

Remembering Rafael Alberti

Rafael Alberti passed away just short of seven weeks before his ninety-seventh birthday. It's normal that one is always moved by the inevitable presence of death, and even more deeply when it's the definitive absence of an exceptional being who has enriched the spiritual heritage and social direction of his contemporaries thanks to a body of poetry characterized by a vigorous human authenticity, written in an exquisite artistic fashion, and with the example of the way he led his life.

But independently of the natural levels of grief that this significant absence provoked, according to the ties that bound us to this great poet, it's clear that in cases like Rafael Alberti's, the joy of having had the privilege of living a long and generous life, of nearly a hundred years, should prevail over the sadness felt on his passing away. It has been a fortunate situation that he not only allowed us to enjoy more of the fruits of his genius, but also that he received during his last years signs of love and acknowledgment from his hometown, after having suffered a distressing exile that lasted four long decades.

It was a long life that he was able to lead joyfully and conscientiously, with tenderness and beauty; he made an extraordinary contribution to the vast heritage of the Iberian culture, as well as to the culture of the world and to the human spirit of the past century and for future centuries. Rafael Alberti's life and work allow him to stay alive forever in the memory of humankind.

In this the first year of the twenty-first century, which places us on the threshold of the centennial of his birth —December 16, 1902—, I wish to briefly remember Rafael Alberti on the first and last occasions that we were together, not only for the selfish pleasure of remembering him, but also to offer a small testimony of his values and some details of his actions and concerns, which are covered more extensively in my book *Rafael Alberti en Cuba (Rafael Alberti in Cuba)*.

In mid-April of 1935, amid a critical political situation in Cuba in which I was involved, I received an important political and literary assignment. Hardly a month before, a forceful general revolutionary strike against the regime, that had been installed by the United States in January of the previous year, had failed. This became the excuse for the beginning of the repressive and terrible period of the first stage of tyranny under Fulgencio Batista. I was assigned the difficult task of

looking after Rafael Alberti and his wife María Teresa León, on their first visit to Cuba. They arrived on April 16 at the port of Havana on board the steamer the *Siboney* from New York.

It was an assignment that had been suggested by my friend Juan Marinello, the eminent revolutionary intellectual, who was then unjustly in jail, on account of his editorial work on behalf of the Anti-Imperialist League of Cuba, and with whom I collaborated on the newspaper *La Palabra* (*The Word*) under his direction; it was closed down by the tyrannical regime after the general strike had failed in March.

The young poet and journalist that I was then was very pleased and honoured by the assignment, for I was aware of the stature of the author of *Marinero en tierra* (*Sailor on Land*) within the new Spanish poetry and of his recent political affiliation with the Communists, even though I had not read much of his poetry. Nevertheless, I approached the distinguished couple—hat was staying at the old Saratoga Hotel—under the supposition that I was going to meet two classic intellectuals, that is, possessed of a distant air of superiority and hard to please. But instead, I met a young charming couple, whom I have already described on more than one occasion: María Teresa was graceful, beautiful, loquacious; Rafael, dashing, affable and smartly dressed, his Andalusian flair clear from his easygoing smile. And any difference of age and social standing was erased when we addressed each other with the familiar *tú* form.

It must be remembered that as of 1931, during the heart of the struggle against the Monarchy and for the Republic in Spain, Alberti took a decisive stand in his life, which he wrote about at the beginning of the first edition of his journal *Cruz y Raya* (*Cross and Stripe*), entitled *Poesía 1924-1930* (*Poetry 1924-1930*): "As of 1931, my work and my life are at the service of the Spanish Revolution and of the International proletariat."

Even though I was aware of his stance, I did not know that his trip to the United States and the Caribbean fulfilled a mission on behalf of the International Red Cross for the Asturian miners, who were being brutally repressed. It's to be expected that both Spanish writers had been warned of the serious political situation in Cuba at the time, which explains their status as passengers in transit to Mexico on the *Siboney*, which periodically covered the New York-Havana-Veracruz route. Still, it was a risky mission, but I proudly and decisively resolved to take it on.

Fortunately, Rafael's literary fame, and his friendship from Madrid with a former member of the Cuban legation in Spain, the scholar José María Chacón y Calvo, the then Director of Culture for the regime, allowed the several weeks' stay to be relatively normal. Lectures given by the both of them and readings by Alberti were made possible in the main cultural institutions, as well as interviews and words of tribute in and from important press organizations.

But apart from the literary activities and the inevitable dealings with a certain snobbish bourgeoisie, the spirited couple did not forego the pleasure of meeting the people that most interested them. The first contact they made was at a clandestine meeting with a group of left-wing intellectuals in a room at the Teacher's College, which was then temporarily set up in a hospital that was under construction.

About twenty writers, artists, and professors attended with the natural precaution that was required in those days of harsh political persecution. Alberti spoke to us about the critical situation in Europe caused by the aggressive fascist policies of Hitler and Mussolini, and about the need to confront ideologically that advance of regimes that were threatening the progress and culture of the world. He spoke of the actions already undertaken by French and Spanish writers and artists in defence of the arts, and he urged the creation in Cuba of a similar organization linked to the European bodies; with that same objective in mind he and María Teresa continued their trip on to Mexico.

There was a lively conversation amongst the members of the group, in which the guest informed us of the reactionary crisis of that sombre period for the young Spanish Republic, which was not very different from that which many Latin American countries were suffering. At a particular point, Alberti asked if the poet Nicolás Guillén was in attendance. I told him that he wasn't there for empty precautionary measures, on account of his having simply been an employee of an official department of the regime that had been deposed in 1933, but it was clear that his books of poetry *Sóngoro cosongo* and *West Indies Ltd.* (1931 and 1934, respectively) were of a revolutionary nature. Alberti agreed with me and warmly praised what he knew of Guillén's writing. The next day I had the pleasure of taking Guillén, who had been a friend of mine from the year before, to meet Alberti and to thus begin a close and long friendship with Rafael and María Teresa. And as of that moment, our poet maintained ties with the far left of the Cuban cultural community.

Their visits to "political prisoners" were amongst other "subversive" activities undertaken by the Spanish couple that, however, did not overshadow the publicity they received for the readings and lectures. On account of being a writer, Alberti was able to have an interview with the imprisoned writers Juan Marinello and José Manuel Valdés Rodríguez in the Castillo del Príncipe jail, where they were serving an arbitrary six-month sentence along with the poet Regino Pedroso (ill at that time) and some other fellow writers, for having been members of the editorial board of the journal *Masas* (*Masses*), an organ of the Anti-Imperialist League of Cuba, (which has already been mentioned). Further-more, both Rafael and María Teresa also visited the "female political prisoners" (intellectuals and workers) in the Women's Penitentiary in Guanabacoa; the women were accused of participating in the recent general revolutionary strike.

On several occasions I took Rafael and María Teresa through Old Havana's narrow streets, which have retained a Spanish colonial atmosphere and they frequently expressed their delight at standing in places that reminded them of places in Cadiz; they were also excited about meeting the black population of Havana, their music, their joy, their particular way of speaking Spanish; María Teresa was especially delighted by the black children.

Even though there weren't many occasions to talk about literature when I was accompanying them, I remember one time that I asked Rafael what poets had influenced his poetry the most. He replied that more than anyone else, it had been Gil Vicente, and he went on to give a warm biographical sketch of the Luso-Spanish poet, whom I did not know about at that time; he also mentioned, naturally, Garcilaso, Góngora, Juan Ramón. Alberti wrote a poem about the day he left Havana;

...

The sky was behind me on the Caribbean sea
 The strong and pure voice of Juan Marinello,
 The unknown voice of Pedroso and the
 Wet memory of José Manuel.
 It was the 10th of May when the "Siboney"
 Left the Cuban palm tree for the maguey
 That the Mexican shores called on me to come,
 The open daggers, gently, to wound me.

On that date in 1935, therefore, Rafael and María Teresa left the port of Havana for Mexico, and we wrote to each other, especially with María Teresa, who was always so graceful and enthusiastic. A year after their departure, on May 20, 1936, the charismatic poet and publisher, Manuel Altolaguirre, published out of his press on 73 Viriato Street in Madrid, Alberti's dramatic and suggestive book of poetry, entitled *13 bandas y 48 estrellas. Poema del mar Caribe*. (*13 Stripes and 48 Stars. Poem of the Caribbean Sea*). It is dedicated, as you will recall, "To Juan Marinello and all the anti-imperialist writers of America", and includes as an inscription a well intentioned line written by Rubén Darío: "¿Tantos millones de hombres hablaremos inglés?" ("Will so many millions of us speak English?").

That dramatic experience of a historical oppressive reality on the American continent, that includes the United States, Cuba, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Martinique, etc. is one of Alberti's most impressive books of poetry. This book is crowned by the poem "Yo también canto América" ("I also sing America"), which is inscribed with the title of Langston Hughes's poem "I, too, sing America". It is a pity that he was not able to see what he yearned for in the following stanza: "It's going to explode, to explode, I want to

see it,/I want to hear it, touch it, be its catalyst,/ that shake up that destroys/ the armed intervention made by those carrying dollars. ("Va a sonar, va a sonar, yo quiero verlo,/ quiero oírlo, tocarlo, ser su impulso,/ ese sacudimiento que destruya/la intervención armada de los dólares").

This poetry of condemnation and combat underlines not only the tragedy of our countries colonized by the dollar, but also the difficulties faced by Rafael and María Teresa vis-à-vis the pro-American tyrannical regimes of this hemisphere, in that disastrous period, that with the outstanding exception of Cuba, differs relatively little from what we are presently experiencing.

But Rafael and María Teresa, the great Spanish poet and the great Spanish novelist, were then far away from the enormous tragedy that was awaiting the heroic Spanish nation as of July 1936. The savagery, forseen by the Congresses for the Defense of the Arts, was unleashed by the monstrous Francoist-Falangist aggression that was supported by the Nazis and that caused the deaths, imprisonment or exile of millions of human beings. That criminal fascist aggression was nothing more than the first act of an even more catastrophic tragedy: the Second World War.

The life and poetry of Rafael Alberti are marked by almost four decades in exile, in the same way that our lives in Cuba, in the Caribbean were marked by many years of constant battles against an unsustainable reality, that was erased in Cuba by the triumphant Revolution of 1959. In 1960, Rafael and María Teresa were guests of Cuba for the second time, but in what a different manner. Their extensive programme of honours and visits, as well as my duties and responsibilities only allowed for a short reunion full of memories. When, however, Rafael returned to Havana in 1991, María Teresa had already passed away, we were able to share a friendly discussion on several occasions.

Of our unforgettable friendship there remained our correspondence and indelible memory of those two exemplary and unmistakable human beings, of an exceptional sensibility and talent, fighting for a better world, who never lost their enthusiasm and hope, nor their will to fight.

Skipping over the years and leaving out other occasions and reunions with Rafael like the one in Segovia in 1994, during the International Conference of Leonese, Hispanic American and Portuguese Writers, where I presented him with the diploma as Honorary Member of the Nicolás Guillén Foundation —, we came upon our last reunion. It took place in his beautiful hometown, the Puerto de Santa María, part of the impressive bay of Cadiz in July of 1996. The Rafael Alberti Foundation, under the direction of his second wife, María Asunción

Mateo, periodically holds poetry reunions, and that year (the third edition), six of us Cuban writers were invited to participate: Fina García Marruz and Mary Cruz in the section "La voz de siempre: Rubén Darío" ("The Everlasting Voice: Rubén Darío") and Cintio Vitier, Nancy Morejón, José Pérez Olivares and Ángel Augier in the section "Poesía de la otra orilla de nuestra lengua: Cuba" ("Poetry from the Other Shore of Our Language: Cuba").

The day after our arrival, María Asunción kindly invited my wife Mary and me – the closest to Rafael – to visit him, but when I told her that all of the Cuban guests had arrived, she extended the invitation, which gave us an unforgettable afternoon with the customary good humour and surprising memory of this great Spanish and universal poet from Cadiz. And there, seeing his usual smile, I remembered that that was one of his personality traits that most impressed me in 1935, this last time with a slight melancholic twinge, but it was never an empty smile, rather the transparent smile of kindness, of the awareness of having fulfilled one's duty, in a life dedicated to writing poetry and to the poetry of his actions.

That is why, when he died on October 28, 1999, I believed that his passing away could not be sad, and I wrote this sonnet that I dedicated to his daughter Aitana Alberti León, who by living in Cuba extends the love that her parents always felt for our country, and receives from Cuba the love that our country will always feel for them, and for the marvellous contribution they made to human awareness and world culture:

A BROTHERLY FAREWELL TO RAFAEL ALBERTI

Rafael, I never forget your smile,
 Since the restless light of Havana
 Embraced you along with María Teresa
 And kissed you with the magic of her breeze.

Because you are a presence that does not disappear,
 You bid farewell without sorrow or in a hurry,
 And at a distance I make out your smile
 Trying not to forget sadness.

What you gave was beautiful, noble, and honourable:
 That enormous treasure that you leave us.
 Your farewell cannot be sad.
 In your life you fought for the joy
 Of humanity. And though you are already leaving,
 You remain forever in your poetry.

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