

"Look! Let's see if someone dares to fight me for her!"

"I will!"

"And I will!"

"And we will!..."

The chaos was frightening, fists landed like clubs on irritated faces, and all sorts of curses and insults spewed forth from their mouths.

Arides commanded attention with a gesture of irritation and a threatening tone of voice, and each of the contenders went their separate ways, grumbling like beasts just waiting for the chance to take down the trainer.

That night Arides retired to his home, more downtrodden and disillusioned than ever. What were all those years of study and sacrifice for? What could one expect from such brutally selfish creatures? What to do...? It's true that he could be the arbitrator, the king, the tyrant, whatever he wished, prevailing through terror, but instead of returning to the state of things that he had so despised, he would prefer to end everything. The new generation appeared to have atavistic instincts and one could hardly trust them. Even his companion had abandoned him...

He went to bed, but he could not sleep: along with disillusionment, desperation took hold of him. His nerves were frayed and an insatiable appetite for destruction overpowered and inflamed him.

"There is no doubt," he finally exclaimed, jumping out of bed, "selfishness, cruelty, wrath, envy, hatred, and bestial instincts are unavoidably innate in human nature. I should have thought not of transforming society, but of transforming humans... But is that something that is within

my means...? And is it worth it that this species, which only thinks of exploiting, oppressing and taking from others, should survive? Can I not imagine annihilating them? And supposing I could, do I have the right to do it...?"

He stood up, with a gesture of irritation and an irate look, opened the window, contemplated the scenery in the light of the moon for a long time, as if he wanted to bid his final farewell to life, and finally headed, groping his way in the darkness, to the lab.

As he entered the large room, his heart felt oppressed: there were his mysterious machines, the docile devices that he had considered to be his most faithful friends, but which had also betrayed him. He had dreamed of destruction for the purpose of edification, but only the former had been realized...

In the shadows, with the complete certainty of one who manages instruments that are familiar to him, he tightened pulleys, adjusted gears, established contacts, and resolutely grabbed the handle of a hand-wheel and turned it with the energy of a madman.

The air burned as if it were a flammable gas, violent jolts shook the floor with the piercing, grating sound of a monstrous earthquake and the city was transformed into an immense bonfire...