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Towards a Revaluation of Joan Alcover's Elegies **Krustine Doll**

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TOWARDS A REVALUATION OF JOAN ALCOVER'S *ELEGIES*

KRISTINE DOLL

Among Spanish poets of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Joan Alcover is one of the least-known and appreciated. Despite the acclaim and recognition of his Castilian as well as his Catalan contemporaries, modern criticism outside of Catalonia has virtually ignored Alcover. Although he continues to receive a certain critical attention from the Catalan intelligentsia (particularly as he relates to the *Escola Mallorquina* or to his more famous contemporaries), Alcover deserves more than regional attention.

During his lifetime (1854-1926) Alcover was regarded highly throughout Spain as a poet, essayist, orator and literary critic. He wrote abundantly in Castilian as well as Catalan and was well-received in both. His Castilian verse was enthusiastically greeted by poets and critics alike. Antonio de Valbuena lauded Alcover's first poetic collection, *Poesías* (1887), and was so impressed by the quality of verse that he even excused the few grammatical errors in the poet's Castilian.¹ Valera, too, wrote highly of Alcover's poetry as did Menéndez y Pelayo, who noted the singular elegance and symmetry of the Majorcan's work.²

¹ Antonio de Valbuena, *Agridulces, políticos y literarios* (Madrid: 1893), 101-108.

² "De los poetas que actualmente escriben en España son acaso Ud. y Miguel Costa los que dejan en mi espíritu una impresión más agradable, los que ofrecen un conjunto más armónico, los que más me agradan tanto por la sinceridad y pureza del sentimiento como por la nitidez de la forma." Menéndez y Pelayo, Letter to Joan Alcover, 21 agosto 1901, in Joan Alcover, *Obras completas* (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1951), xx.

In truth, Alcover's Castilian verse, which drew generously on Campoamor, was no better or worse than that of his contemporaries. Not surprisingly, much of his Castilian lyric is characterized by a moralizing sententiousness. This is particularly evident in such compositions as "Travesía" and the "Apólogos" of *Poesías*. In "El nido" of the same collection, Alcover attests to his admiration of Campoamor:

Si fuese Campoamor, a quien profeso
devota admiración, o no creyera
que vende leche aguada el que le imita,
haría de ese histórico suceso
un pequeño poema, o poemita

(vv. 1-5)³

Some of the compositions of this period, however, are quite worthy of note. Poems such as "Mi libertad", (*Poesías*), "El ciprés de mi huerto", (*Poesías*, 2nd ed.), and "Arte", (*Nuevas poesías*) manifest an inherent stylistic elegance and intimacy of tone which were to be developed more fully in the later Catalan lyric.

Between 1887 and 1901, Alcover published four volumes of poetry in Castilian: *Poesías* (1st edition, 1887; 2nd edition, 1892), *Nuevas poesías* (1892), *Poemas y armonías* (1894), and *Meteoros* (1901). He then abandoned that language to write solely in Catalan. His decision is generally thought to have resulted from a period of personal spiritual crisis. An important factor, as well, was a certain change of cultural climate and the poet's closer relations with Catalonia proper. With the consolidation of the *Renaixença*, Catalonia's 19th century literary revival,

³ Joan Alcover, "El nido", *Obres completes* (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1951), 350. All further textual quotations of Alcover's poetry are from this edition.

writing in Catalan must no longer have seemed as hazardous and precarious as it had earlier. And encouraged by the successful example of his Majorcan contemporary and friend, Miquel Costa i Llobera, Alcover identified himself even more strongly with the language and culture of his homeland. The subsequent deaths of his wife and two of their three children further solidified the poet's dedication to his native tongue in order to express more clearly "el calfred de l'emoció, el polsim de la imatge aletejant i viva, el llampec de la flama invisible i tremolosa, lo més fondo, lo més íntim, lo més personal".⁴

Alcover's later Catalan poetry was much more innovative than his Castilian verse had been. He was among the first to solidify the poetics of the emerging *Escola Mallorquina*, that poetic phenomenon specific to the Balearic Islands and contemporary with the *Modernisme* of Catalonia proper. Within this classically inspired atmosphere of thematic and linguistic balance and moderation, Alcover crystallized an authentic poetic voice, marked by transparent, simple and always personal images, as well as by a varied and agile melody.

Yet he was able to separate his independence and identity from any fixed school or movement, preferring to assimilate those influences, motifs and modes of expression which he felt would most successfully reveal his own world: "En coses d'art, senyors, jo som partidari de la llibertat absoluta... Jo crec més en els individus que en les escoles."⁵

He was considered by many of his contemporaries to be the initiator of a new dimension in Catalan lyricism. His tem-

⁴ Alcover, "La lengua materna" (1903), *OC*, 290.

⁵ Alcover, "Humanització de l'art", *Art i literatura* (Barcelona: Llibreria L'Avenç, 1904), 8.

pered sense of structure and his deliberately intimate, confessional voice broke away from the epic-narrative tone which the *Reixença* had established as proper to poetry.

The poems for which Alcover is most renowned are a group of six elegies included in the poet's first collection of Catalan verse, *Cap al tard*, published in Majorca in 1909. These elegies, begun in 1903 when the poet was 49 years old, are the mature product of a poetic evolution steeped in bilingual inspiration, spiritual and intellectual disillusionment, and personal misfortune.⁶ They are verses of an eclectic nature, reflecting the continued Romantic sentiment and inspiration still prevalent throughout the Catalan-speaking lands, but inspired as well in the post-Romantic and Parnassian movements current in Europe at the end of the 19th century.

Undoubtedly, Alcover's greatest inspiration is found in the Romantics. His lyric exhibits a marked presence of certain essential Romantic features which later movements would adopt and develop: the intensity with which individual grief is exalted, an insistence on an autobiographical and confessional tone, and a significant dependence on imagery drawn from Nature. Like the Romantics, Alcover finds the relation between artistic expression and personal experience to be fundamental to his verse: "L'art no s nodreix de sí mateix; tots el martells de les

⁶ Rosa Pujol i Guarch, Alcover's first wife, died in 1887 from pulmonary tuberculosis, an illness which also claimed the life of their daughter, Teresa, in 1901. Pere, their first son and a child for whom the father had a special predilection died from typhus in 1905. Tragically, Alcover would later lose two more children, Gaietà (the second son and only remaining child from his first marriage) and Maria (a daughter from his second marriage). Both would die on the same day, March 6, 1919, but in separate cities: Maria, in Palma and Gaietà, in Barcelona. Alcover was in Palma with Maria and was unable to reach Barcelona in time to be with Gaietà before he died. See Antoni Comas, *Joan Alcover* (Barcelona: Dopesa, 1973), 13-20.

mines de l'esperit, tots els assumptes li pertanyen, sinó com a objectiu, com a vehicle."⁷

Alcover's elegiac verse is particularly Romantic in the poet's concentration on the self and his inability, or lack of desire, to progress beyond personal catharsis. Writing well after the plenitude of literary and external Romanticism, Alcover defends his exhibition of public grief in words evocative of such an early Romantic as Vigny:

Si en nom del patriciat estètic a lo Leconte de Lisle, m'acusassen de donar en espectacle mes ferides, yo em permetria oposar a l'orgull relatiu dels impassibles, que fonamenten la dignitat de l'art en l'anestèsia moral, un orgull més absolut, que consisteix en desentendre's de tota externa relació, per consagrar la mirra del dolor al culte d'imatges benivolgudes... Jo m'acontent amb ésser home...⁸

The impetus of Alcover's work is unquestionably Romantic, opposing by its exaltation of personal grief the aesthetic norms of Leconte de Lisle and his disciples. Although Alcover rejects the objective slant of the Parnassians, he is akin to them in his restraint, his singlemindedness, and his love of metrical precision, characteristics, as well, of the Spanish post-Romantic generation. His quietly tragic, restrained and resigned poetry is much like the verse of Rosalía de Castro and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer in its musical harmony and undulating rhythm. Like Rosalía de Castro, Alcover frequently uses repetition and parallelism to stress ideas or concepts. His insistence on the rapid and faithful adaptation of expression to sentiment within a controlled structure is not unlike the priority that Wordsworth placed on "emotion recollected in tranquility". Alcover's desire to relate the intensity of his grief on the untimely and tragic deaths

⁷ Alcover, "Humanització de l'art", 22.

⁸ Alcover, "Al lector", prologue to *Cap al tard*, OC, 3.

of his family leads him to develop a poetic language dependent upon stark and often violent imagery, on relatively few but highly subjective adjectives, on the mournful tones of prevalent assonance, and on verbs and adverbs that annul or evade time, freezing the poet within a timeless, subjective world.

As Llompart noted in an early study, Alcover was not an elegist by temperament.⁹ He was, however, a man intimately acquainted with suffering. As he later explained in an interview given in 1924: "Jo no tinc preferència pel dolor com a font d'inspiració; és el dolor el que ha tingut preferència per mí."¹⁰ That the elegies written on the deaths of his family resulted in his finest poetic work is not due to any abstract or Romantic pessimism, but rather, to the intensity of his loss. The noted critic Joan Lluís Estelrich complimented the Majorcan poet on this particular collection of poems, but could not help commenting on the force of his grief: "Es lo mejor del tomo, pero te aseguro que no te doy por ellas la enhorabuena que se merecen sin escalofríos."¹¹

Unlike traditional elegists, such as Manrique, who strove to immortalize the dead in their verse by recounting some characteristic virtue, Alcover fixes his lyric in personal despair and does not attempt to recreate poetically the lives that have passed away. The reader receives no glimpses into the lives of the poet's wife and children and knows nothing specific about them, neither their individual character traits nor the circumstances surrounding their deaths. In fact, Alcover never truly eulogizes the dead. Nor does he offer any solutions to the questions that death for-

⁹ Josep Maria Llompart, "Cap al tard de Joan Alcover", in *Guia de literatura catalana contemporànea* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1973), 129-145.

¹⁰ Alcover, "Psicología de la poesía lírica", *OC*, 336.

¹¹ Estelrich, quoted in Alcover, *OC*, xxxiii.

ces each man to confront. There are none of the traditional religious answers that 19th-century Catholic elegists such as Jacint Verdaguer or Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda offered as consolation. Neither does Alcover present the classic vision of the individual immortalized in society for his actions.¹² Instead, he prefers to express his suffering without meditating on the values of the human spirit. He does not concern himself with examples of human strength in the face of adversity nor does he present any reflections on the possibility of an afterlife. Because Alcover never advances beyond personal despair, he cannot offer the reader any type of consolation on death, whether human or divine. What the reader does receive, however, is a portrait of a man utterly devastated by the death of his family, a man who lives only to grieve for those who have passed away.

The six compositions which comprise "Elegies" were written between 1903 and 1905.¹³ Critics have noted the radical tonal differences that characterize these pieces and consider the poems to make up two distinct groups.¹⁴ The first three elegies, "Les campanes", "La relíquia", and "Enyorança" are dedicated to the poet's wife Rosa and their daughter Teresa and are marked by an air of gentle melancholy and the poet's expression of stoic grief. In dramatic contrast to these delicate and stylized compositions are the tense and violent elegies written in 1905 on the

¹² Societal remembrance as consolation to death is classic in origin. Among 19th and 20th-century elegies in which the tradition is continued, see Rosalía de Castro's "N'á tomba d'o xeneral inglés Sir John Moore", Darío's "Responso a la muerte de Paul Verlaine", Antonio Machado's "A la muerte de Rubén Darío", and Lorca's "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías".

¹³ See the letters written by Alcover to Estelrich, 15 marzo 1903, *OC*, 686-91.

¹⁴ Llompart, 142; Comas.

death of the poet's son Pere: "Desolació", "Col·loqui", and "Dol".

Throughout the collection, three basic themes predominate: (1) the devastation wreaked by the passage of time, robbing Man of any good he may have known; (2) the emptiness felt by the living on the death of a loved one; and (3) the enriching experience of suffering.¹⁵ The first theme is inspired evidently in Baroque, as well as Romantic, elegiac verse. Both expressions were particularly concerned with time's flight, which ultimately mocks Man's delusions of divinity and grandeur by revealing his inherent helplessness in the face of his own mortality. The second theme reaches out to all elegiac tradition by expressing a profound emotion common to all humanity. As for the third principle of the poet's elegiac verse, his lyric speaks for itself:

La plenitud de vida no comença
ni arriba l'home a sa virilitat
sens que fermenti en l'ànima el llevat
de l'íntima sofreça.
("Col·loqui," vv. 18-21)

In fact, Alcover's insistence on the enriching experience of grief, along with his desire to immortalize his family, are the two significant motives behind the composition of "Elegies".

In order to communicate more precisely his sorrow, Alcover grounds his verse in visions of physical reality, particularly Nature.¹⁶ But unlike the popular tradition which inspires him, Alcover imbues his seemingly objective descriptions with an ob-

¹⁵ Llompart, 140-141.

¹⁶ An integral part of Alcover's poetic theory is the interrelationship between Man and Nature: "De l'esperit humà i la naturalesa, units per la contemplació... neix la creació de l'artista." "Humanització de l'art", 12.

vious symbolic intent. In the Romantic manner, Nature mirrors the poet's emotional and spiritual state and reflects his personal tragedy. In the sonnet "Desolació", the first piece written specifically to commemorate the poet's son, Alcover portrays himself as the gutted and destroyed shell of a once grand tree: "Jo só l'esqueix d'un arbre, esponerós ahir". (v. 1). In "Enyorança" his thoughts are "caravanes / de fulles empeses pels mateixos vents", his youth is a "camí de roses", and his dead children "unes poncelles que aquí se badaren / i ara se podreixen / a davall la terra" (vv. 1-2, 10, 31-33). And in "La relíquia", the second elegy of the series, he compares his happier youth to a desolate vision of Nature destroyed:

Faune mutilat,
brollador eixut,
jardí desolat
de ma joventut...
(vv. 1-4)

The deaths of the poet's family and his subsequent equation of life with pain result in Alcover's declared alienation from life. Throughout "Elegies" the poet is identified as a man who exists only physically, a man who doesn't truly live. Yet his belief in the fecund rewards of suffering causes him to profess that only those who have suffered deeply know how to live, even though their grief isolates them from life. This paradox is markedly Romantic in nature, largely based on the exaltation of the self and particularly on the superior sensibilities of the artist, who allegedly feels differently and more deeply than the rest of humanity, a distinction in which the Romantics took special pride.¹⁷

¹⁷ Thus Espronceda depicted himself in "Canto a Teresa" as alienated from the world and from society by his acute consciousness of his personal, superior

Consequently, Alcover sees himself as an outsider, as one who has been divorced from participating fully in life: "en aquesta vida m'hi trob un extern." ("Enyorança", v. 8).

In "Dol", the most irregular of the poet's elegies, yet the only one to receive an award at the 1907 Jocs Florals, Alcover poignantly compares himself to an old woman abandoned by her children as they leave to seek new lives abroad:

Sé d'una vella consirosa
a qui sos fills varen deixar
per la fortuna fabulosa
de l'altra banda de la mar.
(1-4)

Like the old woman, he, too, waits for a miracle that will return his children to him, but is confronted instead with the painful realization that: "Arriba un jorn que nostra vida / ja no veu res en l'avenir" (13-14).

Unable to join in life, Alcover depicts himself as a spectator, gazing through windows at visions of the past (vv. 37-44) or at glimpses of an eternal abyss (vv. 11-12) with which he compares his present existence.

Given Alcover's Romantic affinities, the reader might expect the poet's lyric to disintegrate into sentimental excesses and exaggerations. As noted earlier, however, Alcover's greatest strength lies in his ability to express his ideas and emotions concisely. Consequently, his work is characterized by a marked in-

aspirations and by his enormous capacity for suffering. Rosalía de Castro similarly portrayed her estrangement from mankind throughout her work, both poetic and prose. In *A mi madre* she focused, like Espronceda and later, Alcover, on the great extent of her grief: "vivo muriendo / que sentir, nadie sin morir pudiera, / ¡ay! lo que siento yo." Rosalía de Castro, "De gemidos quejumbrosos", vv. 208-210, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1977), 62-63.

terdependence of theme and form. Alcover's choice of intensely subjective vocabulary as well as images and metaphors based on physical reality are but one aspect of the thematic and structural integrity he achieves. To further solidify the relation between expression and content, the poet relies on corresponding rhythm and rhyme, and a syntax, while not wholly removed from complexities, essentially uncomplicated, all of which effectively reveal his immense grief.

In "Les campanes", the first elegy of the group, Alcover establishes the motive for "Elegies" — the remembrance of the dead:

Pertot arreu, l'alta harmonia
aixeca esbarts de pensaments,
i an els finats fa companyia
la rememrança del vivents.
(25-28)

The integration of theme and form throughout the piece is pronounced in the mournful tones of assonance, the prevalence of resounding and nasal consonants ("m" and "n"), and the consistent regularity of the octosyllabic rhythm. Not surprisingly, "La relíquia" is extremely suggestive of the tolling of funeral bells and of the melancholic feeling which characterizes our memories of the dead.

Another example of the relation between theme and form in Alcover's lyric is "Col·loqui". In this poem, frequent and dramatic enjambement forces the reader's eye, like the poet's thoughts and emotions, to flow through the poem as though cascading. One sentence may run on for three or more lines in a chain of uninterrupted meaning. Throughout "Col·loqui" Alcover's free combination of lines of seven and eleven syllables

reflects the pulsating rhythm of his own heart. His use of such a traditional form as the *silva*, employed for its tranquil fluidity and undulating rhythm, aids the poet's expression of grief by reflecting his emotional state, yet tempering his bereaved confession. Consequently, there is no emotional exaggeration, and the piece, like the others of "Elegies", is a controlled expression of personal despair.

Alcover's preference for the control and elegance of the more fixed and traditional metrical forms is evident, too, in his use of the *redondilla*, with its octosyllabic rhythm, marked rhyming pattern and fixed quatrain.¹⁸

"Desolació", the only sonnet in "Elegies", is structurally and thematically the most concise of the six poems which make up the collection. Like a number of 19th and 20th-century elegists, Alcover chose the sonnet for its expressive concision and traditional elegance. "Desolació" owes its brevity not only to the poet's lyric precision but also to his lack of didactic intent.

A simple and direct metaphor opens the piece and contrasts the poet's present life with his past:

Jo só l'esqueix d'un arbre, esponerós ahir,
que als segadors feia ombra a l'hora de la sesta;
mes branques una a una va rompre la tempesta,
i el llamp fins a la terra mà soca migpartí.

As Alcover reveals, he considers himself nothing more than the mere remembrance of a vibrant past. In this first quatrain, the reader finds that the tree with which the poet identifies is associated with benevolent and paternal feelings. Like the tree, Alcover is seen as one who offered shelter and protection, tradi-

¹⁸ See "Dol".

tional paternal attributes. By using easily-visualized images of physical reality, Alcover ensures the communication of these attributes to the reader by means of a conventional scene — tired harvesters gratefully taking their afternoon rest in the shade of a great tree. But the word “l'esqueix” of the first line cast a shadow over this idyllic past, a past which is abruptly shattered when the reader reaches the semicolon at the end of the second line. Rather than the previously depicted harmony and cooperation between Man and Nature, the last lines of this quatrain speak of destruction and violence. Branches have been broken one-by-one during a fierce storm and lightning has split in two the very trunk of the tree.

The second quatrain moves from destruction to disintegration. The intense poignancy of these verses is textually supported by the enjambement of the first line and the frequent breaking of verse, representative of the agitated and emotional voice:

Brots de migrades fulles coronen el bocí
 obert y sense entranyes, que de la soca resta;
 cremar he vist ma llenya; com fumerol de festa;
 al cel he vist anar-se'n la millor part de mi.

Nothing is left of the formerly splendid tree but a gutted and hollow trunk. The leafy branches which have broken off are now used as kindling. These branches, evidently representative of Alcover's children, were the best part of the tree. Nothing of them remains now but puffs of smoke rising skyward. And like the tree, the poet is helpless to do anything about the tragedy.

His sense of grief is intensified in the following tercet:

I l'amargor de viure xucla ma rel esclava,
 i sent brostar les fulles i sent pujar la saba,
 i m'aida a esperar l'hora de caure un sol conhort.

Because the root continues to receive nourishment, the tree continues to live. While the outer trunk appears to be dead, as portrayed earlier by the image of its being split in two, there exists an internal process of regeneration, but based on a nourishment of bitterness. A significant word in this tercet is the verb "sent": "i sent brostar les fulles i sent pujar la saba". The poet, in his role as the mutilated tree, is by all appearances a stricken and desolate remembrance of his former self. Yet, like the tree which is forced by its very nature to continue life where nourishment is available, Alcover, too, continues to feel, however unhappily.

He speaks in these verses of feeling life within him — the leaves budding and the sap rising — but intimates that he does not actively participate in the life-renewing process. He is, as the adjective "esclava" in the first verse suggests, trapped within a state of living death, forced to exist on the bitter memories of a happier past.

He then declares in the last line of this tercet that there is but one consolation left him in this bleak and tragic world, a consolation which he reveals in the closing tercet:

Cada ferida mostra la pèrdua d'una branca;
sens mi, res parlaria de la meitat que em manca;
jo visc sols per a plànyer lo que de mi s'és mort.

These last verses are an effective and intense closure. The first line reiterates the pattern of analogy to the tree used throughout the elegy.¹⁹ Alcover's wounds are unquestionably associated

¹⁹ Alcover continues his metaphorical identification with trees throughout "Elegies". In "Col·loqui": "Ran de la fossa com un arbre estic, / que hi beu tota la saba." (vv. 53-54). But unlike the wasted ruin of "Desolació", this tree will bear fruit, even though it be bitter (See vv. 55-59). It should be noted that the tree as symbol was particularly prevalent in Romantic and post-Romantic verse.

with the loss of his children. But his grief on their deaths is attenuated, to an extent, by what he now sees as his role in life: to grieve for and bear witness to those lives which have passed away.²⁰ Consequently, his mourning is transformed into a search for ways to immortalize his family. His verse, then, becomes the forum in which he achieves this objective.

Alcover uses Catalan, not to reproduce regional speech, although his idiom is marked by specifically Majorcan variants, but as an intimate and flexible language through which he expresses more accurately his most painful thoughts and emotions. His dramatic shift from the bright outer world of his earlier Castilian verse to the sombre and tragic landscape of his soul could only be successful, he asserts, in his native language: "El català és, entre nosaltres, l'única expressió possible de l'escriptor artista... Llavors tota parla que no fos la materna va rebutjar-la el llavi febrósenc, com el contacte de quelcom inexpressiu, fred i metàl·lic."²¹

Alcover's family tragedy undoubtedly stimulated the refinement of his poetic voice. Given the motives for "Elegies" — the remembrance of the dead and the versification of personal grief — Alcover's expression had to be as clear as possible in order to communicate his emotions. Obviously, he never intended his elegiac verse to be hermetic. On the contrary, it was to be accessible to all if it was to achieve the goals the poet had set for himself since his tragedy: to grieve for and bear witness to his dead family.

To facilitate contact with his audience, Alcover forged a re-

²⁰ Similarly in "Col·loqui" Alcover justifies his public sorrow: "perquè en la pietat dels qui passessin / i el càntic escoltessin, / / duràs almenys sobre la terra una hora / la vida de mos fills, que fou tan breu", vv. 12-13, 16-17.

²¹ Alcover, "Discurs en el primer Congrés internacional de la Llengua catalana", (1906) *OC*, 273, 278.

markably strong union between theme and form, relying on an uncomplicated syntax, familiar metrical forms, and a language heavily steeped in descriptions of commonplace reality. Not surprisingly, his native language, Catalan (with some distinctively Majorcan forms), became his most intimate and fluent voice. And it is in Catalan that he created one of Spain's most human and poignant expressions of individual despair. Alcover's "Elegies" stand as a superb testimony to Man's grief and helplessness in the face of Death.

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