



## Rafael Alberti

### A Sailor Ashore

*I took the mask off a word  
and, dumb,  
face to face,  
we both remained.*

**Rafael Alberti**

“It’s 1902, a year of great peasant unrest in Andalusia; a year of preparation for the revolutionary uprisings of later years. December 16: the date of my birth, a night of unexpected storms.” This is how Rafael Alberti describes his arrival in the world in his autobiographical *La arboleda perdida*<sup>1</sup> (The Lost Grove), written in 1942.

A sailor ashore, painter, playwright, translator of Paul Eluard, poet. The last exponent of Spain’s legendary Generation of ’27 died the night of October 27 in his hometown of Puerto de Santa María, Cádiz, from where the young boy in love with the sea left for his “first exile” when his family moved to Madrid in 1917. This brutal change in his life was reflected in one of his most memorable works, the collection of poems *Marinero en tierra* (Sailor Ashore) (1925), which won him the National Prize for Literature at the age of 23.

#### POETRY IS A WEAPON LOADED WITH THE FUTURE

In the 1920s, Rafael Alberti decided to study art. He lived near the student dorms that was the birthplace of the Generation of ’27, a group including poets Federico García Lorca, León

Felipe and Luis Cernuda; the film maker Luis Buñuel; and painters Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso, among others. The group took its name from the 1927 homage organized to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the death of Luis de Góngora, the poet of Spain’s Golden Age. These young artists preached the break with bourgeois values; they were enraptured by the world of the cinema, the “city lights,” the art of realism and the ideal of “pure poetry” cultivated by the Spanish poets Luis de Góngora and Juan Ramón Jiménez; intoxicated by the notion of a political and aesthetic revolution and by the proclamation of the Second Republic (1931-1939).

Alberti and other members of his generation learned from Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes, a great connoisseur of Góngora’s work, who began to study and revive his legacy, bringing it to them. In Alberti’s case, Góngora’s influence is clear in his volumes of poetry *El alba del alhelí* (The Dawn of the Wallflower) (1927), *Cal y canto* (Lime and Song) (1928) and *Sobre los ángeles* (About the Angels) (1929).

Alberti, who identified with the intellectuals who saw in the Republic the solution for Spain’s future, joined the Communist Party (CP) in 1931 and founded the magazine *Octubre*. His work became openly political. In those years the Fifth Regiment was formed to defend Madrid and together with poets Antonio Machado, Luis Cernuda and Miguel Hernández, among others—practically the same ones who participated in the Antifascist Alliance of Intellectuals organized by Alberti and his wife María Teresa León—went into the Talent Battalion. In 1935 he traveled to Mexico seeking aid for Asturian miners who had risen up in arms. On that trip he met writers Andrés Henestrosa and

Salvador Novo and painters David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, who illustrated his book *Verte y no verte* (Seeing You and Not Seeing You), an elegy dedicated to poet Ignacio Sánchez Mejía, exiled in Mexico.

In July 1936, the Falangist rebellion put Alberti's life in danger, and he fled to Madrid; when World War II broke out in March 1939, he went into exile. The Civil War and the fight against dictator Francisco Franco had broken the group: the murder of Federico García Lorca symbolized the death of an entire creative generation and the beginning of a process of transfiguration of lyric poetry into socially and humanly committed lyrical poetry in exile. Alberti's poetry changed. As Octavio Paz said, "It filled up with neo-Góngorisms; angels appeared in arithmetic class or in the ruins of houses; dreaming with your eyes open, political poems, civic elegies, poems about war and exile, odes to painting, satires....[However,] in all his metamorphoses, Alberti has been faithful to himself and his first books."<sup>2</sup>

The poet and his wife went to France, then Uruguay and finally Argentina, where they lived for 24 years, initially underground. After the death of Perón, when the military was preparing to arrest—in alphabetical order—Argentine and foreign intellectuals considered a danger to the regime, Alberti fled to Italy, where he lived 14 years, spending most of his time writing.

In 1977, after the death of Franco, Alberti returned to Spain with María Teresa and their daughter Aitana, born in Uruguay. His return caused jubilation among Communist Party militants, writers, politicians and friends who went to meet him. "I left with a clenched fist and I return with my hand open as a sign of goodwill," he said, moved by the singing of *The Internationale*. He later accepted running for office on the CP ticket and dove into his campaign with youthful enthusiasm. On July 13, 1977, two old comrades occupied the vice presidencies of Spain's legislature, the Cortes, in the first democratic session since the war as the oldest deputies: Dolores Ibárruri, *La Pasionaria*, the emblematic figure of the Asturian miners' struggle, and Rafael Alberti.

As he neared 80, tiring of political activity, Alberti decided to turn himself into "a poet of the street": he spent his time reciting his poetry, giving lectures and enjoying the total recognition of his literary work abroad and in his native land. He was given the National Theater Prize in 1981, the Cervantes Prize in 1983 and several honorary doctoral degrees; he was admitted to the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine

Arts in 1989; and in 1993, he was given the Andalusian Prize for Letters.

#### THE LAST OF THE CLASSICS IN THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

Rafael Alberti's work was never overwhelmed by his political activity. It has traveled the world over thanks, to a great extent, to the loving welcome given it by poets from the most diverse literary and ideological tendencies. In Latin America it had its impact on Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti, as well as Chile's Pablo Neruda and Mexican novelist Sergio Pitol and poets Jaime Labastida and Octavio Paz. Paz admitted Alberti's influence saying, "My discovery of modern Spanish-language poetry began when I was 16 or 17 in high school....One of the first things I read was Rafael Alberti. His poems took me into a world where old things and hackneyed situations both continue to be that, but were also something else."<sup>3</sup> Singer-songwriters Paco Ibáñez and Joan Manuel Serrat have set Alberti's poems to music and sung them on five continents where his poetry is known.

In August 1990, Alberti was honored in Mexico City's Fine Arts Palace and the Julio Jiménez Rueda Theater.

"IF MY VOICE SHOULD DIE ON LAND, TAKE IT TO SEA LEVEL."

On his ninetieth birthday, he closed the cycle of his "first exile" in 1917. The city government of the port of Santa María gave him a house that Alberti called Maritime Ode, after one of his books of poetry, and he began to spend long periods there until his last and final stay. As he wished, his ashes will be scattered in the Bay of Cádiz.

María Cristina Hernández Escobar  
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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Alberti, *La arboleda perdida* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz as quoted in "Murió Rafael Alberti, último exponente de la Generación del 27," *La Jornada* (Mexico City) 28 October 1999, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Octavio Paz, speech at a 1990 homage to Alberti in the Julio Jiménez Rueda Theater. "Murió el poeta Rafael Alberti," *La Jornada*, 28 October 1999, p. 29.