

INTRODUCTION TO THE DISPARATES OR, THE PROVERBIOS

THE LAST OF Goya's four main print series, most often called by the public *Los Proverbios* (Proverbs), but also called by art historians, who have devised various names, *Los Disparates* (Follies—"without rhyme or reason") and even sometimes *Los Sueños* (Dreams), is the least known graphic work of the master, and the most difficult to appreciate or to understand. It is generally considered that Goya made the eighteen large etchings and aquatints that the series, as first officially published in 1864, contains soon after a particularly serious illness he underwent in 1819. He had just moved into a newly purchased house on the banks of the Manzanares, north of Madrid—a house which became locally known as "La Quinta del Sordo" (the house of the deaf man). For Goya was nearly totally deaf, and was seventy-three years old. His wife had died in 1811; his only son, Francisco Javier, was an idler and of little help to him; his popularity at court and among those who commissioned pictures was at a low ebb; Spain itself staggered along under the stupid and autocratic rule of one of the worst of its Bourbon kings, Ferdinand VII. Small wonder, then, that Goya was deeply discouraged and recovered from his illness with the greatest difficulty. There was little in his life, or in its prospects, to give him hope. This print series surely reflects his state of mind.

One cannot be sure what name Goya himself had intended for the prints under consideration. Perhaps *Disparates* is the most likely one, since a certain very limited number of proof prints, drawn from the plates by the artist himself, carry this title in a contemporary handwriting (two are reproduced in this volume). Moreover, the full title of each print was, as usual, disguised in order that its personal, political, religious, or satirical inspiration could not be identified. Why should a group of dark human figures huddled together on the branch of a great tree be called "Disparate ridículo" (Ridiculous folly) if a meaning was to be inferred therefrom? Like the terrifying murals Goya painted in his house about the same time, called popularly *las pinturas negras* (the black paintings), this subject seems almost a vision from a nightmare. We know that Goya was deeply disturbed nervously as well as physically after a previous illness in 1792–94, and that he turned to making prints before he had gained sufficient strength to resume

painting and his normal life. It may have been that the same sequence of suffering and work occurred in 1819–20. But whereas many of the *Caprichos* (Caprices) series etched and aquatinted in the late 1790's are susceptible to reasonable interpretation, the same is not true of the *Disparates* series. As the eminent Spanish Goya scholar F. J. Sánchez Cantón says, how can we explain them rationally when we can hardly find words with which to describe them?

Besides the eighteen *Disparates* prints that the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid published in 1864, thirty-six years after Goya's death, there are four more prints of equal size and of the same enigmatic purport which were first published in the French magazine *L'Art* in Paris in 1877. These seem also to have been intended by Goya to form part of this series. This makes a total of twenty-two subjects. Can we carry any of these compositions back into the stage of drawings which Goya customarily made while he was working out the subjects of the prints? Actually we can; but the relation to the prints is more than usually involved. There are nineteen drawings recorded for subjects which are in the *Disparates* vein and of similar size and technique. Eighteen of these are in the Prado Museum in Madrid, and one is in the possession of the author of this essay. The latter drawing appears as the frontispiece of this volume, where it is reproduced for the first time. It is not difficult to relate thirteen of these drawings to the same number of *Disparates* prints. But there are six drawings for which no prints are known to exist, and nine prints (Löys Delteil nos. 206, 209, 214, 215, 219, 220, 221, 222, and 223) for which there seem to be no drawings. None of the four prints first published in *L'Art* seem to have preliminary drawings, but they are nevertheless unmistakably by the master.

It has been tempting in recent times for psychologists and psychiatrists to try to analyze Goya's state of mind which produced the *Disparates* prints and the *pinturas negras*, but so far no considerable group of Goya scholars has seemed satisfied with any single interpretation. It is one thing to hazard a guess, and quite another thing to attempt to interpret the mind of a man who died one hundred and forty years ago. In the end it would seem best to look at these prints without trying to discover any very specific meaning—to loosen one's aesthetic emotions and to allow one's

unfettered imagination to revel in or be stirred by the train of thoughts and emotions the prints evoke.

Dover Publications is doing a public service in making good reproductions of the *Disparates* prints available. All of the many editions of the series put out by the Academia de San Fernando have become scarce. A privately printed edition of the first eighteen subjects, said to have been prepared for "a Madrid industrialist" who temporarily owned the original copper plates before the Academia (ca. 1840–50), is almost as rare as the proof prints, but it has pale impressions of the prints (one of the best—*Disparate* 13—is reproduced in this book). The first published edition of

1864 was therefore the basic one used here, together with the two above-mentioned proofs pulled by Goya himself (for *Disparates* 12 and 15). These are all strong and contain added aquatint grain. If the reproductions in this volume naturally cannot be as fine as the originals from which they were made, they are at least better than the worn ghosts of impressions that have recently come from the heavily used and reworked plates.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
October 1968

PHILIP HOFER
Harvard Library