

POET TO PAINTER
by Douglas Messerli

Rafael Alberti **To Painting**, translated from the Spanish by Carolyn L. Tipton (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press/Hydra Books, 1997)

Rafael Alberti **Concerning the Angels**, translated from the Spanish by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995)



Born in 1902 in Puerto de Santa María in the south of Spain, Rafael Alberti is one of the preeminent poets of the 20th century, and, perhaps, also that century's most representative poet—in part because he outlived so many others. As Carolyn L. Tipton writes in her intelligent and informative introduction to *To Painting*, “Rafael Alberti and the twentieth century progressed together; born in its infancy, he experienced the excitement and novelty of all the artistic movements of the 1920s of his youth—Cubism, Cinematic Imagism, Surrealism; participated as an adult in the political upheaval of the 1930s, working ardently for a more equitable society; and then, having suffered war and exile, finally reached a place of quiet at the end of the 1940s, a place of maturity out of which he created—and would continue to create for years to come—with insight and a profound nostalgia for the world of his youth.” Part of the great

literary renaissance of Spanish poetry of the late 1920s—the Generation of '27, which included notables such as Federico García Lorca, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, and Vicente Aleixandre—Alberti has produced over 47 volumes of poetry. Yet, until the publication of this book Americans knew him primarily for one work only, the great *Sobre los ángeles* (*Concerning the Angels*) from 1929, most recently reissued in an excellent new translation by City Lights in 1995.

Accordingly, it is a joy simply to hold in one hands another volume of poetry by this important artist, particularly when it is so beautifully produced as this one. *To Painting* is a watershed work of Alberti's *oeuvre*, a work shedding his angry and often sardonic lyrics of the 1930s. With its 1945 publication in Buenos Aires, to where he had exiled himself, Alberti signaled a return to aesthetic issues, combining his deep love of painting—he himself began as a painter and continued painting throughout his life—with his poetry. As Tipton explains, the book consists of three different types of poets: poems dedicated to colors (which most often take the form of numbered lists of the uses, shades, hues in nature, or associations); traditional sonnets, presented almost as “toasts” to various subjects of art; and poems dedicated to artists—to Giotto, Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto, Bosch, Dürer, Rubens, Goya, Cézanne, Van Gough, Picasso, and others. These three types, in turn, are structured by theme, chronology, and other issues, and then interrelated by color and artist and numerous other “pairings.”

Given what the translator has described as a meticulous structuring, it is a bit strange to be told that she has excised from the original six sonnets and seven poems to painters because “I think that most of them tend not to be as strong as the other poems, and I felt that their inclusion would weaken the whole.” Even within the selection we are presented there are certainly poems of less interest than the best of them, so one feels some sympathy with Tipton's decision. But it would have been better, I believe, to have the whole of the original volume, and to let time and readers

determine its strengths and weaknesses.

Personally, I find many of the sonnets, in part because of their traditional form, uninteresting. The debate continues whether translators should keep the original rhyme and meter or attempt to bring the poems into a more suitable American-English form by using internal and slant rhymes or subtly suggesting the original rhyme in other ways. Tipton has chose to retain the end rhyme, and she almost gets away with it:

To Perspective

To you, the perfect hoax, through whom the eye,
like a reaching hand, extends its view,
moving to what is far from what's close by,
to paler amethyst from deepest blue.

To you, feigner of depth & endless space,
giving to flat planes profundity,
through whom, beyond the balcony's iron lace,
we think that we can just make out the sea.

To you, value prized above all others,
hazy diminution of the colors,
architecture, music of the spheres.

On you, pictorial space lays its foundation.
Line & number sing your celebration.
To you, the tiller by which Painting steers.

The form, however, cannot escape the feeling of stiltedness in the American ear—at least this American ear.

Fortunately, many of the other poems are brilliant, and make this book an important one. The lists of colors are often truly inventive, and read, in the vaguely associational connections, a bit like the lists of New York School poets, albeit without the flat, seeming disinterestedness of those poems. Alberti, clearly, is an enthusiast—of art, of living. His colors represent catalogues of heightened experience.

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Hosannas in the blacks of Titian.

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Blacks wet & green
—Tintoretto—rising,
toppling suddenly
in storm.

The black of Spain, all
 five senses black:
 black sight,
 black sound,
 black smell,
 black taste,
 the Spanish painter's touch.

(from "Black")

My favorite poems of this volume are among Alberti's very best, and represent to me the importance of this poet. "Goya," for example, mixes narrative and magic incantation to conjure up a world of dark horror:

Your eye: I keep it in the fire.
 Your head: I nibble on it.
 Your humerus: I crackle it. Your harrying
 inner ear: I suck its snail.
 Your legs: I bury you up to them
 in mud.

One leg.
 Another.

Flailing.

Run away! But stay
 to witness, to die
 without dying.

And Alberti's "Bosch" is a true masterpiece of poetry and translation. Just a short piece of it conveys little of its energy, but the entire poem is a marvel of image and world-play:

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Mandrake, mandrake
 The devil has a crooked stake.

Cock-a-doddle-do!
 I ride and I crow,
 go mounted on a doe
 & on a porcupine,
 on a camel, on a lion,
 on a burro, on a bear,
 on a horse, on a hare,
 and on a bugler.

Cork, cork,
The devil has a small pitchfork.

To Painting will be a necessary volume in anyone's collection of important twentieth century poetry.

Los Angeles, 1997

A year after the publication of the Alberti book, the translator, Carolyn Tipton, read at a Sun & Moon Press salon held on September 26, 1998. Among the attendees were the usual friends, Will Alexander, Thérèse Bachand, Luigi Ballerini, Diana Daves, Peter Frank, Dennis Phillips (with his wife Courtney and his baby daughter Sophia), and Paul Vangelisti. Soon after that event, Alberti was awarded The Contemporary Arts Educational Project America Award of 1998 for the most outstanding writer of world literature. Alberti died in October 1999.

Los Angeles, January 1, 2000