

Rafael Alberti and Maruja Mallo in 1929: “La primera ascensión de Maruja Mallo al subsuelo”

Andrew A. Anderson
University of Virginia

Abstract: In 1929 Alberti published *Sobre los ángeles* and worked on *Yo era un tonto y lo que he visto me ha hecho dos tontos*, conceived as a book of poems combined with Mallo’s drawings, and on *Sermones y moradas*, heavily influenced by her *Cloacas y campanarios* paintings. The poem “La primera ascensión de Maruja Mallo al subsuelo” explores their shared artistic and philosophical concerns. This essay situates the text within the overall context of the couple’s activities and offers a detailed reading of it.

Keywords: Rafael Alberti – Maruja Mallo – *Sermones y moradas* – *Cloacas y campanarios* – 1929

Rafael Alberti and Maruja Mallo were involved in what was by all accounts a tempestuous romantic relationship between the summer of 1925 and the very end of 1930. After a major break-up in the spring of 1928, they reconciled in the late summer or fall of that year. Mallo had been vaulted to instant celebrity by her show of paintings and prints, *Verbenas y estampas*, held in the offices of the *Revista de Occidente* over May/June 1928, but immediately thereafter dramatically changed her style to that reflected in the *Cloacas y campanarios* series that she worked on through the end of the decade and beyond. By the end of 1928 *Sobre los ángeles* was largely completed—Pedro Salinas introduced a reading by Alberti of the poems at the Residencia de Estudiantes on December 20, 1928,¹ and by the spring of 1929 Alberti had already moved on to working on texts associated with *Sermones y moradas*.² This collection, never published as an individual book,³ is closely linked with *Sobre los ángeles* yet thematically, stylistically, and

¹ See Alberti’s comments about the progress of the collection to Cossío from August 15, 1928 through February 1929: Alberti, *Correspondencia* 34-37. For the lecture, see the letters in Champourcin and Conde 255–256.

² As evidenced by the publication of three poems in *Litoral* and one poem in *Atlántico* in June 1929: see below. See also Alberti, *AP. Quinto libro* 25 (all references to *La arboleda perdida* are abbreviated as *AP*).

³ It has only appeared in collected works, starting with his *Poesía* of 1934.

chronologically separate from it. Such a distinction was superficially blurred by the publication in May/June 1929 of *Sobre los ángeles* and the wide critical acclaim that it received in the following weeks and months.

Shortly thereafter, Alberti published the poem “La primera ascensión de Maruja Mallo al subsuelo” in *La Gaceta Literaria* in July 1929. The points of reference in “La primera ascensión...” are so transparently autobiographical that readers have not hesitated to relate the contents of the poem to the two principals and to the artistic works that they produced over the surrounding period. Thus, Havard sees the poem as Alberti’s “supreme tribute to her,” treating “Maruja in mock-paranoiac terms as a Redeemer whose transcendence is towards the matter of this world rather than the next” (*The Crucified Mind* 13). In contrast, for Laurenson-Shakibi it is a “conflicting and, at times, misogynistic paean of praise” (37) wherein their relationship “is both eternalized and demeaned” (38). In what follows, I aim to document more fully than has been done before the various convergences of Mallo and Alberti over the course of 1929, and then to subject the text of the poem to detailed scrutiny. As the critical discrepancies clearly demonstrate, it is deserving of a careful reading that addresses all parts of the composition in equal detail.

The year 1929 was one of the most fruitful for Alberti and Mallo, when personally they were more involved than ever, when their aesthetic stances came nearest to coinciding, and when their collaborative efforts were the most extensive. Ernesto Giménez Caballero held the first session of his CineClub on December 23, 1928, and the next day Ernestina de Champourcin reported to her friend Carmen Conde:

Vi allí a toda la joven literatura. Entre ella la inseparable pareja Maruja Mallo-Rafael Alberti. Son sólo amigos; por la tarde los vi también juntos en el Lyceum. Ella está bastante entusiasmada pero él... dicen que es de los que no se enamoran. (Champourcin and Conde 257)

A little later, on January 9, 1929, she commented again about Mallo: “Es muy original e interesante esta muchacha. ¡Lástima que su éxito la haya desvanecido un poco! Ella y Alberti están empezando a ‘ponerse tontos’” (Champourcin and Conde 262). Meanwhile, Alberti had made a big splash in the January 1 number of *La Gaceta Literaria*, publishing there his poem “Los ángeles de las ruinas” accompanied by a drawing by Norah Borges, an interview with him conducted by Giménez Caballero, and an excerpt from the aforementioned talk by Salinas. That same month, the *Revista de Occidente* brought out three more poems from *Sobre los ángeles*.⁴ And on January 7, Concha Méndez’s play *El ángel cartero* was performed at the Lyceum Club Femenino, with sets and costumes designed by Mallo (E. de M.).⁵

⁴ The journal had already published five the previous September.

⁵ See also Champourcin’s comments on the design and its realization: Champourcin and Conde 263.

In March the much delayed collection *Cal y canto* was finally published (Bergamín; “Poesía”), while in April two more magazines—*Filosofía y Letras* and *Meseta*—reproduced poems from *Sobre los ángeles*. For the sixth session of the Cineclub that was held at the Cinema Goya on May 4, *La Gaceta Literaria* announced “El cinema cómico.” The first part consisted of excerpts from five movies, followed by the interlude recital of “Poemas a los cómicos del cine” by Alberti, and then a second part with four more excerpts (“6.^a Sesión”). One reviewer called Alberti’s performance “un número de ‘variétés’”; besides reading poems dedicated to Chaplin and Keaton,⁶ during the recital he also included “un accionado especial y una sincronización con ruidos, silbidos y tiros de revólver” (Gimeno). This is the first concrete evidence that we have of what would become the collection *Yo era un tonto y lo que he visto me ha hecho dos tontos*, which he continued to work on through 1929. Days later, *La Gaceta Literatura* published a first installment of it in the form of “Harold Lloyd, estudiante,” in mid-June two more poems, both centered on Harry Langdon, in mid-July a sequence of three, and in mid-August, three more, all concerned with other actors of the silent screen.⁷

Coinciding with the publication of *Sobre los ángeles* at the beginning of June (and overlapping with these texts from *Yo era un tonto...*), *La Gaceta Literaria* printed one more poem from *Sobre los ángeles* in its number from June 1. In the same issue we find an advertisement from C.I.A.P. with a blurb publicizing the book (“Compañía Iberoamericana”). Reviews soon followed, with Azorín’s being one of the first. However, what particularly interests us here are the other poems that Alberti published in June. First there is “Carta,” a text that clearly belongs to the world of *Sermones y moradas* even though it was never included in that collection.⁸ At the same time in Málaga *Litoral* brought out a sequence of three poems that do fall into the established canon of *Sermones y moradas*.⁹ Then, at the end of July, Editorial Plutarco came out with a second edition of *La amante*, to which Alberti added poems and drawings (Alberti, *AP. Libros I y II* 281; “[advertisement]”), demonstrating the diversity of his projects at this moment and the perhaps confusing nature of the image of him given to the reading public.

⁶ Presumably “Cita triste de Charlot” and “Buster Keaton busca por el bosque a su novia, que es una verdadera vaca.”

⁷ For all details see Works Cited; the July 15 installment included the first appearance of the title *Yo era un tonto...*

⁸ Its publication in *Atlántico* seems to have gone unnoticed by most critics. In 2007 Hernanz Angulo revealed that she had found a disparate cache of Alberti manuscripts, which included “Carta” and two other poems in a similar vein, titled “Se sabe de alguien colgado de tres alcayatas sin punta” and “Es una frente la que hoy pide auxilio...” (214). In the same year she gave “Es una frente la que hoy pide auxilio” to *El País* for publication; to my knowledge the third poem remains unpublished. A fourth poem, “[A Petere, *en mi estilo serio*],” brought to light by Martín Gijón, also belongs in this same orbit: see “Entre dos corrientes de aire” n.p.

⁹ The first and third poems were subsequently retitled, respectively, “Morada del alma encarcelada” and “Morada del alma que espera la paz.”

Alberti spent the summer of 1929 in the Sierra de Guadarrama, as he had done several times before, for health reasons (Jiménez Gómez 163). On this occasion he seems to have lodged, at least for part of the time, in the village of Collado Mediano, some ten kilometers away from Cercedilla where Mallo's family habitually summered, often taking the local train to commute back and forth (Alberti, *AP. Libros III y IV* 29; Alberti, *AP. Quinto libro* 25). Once again, Champourcin was *au fait* with the latest gossip: "Alberti veranea en Cercedilla, donde también está Maruja Mallo. Colaboran juntos en un libro sobre el excremento y él se pasea con una estrella bordada en la boina canturreando coplas pastoriles" (Champourcin and Conde 310). A contemporary newspaper report confirms the general lines of Champourcin's information:

Alberti, además de ser un poeta auténtico, es un muchacho alegre. Yo le he visto pasear este verano de Guadarrama a Cercedilla un jersey gris perla y una boina adornada con una estrella, para lo cual, además de buen humor, se necesita cierta intrepidez. Bajo la vigilancia austera de las que llamó [Gabriel García] Tassara columnas de la tierra castellana, aunque también bautizada con el nombre de la Maliciosa, ha compuesto, en colaboración con María Mallo, un libro,... (Hernández-Catá)

While the reference to "excremento" takes us directly to Mallo's *Cloacas y campanarios* (Mangini 126–155),¹⁰ what is less clear is the identity of the collaborative volume or volumes: a plan somehow to combine the paintings of *Cloacas* with the texts of *Sermones y moradas*, poems specially composed by Alberti to accompany Mallo's canvases, or drawings to go with certain poems? What we do know is that Alberti, after the June publications mentioned above, was continuing to work on *Sermones y moradas*:

Cuando yo escribía *Sermones y moradas*, poco después de *Sobre los ángeles*, mi estado de confusión era más grande. Pasaba unos días del verano con Maruja Mallo, que vivía en Cercedilla, yéndome yo a la noche a Collado Mediano, cerrando los ojos durante el camino que mediaba entre la estación y mi casa, apuntando con lápiz en un cuadernillo los poemas que se me iban ocurriendo, durante poco más de medio kilómetro que tenía de camino. Luego, al día siguiente, corregía el poema y lo ponía en limpio. El poema que más me gustaba y hoy me sigue gustando, escrito en la oscuridad de los ojos mientras andaba, es el más triste de todos, pues yo

¹⁰ Sixteen canvases were exhibited at Galerie Pierre (Pierre Loeb's gallery) in Paris in May 1932; they were subsequently dispersed and I am not aware of the publication anywhere of a complete set of reproductions.

vivía un momento muy depresivo de mi juventud. Se titula “Ya es así”:
(Alberti, *AP. Quinto libro* 25)¹¹

Confirming this chronology, two manuscript versions of “Adiós a las luces perdidas” and one of “Elegías” are to be found in a notebook used by Alberti and which is dated to Cercedilla, June 15, 1929 (Siles 786, 790, 795).

This may also be the summer during which Mallo produced a series of strange, avant-garde photographs in which she posed while her brother Justo operated the camera. Most of them involve railway tracks, abandoned railcars, animal bones, wooden structures, and other pieces of detritus, arranged as *objets trouvés*.¹² As Alberti just mentioned, he too was to be seen at railway stations, and there he also rehearsed the disruptive act that he had already performed in May and would bring to full fruition in November: “aún le quedó tiempo para ensayar en el andén de una estación serrana, entre el estupor y la dispersión presurosa de ‘la colonia,’ el tiro que había de repetir ante los estudiantes” (Hernández Catá).

What is more, this was also the summer when Alberti met the young poets José Herrera Petere (then just under 20) and Luis Felipe Vivanco (then just under 22); Petere and Vivanco had themselves met in Cercedilla the previous year (Martín Gijón, *Una poesía* 24–25). Vivanco recalls that “yo he conocido personalmente a Alberti, le he acompañado por las calles de Madrid y los prados de Cercedilla y he llegado a ser amigo suyo” (16). The account that he offered to Valverde is more detailed and evocative:

Vivanco has told me that Alberti spent part of a summer [...] not exactly staying with him, but almost, at the summer place of San Lorenzo del Escorial, near Madrid. Not exactly staying with him, I say: as Vivanco’s severe, old-fashioned mother did not approve of such a dangerous friendship, Alberti could not stay at the Vivanco house, but somehow spent his nights out in the fields, and only in the morning was admitted into the house to shave, to be fed and to spend his day with Vivanco. (63)¹³

As with Mallo’s family, Petere’s also summered in Cercedilla (Alberti, *AP. Libros III y IV* 29, 91). And Petere’s wife Carmen Soler reinforces the idea of the rough-and-ready, hand-to-mouth existence that Alberti was leading over these months, recalling that her husband

¹¹ See also Alberti, *AP. Libros I y II* 274, 277, 281. “Ya es así” is part of the *Sermones y moradas* corpus.

¹² The photos are undated and it is not possible to establish whether these were made in the summer of 1929 or 1930: for instance, Nuevo Cal and Ínsua López favor 1929 (132), while Mangini favors 1930 (plate caption between 120–121 and 150–151).

¹³ Evidently, the geographical locations do not match up exactly; San Lorenzo was about 25 kilometers away from Collado Mediano by the roads of the time.

“ayudaba a algunos artistas, robando comida en su casa. Entre ellos se encontraba Alberti en Cercedilla” (127). It is hardly surprising, then, that Alberti shared the poems that he was working on with Petere, and while the title of his new collection was not made public until the beginning of 1931,¹⁴ Petere evidently knew it much earlier, as is suggested by his poem entitled “Dolores y moradas” from January 1930 (Martín Gijón, “Entre dos corrientes”).

In early fall of 1929—September 1—the fifth installment in the *La Gaceta Literaria* series of *Yo era un tonto...* marked a change, as a second text plus illustrations project began to take form. Two drawings by Mallo were reproduced alongside three further Alberti poems, one keyed to a poem and the other independent. A fortnight later the couple followed up with a similar combination of three poems and two illustrations, in this case both drawings being independent of the texts but also about other silent movie stars. Clearly, Alberti and Mallo were by this stage planning a book together, but while he struck on the title of *Yo era un tonto y lo que he visto me ha hecho dos tontos*, for her series of drawings she maintained the original, generic one of *Los cómicos del cine*. Hence the reference in 1930 by the journalist Luis Gómez Mesa to “sus estampas de los cómicos del film,” “sus ilustraciones para el libro cineístico [...] de Rafael Alberti,” and “los retratos de los cómicos del film,” and her own in 1939 to “*Los Cómicos del Cine*: quince dibujos realizados con los elementos más usuales de que los cómicos del cine se sirven para basar y construir los argumentos de sus películas” (Mallo, *Lo popular* 12).

In October Alberti turned back to *Sermones y moradas*, and provided the largest sampling to date, four poems under the general heading of “Un tragaluz sin vidrio” in *Revista de Occidente*. At the end of the month, he gave a reading to the Asociación de Estudiantes de Filosofía y Letras, and in the course of it continued on with his provocations of the previous spring and summer: “En una reciente conferencia o lectura de poesías ofrecida a los estudiantes, Rafael Alberti se ha suicidado con una pistola previamente reconocida por el delegado de la autoridad” (“Noticias”; Hernández-Catá). These “scandalous” acts reached an apogee with the lecture “Palomita y galápago (¡No más artríticos!),” delivered to the Lyceum Club Femenino on November 10. Alberti turned up in a Chaplinesque outfit, the back of the program featured a short poem about baldness, and during the lecture he insulted many established literary figures and performed various stunts. Most of the audience walked out, but among others Mallo, Concha Méndez, and Ernestina de Champourcin stayed, and thus were able to witness the finale when he “soltó la palomita y disparó sobre ella los tres tiros de una pistola de juguete” (“La batalla”; cf. Mateo 117). In his own account—and justification—of the lecture, he writes that, after returning to the building the following day, he discovered that the staff had killed the dove and immediately wrote the poem that he reproduces, titled “¿Tuviste tú acaso la culpa de que las balas de un revólver no te hirieran y de que en

¹⁴ When Alberti published, “Lejos, allá” and then the set of three “Ya es así,” “Sin más remedio,” and “Estáis sordos.” He had earlier floated the title of just *Sermones* (Salado).

cambio comprobaras que una hoja de otoño no vale ya ni para sepultar dos alas difuntas?” (“Un ‘suceso’ literario”).¹⁵

From the beginning of November through the end of December an *Exposición Regional de Arte Moderno* was held at the historic Casa de los Tiros in Granada; Mallo participated, alongside works by Picasso, Gris, Vázquez Díaz, Moreno Villa, Ángeles Ortiz, Peinado, González de la Serna, Lanz, Cristóbal, Dalí, and Lorca (“La Casa”; “El Patronato”). Alberti was present at the Madrid premiere of Buñuel and Dalí’s *Un Chien andalou* at the eighth session of the Cineclub held on December 8 at the Cine Royalty, where as a diehard supporter he was described as one of the filmmakers’ “incondicionales” (Suárez Guillén). Mallo and Alberti capped off the year with publications in the new magazine, *Nueva Revista*, run by Madrid university students, she with two movie drawings in no. 1¹⁶ and he with one more poem from *Sermones y moradas* in no. 2.¹⁷

At some point in 1929, Alberti and Mallo also collaborated on his plays *La pájara pinta*, *El colorín colorete*, and *Lepe, Lepijo y su hijo*, the first two of which dated from 1926 while *Lepe...* was much more recent. Thus, under the category of works executed in 1929, Mallo listed 22 drawings and vignettes with the title of *Figuras de Guiñol y Colorín Colorete* and explained that:

Figuras de Guiñol es una serie de dibujos coloreados que representan a personajes ideales inventados por el pueblo. Arquetipos de los que se les atribuyen cualidades intelectuales, físicas o morales, encarnadas en los personajes imaginativos de Lepe, Lepijo y su hijo, Picio, La Pájara Pinta, Pipirigayo, la Tía Piyaya, etc.... Los que corresponden a *Colorín colorete* contienen sacerdotes y manolas satíricos, cocineros, fumistas, faroleros, chimeneas, plumeros y chuzos en farsa guiñolesca. (*Lo popular* 12)

Exactly in the middle of 1929—July 1, and as a token of their creative and personal closeness, stands Alberti’s poem “La primera ascensión de Maruja Mallo al subsuelo,” alongside which appeared reproductions of two paintings from Mallo’s *Cloacas y campanarios* sequence, “Huella” and “Cloaca.”¹⁸ Occupying most of the frame in “Huella” are the impression of a shoe in earth that has since dried and beside it a fallen compound leaf with three leaflets. Around the edges we see what appear to be cracks in the ground,

¹⁵ Retitled as “En el día de su muerte a mano armada,” the text is part of *Yo era un tonto...*

¹⁶ Two more drawings from the same series would appear in 1930 in the magazine *Popular Film*. After their split, in 1932 Mallo planned an album of all fifteen entitled *Le Cinéma comique* to be published in Paris by the Galerie Jeanne Bucher, but it never came to fruition (Nantell 467); an image of the subscription slip for the volume can be found on-line.

¹⁷ Several more poems from *Sermones y moradas* would follow, sporadically, through 1930 and 1931. In November 1930 he told Cossío that “pronto publicaré mi libro de *Sermones y moradas*”: *Correspondencia* 40.

¹⁸ Champourcin’s comment that “colaboran juntos en un libro sobre el excremento” dates from July 25.

and towards one corner a cigarette butt.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the original of “Cloaca” does not seem to have survived, or at least its whereabouts are not currently known. It presents a nightmarish scene, reminiscent of medieval depictions of hell, with several floating headless naked bodies whose hands and feet are prominently displayed. Other hands and feet emerge from the murky background; some other features, particularly three lighter patches, are hard to identify because of the poor quality of the image in *La Gaceta Literaria*.²⁰ The two paintings frame Alberti’s text, one above it and one below it.

Overall, the poem approximates to the genre of the ode, with the opening line’s single pronoun “Tú” signaling the addressee. In some senses too, Mallo becomes the poet’s muse. We might remember that in 1926 Lorca had published his “Oda a Salvador Dalí,” and that as was the case with Alberti and Mallo, Lorca admired Dalí’s artistic production and sought to characterize it in the poem, while at the same time the two were also involved in a complicated amorous relationship. In his memoirs Alberti remembers outings with Mallo to the countryside around Vallecas, motivated by their contact with Benjamín Palencia and Alberto (*AP. Libros III y IV* 28–29; Alaminos López), and also the summers of 1929 and 1930 spent in the Guadarrama (*AP. Quinto libro* 25, quoted above). Mallo is more explicit in locating the source of her inspiration:

En estos momentos me impresionaba la naturaleza eliminando las basuras. La tierra incendiada y encharcada. Las cloacas empujadas por los vientos. Los campanarios atropellados por los temporales. El mundo de las cosas que transitan. Esta visión tangible de las cosas que se transforman, que con frecuencia tropezaba por las estaciones de circunvalación, es la base fundamental del contenido de la labor de aquel momento. (*Lo popular* 23)

This coincides more exactly with two other passages from Alberti:

caminaba día y noche hasta caer rendido. En cualquier parte, sobre un monte, en un camino o en el más solitario descampado, seguía los poemas de *Sermones y moradas* alternándolos con los del libro de “los tontos” (*AP. Libros I y II* 281)

and:

Coincidiendo con el arrastrarme los ojos por los barrizales, los terrenos levantados, los paisajes de otoño de sumergidas hojas en los charcos, las humaredas de las neblinas, mi salud se resquebrajaba, y los insomnios y

¹⁹ A good reproduction is to be found in Corredoira López 78.

²⁰ The light patch to the extreme right could possibly be a tree stump, with a knot—or a set of lips?—on it. At the extreme top another light patch has a similar shape on it.

pesadillas me llevaban a amanecer a veces derribado en el suelo de la alcoba. (*AP. Libros III y IV* 29)

And it is here that he recognizes the influence that she exercised on him: “De la mano de Maruja recorrí tantas veces aquellas galerías subterráneas, aquellas realidades antes no vistas, que ella, de manera genial, comenzó a revelar en sus lienzos” (*AP. Libros III y IV* 29). Consequently, and as several critics have already observed, Alberti’s poems from the period—some of the last texts in *Sobre los ángeles*²¹ and most of those in *Sermones y moradas*—correspond closely to Mallo’s entire series of *Cloacas y campanarios*. In some ways at least, “La primera ascensión de Maruja Mallo al subsuelo” is the best example of this phenomenon, and refers not to a single canvas but to her entire *oeuvre* of the time.

The word “subsuelo” and several near-synonyms were loaded terms for Alberti and Mallo. In his memoirs, Alberti evokes the period of composition of *Sobre los ángeles*: “mis ángeles no eran los del cielo. Se me iban a manifestar en la superficie o en los más hondos subsuelos de la tierra” (*AP. Libros III y IV* 29), and shortly after describes his return to Madrid from Tudanca after Mallo had a car accident: “Yo bajé en seguida a Madrid. Y la entrada de nuevo en el subsuelo, en las cavidades más oscuras y hondas, fue inmediata” (30). His writings are also littered with a variety of related concepts: when he fell into his depressive crisis, he found himself in what he describes as “aquel pozo de tinieblas, aquel agujero de oscuridad,” “aquel hondo precipicio,” “aquella sima de catástrofes en que estaba sumido,” “antros,” “aquella cueva” (all *AP. Libros I y II* 263–265), and “un sótano profundo” (“Cuando tú apareciste...” ii).

For her part, describing the subject matter of her paintings, Mallo refers to “las cloacas empujadas por los vientos,” “los antros de fósiles,” “las bodegas,” “los sótanos,” and most memorably “la hecatombe de las basuras que ruedan hacia las alcantarillas buscando el subsuelo” (*Lo popular* 23–26). In this regard, Havard is right in invoking Giménez Caballero and his *Yo, inspector de alcantarillas*, not just because of his biographical proximity to the couple and the role of the journal *La Gaceta Literaria* in all this, but also for the connection with several sections of *Yo, inspector...* (“Rafael Alberti”). Here the narrator undertakes a figurative dive into “la zona abisal” to reach “el reino de los epiplasmas” (27–28), that is, figuratively speaking, a descent into the depths of the psyche.²² This also becomes an exploration of the “alcantarillas” of the title, “la alucinante comarca de las atarjeas: donde vertían las ciudades (animal, vegetal, mineral, hombre) sus últimas substancias disueltas en fango” (29–30; see also Anderson 104–105). But if Caballero’s imaginative framework has more than a little to do with Freud, Mallo’s ideas

²¹ Notably “El ángel falso” (stanza 1), “Los ángeles muertos,” and “Los ángeles feos.” Of the second poem, Alberti says that it “podría ser una transcripción de algún cuadro suyo” (*AP. Libros III y IV* 29).

²² “Epiplasma” corresponds to “protoplasma” as epilogue does to prologue.

focus more on inexorable natural processes and on the disintegration—in parallel—of certain aspects of society (notably, the upper class and the church).²³

With his Jesuit education, Alberti would have well known that the Virgin Mary was *assumed* into heaven whereas Jesus *ascended*, and so although Maruja is one of the nicknames for María, he casts Mallo more in the mold of Christ. The semantic paradox in the title underlines the substitution here of the subterranean and material for the other-worldly and spiritual.²⁴ In this new, and distinctly unreligious, world order, one can only aspire to a knowledge of what lies beneath, and the afterlife of people (and things) is to be found in decomposing organisms and detritus rather than in heaven; hence “the Alberti-Mallo view of reality puts the highest value on simple or base matter” (Havard, “Rafael Alberti” 1019). The significance of the adjective “primera” in the title is less clear: is a second “ascent” somehow anticipated, or is it the combination of “ascensión,” Mallo, and “subsuelo” that makes this event a “first” and her a pioneer?

Developing on the idea expressed in the title, in the first stanza Alberti combines the mythological motif of descent and return (katabasis) with the death, entombment, and resurrection of Christ to serve as superimposed frames of reference for Mallo’s praeternatural abilities and insights. She goes down to the sewers and metaphorically dies in the gutters and culverts in order to observe what goes on there: flowers become gobs of spit, the sewer pipes empty out on to disused land once the site for open-air fairs and dances,²⁵ and then she returns beside a stone (by extension, of Christ’s tomb) that is somehow under attack by moist, fetid fungus (the double negative “hongo estancado”). Everything, then, is subject to the law of decay, decomposition, and final reduction to “epiplasm,” the “lodo,” “fango,” or “limo” of Giménez Caballero (28–30) or the “légamo,” “barro,” “lodo,” and “tinieblas cenagosas” of Mallo (*Lo popular* 24–25). This singular experience of katabasis brings with it enhanced knowledge, for the speaker now turns to Mallo with three parallel request imperatives that progress from the specific to the general: she now understands not just the *how* but most importantly the *why* of the rotting of leaves and wood—why is it that all material things are subject to these processes, and this in turn will serve to resolve the speaker’s doubts about existence as he looks out over the different landscapes (rural, natural ones, but also surely rubbish dumps and landfills), and hence finally “wake him up,” that is to say, open his eyes and enable a realization in him of how things really are and what needs to be accepted, under the circumstances, in order to achieve some measure of personal equanimity.

Stanza two continues in the same hyperbolic vein, though from a slightly different perspective. The speaker asserts that Mallo is most herself (by implication, that she is the

²³ As an institution, this latter barely appears in Alberti’s poem but, emblemized by the “campanarios,” is an important element in Mallo’s account of her painting of the time: *Lo popular* 23–26.

²⁴ In the poem “Ascensión” from *Sobre los ángeles*, the speaker’s *alter ego* “tú” is trapped at the bottom of the well and there is no escape.

²⁵ “Verbenas” is a direct allusion to Mallo’s previous series of colorful and festive *Verbenas* paintings.

most attuned, most insightful) when conscious of the end-product of decomposition—“barro.” There is a certain underlying “logic” here: Mallo thinks of clay, and in some sense as a result of this the hard tile made of clay disintegrates in close proximity to her—“se deshace contra tus pies,” participating in and exemplifying the inevitable process of return to primal matter, and hence “predicting” another death.²⁶ The image is doubly striking because of the personification and because we tend to associate something as hard as a clay tile with permanence.

The syntactic structure of lines 10–11 demands special attention. The fleeing deer or more specifically stag has apparently fallen into waters that are not just drowning it but poisoning it;²⁷ from these depths its eyes, “deformed” by the waters engulfing it, are what literally “raise up” the fright that it experiences as it drowns/is poisoned—projecting the look of mortal fear. In a seemingly illogical connection, this in turn is, according to the speaker, the only reason given (presented, set forth) by his skeleton “para pulverizarse junto al tuyo.” With a clear anticipation of the demise of both of them—the skeleton as *memento mori*, and the notion of “dust to dust” attached to the clay tile, the sense seems to be that he shares, or at least is alarmed by, the terror of the drowning/poisoned stag, and although his and Mallo’s deaths are much less imminent, this, in the final analysis, is the only reason to seek some kind of close solidarity or togetherness with her. Behind this at a secondary level of suggestion may lie the notion that this fear is the motivation for something quite different, namely to engage in highly energetic sexual activity with her.

The last line of the stanza seems rather randomly attached here, and the tone changes a little, from that of a frank admirer to one of someone seemingly giving advice. According to the speaker, then, a particular kind of a light attuned to the atmosphere being invoked here (where the normally positive light is under attack by the negative corruption²⁸) will help her perceive these “más bellos excrementos del mundo,” to find, paradoxically, a certain beauty in the feces that flow in the sewers and the dung that is deposited on the landscape. This is what Mallo actually did in her *Cloacas y campanarios*, and it accords with her unique vision expressed there: “los lugares arrasados, sembrados de fósiles y excrementos,” “donde florecen los excrementos y triunfan las basuras,” “el estiércol petrificado,” “las hojas fecales,” and “las letrinas” (*Lo popular* 24–25).

²⁶ Throughout the poem, Alberti consistently overturns or radically distorts traditional ideas or associations: here there could be a distant reminiscence of Mary, often traditionally depicted as standing on/crushing a snake. Further, clay figures in many creation myths, which in *Genesis* 2:7 becomes dust.

²⁷ Evidently, there are allusions here to San Juan de la Cruz’s “Cántico espiritual”: to its well-known phrases “como el ciervo huiste” and “el ciervo vulnerado” and elsewhere in that poem to the lines “Oh cristalina fuente, / si en esos tus semblantes plateados / formases de repente / los ojos deseados.” The knowledge or insight that Alberti acquires is of course entirely at odds with the “ciencia muy sabrosa” of San Juan.

²⁸ This imagistic formation of—in simplistic terms—a “positive” noun combined with a “negative” adjective or past participle is found frequently in Alberti’s compositions of the period; it is also a stylistic feature of much of Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra*.

Stanza three contains four lines, each of which focuses on an aspect of what appears to be a bleak urban landscape. The combination of elements in each description also functions as an objective correlative (Debicki) of a variety of ideas and emotions, involving disposability, abandonment, decay, and suffering. The verb “estampar” is not far from “imprimir,” but we discover that the image refers rather to the smudges left on newspapers that have been handled and read. Syntactic ambiguity follows as the subject of “perdieron” could be either the “periódicos” or the “manos,” though the sense favors the former. Old newspapers have been used, as has long been the practice, to soak up excess oil from frying food, and then discarded. A final inversion comes at the end of the line where it is they who rip the wind, rather than the more normal reverse situation. By association, “aceite” leads to “grasa,” though here this is likely automotive rather than culinary, given the appearance of “asfaltos.” Just as cooking oil has seeped into the newsprint, so lubricant grease has pooled on the road surface, and this image of absence (the vehicle has left) and deterioration (the asphalt has been damaged) calls out for Mallo’s attention. Line 3 turns from the street to the sidewalks, which are covered with a thin layer of sulfur.²⁹ As brimstone, the mineral has traditional associations with hell, but more prosaically was traditionally used as an insect repellent, so perhaps the point of departure here is nothing more than a line of front doorways treated to deter ants and other pests. The personified sidewalks, with this perfectly powdered yellow surface, long for a shoeprint—after all, their purpose is to be walked on, and line 4 takes this further, the internal figurative “logic” of the stanza (of material objects that are somehow capable of actions and feelings) positing a kind of competitiveness. Once trodden upon, that is to say, used, the street sidewalks will excite envy in these “vidrios helados,” bottles that have been thrown away and will soon shatter from the cold, bottles that are already or which will soon find themselves tossed on sprawling garbage dumps—the “terrenos intransitables.”³⁰ Together lines 13–16 exemplify what Mallo calls “esta presencia humana de realidad fantasmal”: “Sobre el suelo agrietado se levanta una aureola de escombros; en estos panoramas desoladores la presencia del hombre aparece en las huellas, en los trajes, en los esqueletos y en los muertos” (*Lo popular* 23–24). As noted, the rhetorical device of personification is nearly ubiquitous in the stanza; furthermore, in Peircean terms, the various things mentioned in these lines are all indexical signs. Thus, despite their physical absence, the role of humans is especially important, in the manufacture, use, and discarding of the objects, involving them by association in the journey towards becoming refuse (just as the objects’ trajectory mirrors that of human mortality).

Stanza four marks a distinct change in the discourse of the poem, as the opening verb indicates that the focus is now on the speaker rather than Mallo. Still, the implication is that he has learned his lesson, he has espoused the attitudes and perspective embodied

²⁹ Mallo also mentions sulfur: “Todo está calcinado y mordido por el azufre. Todas las cosas están oxidadas y mohosas” (*Lo popular* 25).

³⁰ Mallo again, summing up her inspiration: “Éstos eran los panoramas necrológicos que encontraba en el centro y en los vertederos de los alrededores de la capital, 1929-1931” (*Lo popular* 26).

by Mallo. Consequently, he will henceforth study the surface of the ground carefully because this is where material objects are to be found (notice that here it is “suelo” and not “subsuelo”). The following lines (18–21) purport to explain why the speaker has had this change of heart. Line 18 adduces a shift of beliefs and values. The object pronoun “nos” can be understood in two ways: as just the speaker and Mallo, or more broadly as a more generalized “us” referring perhaps to modern society or a certain group within it in which the speaker and Mallo would be included. The mention of “hadas” takes us to fairy-tales, which “we” pay less and less attention to, and it is an easy step from there to the tenets of religious belief, which of course is completely at odds with the intense materialism embodied in the text. The situation becomes even more dire in lines 19–21. Light is conventionally a positive, and doubly so if they are “luzes complacientes.”³¹ But here things have altered radically, either driving or mirroring the change of viewpoint undergone by the speaker. In this new world order the once “accommodating” lights are aggressive and destructive, towards humans, animals, and nature, even the most peaceful and defenseless: innocent, happy newborns are violently killed, gentle, cooing doves are kicked, and unsuspecting trees are slapped. Line 21 extends a scornful description of the tree, which deludes itself as to its value, no longer needed—despite what it may think—as a clichéd enhancement of a romantic or rural scene.

The stanza closes with two singular imperatives, though to whom they are directed is not entirely clear: it may well be Mallo, but it could also be the speaker talking to himself. If the first, the position adopted by the speaker has changed: no longer praising Mallo or seeking to learn from her, he has resolved to change his future life (“el resto de mi vida”) and now apparently gives *her* advice, urging her to continue looking down, just as he will “contemplar el suelo,” and justifying this by asserting that she has missed nothing in the sky. With the conventional polysemy of “cielo” as heaven, there is an obvious link back to the “hadas” and the clear sense that all that there is to be found in the world is on—or under—the surface of the ground, and therefore it is pointless looking skyward.

The debunking of facile romanticism continues in the solitary line 24, picking up the overtones of the tree “que se cree imprescindible para el embellecimiento de un idilio o de una finca.” The nightingale, traditionally associated with lovers’ trysts in the moonlight, is about to become extinct (“último”), and in a sense has already done so, as its beautiful song is now reduced to the squeaky or twangy sound of a rusty spring sticking out of the upholstery of a broken and discarded sofa.³²

In the final stanza the speaker locates himself in the “pantanos,” literally a bog, marsh, swamp, or quagmire, but also not far semantically from a cesspool or waterlogged

³¹ Things have evolved since the “luz corrompida” of line 12. Perhaps it is not irrelevant to remember here that Jesus described himself as the light of the world (*John* 8:12).

³² There are distant, and subversive, echoes of Bécquer here. Compare this with the gentler—even nostalgic—decrepitude of “Invitación al arpa” (*Sobre los ángeles*).

dumping ground.³³ Returning now to the stance of praise and admiration, the speaker finally picks up the key idea in the title and imagines Mallo experiencing a kind of ascent/ascension that everyone should see, a kind of apotheosis almost in the etymological sense of the word (cf. Havard “Rafael Alberti” 1019). However, she is not outlined against the sky but rather against two very different things. Firstly, a powerful swell that one can only imagine as flowing down sewer culverts, as the “oleaje” comes bearing dross, dregs, or slurry, and secondly against this backdrop of bald—one imagines weathered—planks³⁴ and bull droppings, all items to be found on or under the earth. In the closing line Mallo’s “ascent” resolves in another paradoxical image: the “golondrina” evokes flight and is also, likely, connected with Becquerian romanticism, “sueño” similarly suggests the ideal, but what immediately negates these is the adjective “fecal,” linking with the earlier mentions of “extrementos” and “boñigas.” Here the scatological literally brings things down to earth, and Mallo’s aspiration (“sueño”) is (re)defined in striking terms as the conjunction offered by the image of a defecating bird: the dream is still in some senses a dream, but what it seeks and how it is expressed require new and entirely different terms, involving an immersion in matter rather than elevation into the air.

Havard refers to the figure of Mallo in the poem as an oracle, a messiah, a savior, and a Redeemer (*The Crucified Mind* 13, 107–108). While this terminology no doubt serves to underline the descent-return-ascent motif that is an important structural feature of the text, it may go rather too far in its implications concerning the attitude of the speaker towards his addressee. There is certainly admiration and the acknowledgement of a debt here, and some hyperbole too, but there are distinct variations of tone and stance throughout the composition that briefly position the speaker on an equal or mildly superior footing. For her part, Laurenson-Shakibi blows these latter out of proportion. It is hard to accept her characterization of the text as a “love poem,” even if it is one of “the strangest and most improbable [ones] of the twentieth century” (37), because in actuality it focuses almost exclusively on aesthetic and ultimately philosophical matters, and the amorous dimension only enters via external biographical circumstances. More seriously, the “startlingly obvious and mock-heroic debasement of the female” and the “unstable and shifting male voice that veers erratically from exaltation to deprecation” (38) are impossible to find here, for the advice found in line 12 and the imperatives in lines 22–23 are really far distant from “a supremely patriarchal voice [that] derides her” (38).

A close examination of “La primera ascensión...” then, demonstrates that it falls squarely in Alberti’s difficult yet far from hermetic style of the late 1920s, incorporating stylistic elements from both *Sobre los ángeles* and *Sermones y moradas*, and that while a few features may be quite arbitrary (why, for instance, “100.000 siglos?”), there is a great deal

³³ Mallo: “En la boca de los pantanos se deforman los cuerpos de los decapitados sobre la tierra humeante” (*Lo popular* 25).

³⁴ One of the Cercedilla photos shows a weather-beaten wooden door; Mallo’s face, glassy eyed, appears in a small opening in it, and is surrounded by three sheep skulls and various chalk writings and markings.

of meaning here whose lines of development can be followed through the text. Though not in any strict sense ekphrastic, it does capture a great deal of the subject matter, the atmosphere, and the essence of Mallo's *Cloacas y campanarios*. Standing chronologically towards the beginning of the compositional period of *Sermones y moradas*, it could serve as a kind of introduction to that collection, where the poetic voice expounds and expands upon much of what is attributed to Mallo in this composition. Subversive in discourse and subversive in theme, its imagery focuses the stress on matter and on the overturning of conventional religious paradigms, finding satisfaction in the challenging paradoxes that it presents—the transcendent quality of the decidedly non-transcendent—and in the artistic expression of these.

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