



## Antoni Maria Alcover

Visat núm. 18

(octubre 2014)

by Jaume Guiscafrè

Antoni Maria Alcover i Sureda (Manacor, 1862-Palma, 1932) is, without doubt, one of the most complex and multifaceted figures of not only early 20th century Catalan literature, but also Catalan culture. This is the period in which he was most exuberantly active in the various fields to which he dedicated his life.

A stubborn and indomitable character, Alcover was a fierce and uncompromising polemicist who published, in *El Àncora* and *L'Aurora*, a great number of strongly worded criticisms of liberalism and the labour movement. He had a longstanding disagreement with some of the most prominent members of the Philological Section of the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans*, of which he was president in 1911. A propagandist and firm cultural advocate, he published *Lletra de Convit* on 5th November 1900: a manifesto in which he explained his intention to carry out the creation of what would be the largest dictionary of the Catalan language, the first volume of which was published in 1926 entitled *Diccionari català-valencià-balear* (Catalan-Valencian-Balearic Dictionary). In 1904 he began preparatory work for the first International Congress on the Catalan Language, which eventually took place in Barcelona in 1906. A tireless and tenacious scholar of Catalan who, in 1901, founded the *Bolletí del Diccionari de la Llengua Catalana* (Bulletin of the Dictionary of the Catalan Language) in which he published a great many of his studies on phonology, morphosyntax, lexicology and dialectology. A keen traveller and observer, he left behind diaries of trips he made in 1907, 1912 and 1913 to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, France, England and Belgium, the most interesting of which is *Dietari de la meua eixida a Alemanya i altres nacions durant l'any del senyor de 1907* (Diary of my Trip to Germany and Other Nations in the Year of Our Lord 1907). A key figure in the Majorcan ecclesiastical hierarchy, a seminary teacher, Vicar-General, canon of Palma Cathedral and, most importantly, a writer blessed with an extraordinary talent and with an inimitable individual style.

His intellectual activity and passionate cultural activism led to the publication of around fifty major works, comprising books and pamphlets, around thirty magazine articles, as well as miscellaneous pieces. Further to this, he left behind a substantial amount of original unedited work, such as *Quatre anys de Vicari General (1898-1902)* (Four Years as a Vicar-General, 1898 - 1902), a diary of the most noteworthy things which occurred in his daily life, which he kept from 27th June 1898 when he became part of the curia of Majorca. This formed the first volume of his *Obres Completes* (2003) (Complete Works).

As regards Alcover's strictly literary output, this is limited to just three pieces. In 1885 the still youthful Alcover published *Contarelles d'en Jordi des Racó* (Stories of Jordi des Racó). Few of the stories in this book actually have a plot which develops and instead focus on presenting stock-type characters who represent actions, within a rural setting, to teach a moral lesson. In the second — larger and modified — edition, published in 1915, some tales have been left out and two which combine ethnographic investigation and creationism, *Corema, Setmana Santa i Pasco* (Lent, Holy Week and Easter) and *Ses matances i ses festes de Nadal* (The Pig Slaughter and Christmas Holidays) were included.

Between March and July of 1916 in the weekly publication *L'Aurora* he published the fifteen episodes which form the novella *N'Arnau*, which describes the events which befall the bad student who gives the novel its name. The homodiegetic narrator in the story, Pau Fora-Embuis, learns of him by chance, overhearing a conversation amongst a group of students in a train carriage. Attracted by the character, he begins a series of contact with a gallery of characters who provide him with information from which the short story is constructed. Although the narrative's construction is extremely complex and elaborate, *N'Arnau* shares certain traits with *Contarelles d'en Jordi des Racó*: the customs; a pre-eminence of dialogue and description to the detriment of the narrative; recourse to flat, stock-type characters who are presented as role models; and the ultimate didactic aim of the text.

In 1880, at just 18 years of age, the first of Alcover's short stories was published, *Es jai de sa barraqueta* (The Old Man of The Hut), in the magazine *L'Ignorància*. Nine years later, in the summer of 1889, he came up with the idea of "creating a book entirely of popular, persisting Majorcan folk tales". This project did not see fruition until 1896, when the first volume of *Aplec de rondaies mallorquines d'en Jordi des Racó* (Collected Folk Tales of Majorca). Alcover's recollection, regeneration and editing work lasted around 51 years, during which — intermittently and in the free time which his other obligations allowed him — he continued collecting oral versions of popular tales and published the re-editions, both in volumes and in the press. In 1928 he suffered a first attack of apoplexy, forcing him to reduce his workload and abstain from intense intellectual activity. He took advantage of these circumstances to write the stories which were, at that point, still merely in note form and which were to form the eleventh and twelfth volumes — the final two — of the *Aplec*, published in 1930 and 1931. After Alcover's death in 1931, Francesc de Borja Moll, his disciple, continued with his work and resumed the stories' publication. He restructured the volumes' layout and used stories which had previously only appeared in magazines as well as those which were previously unpublished to create further volumes. In 1936 the first volume of the *Aplec*'s "definitive edition" was published, numbering 24 volumes by 1975 which continue to be published to the present day.

Though anchored in both the Majorcan oral tradition and universal art of traditional storytelling, the 430 tales which make up the *Aplec de rondaies mallorquines d'en Jordi des Racó* are not literal transcriptions of the stories recounted by informants. Rather, they are faithful recreations produced through the conscious application of literary techniques to the previously obtained narrative description of events. This stylistic superimposition gives coherence to the text as a whole and removes the discrepancies which could be expected to be found in a collection of transcriptions from different narrators. There are four main virtues to Alcover's narrative style: Transforming the oral version — at times excessively — often through the insertion of numerous descriptive passages into the tale; The effective and well-balanced combination of abstract style (particular to the fairytale, the most well-represented genre in the *Aplec* according to Max Lüthi) and realism. This is a technique which Josep A. Grimalt describes as "what must be one of the secrets of what makes him a master of storytelling"; The folklorism — in the Mikhail Bakhtin sense of the term — imprinted on the texts and the exuberant and wise use he makes of linguistic and rhetorical devices deriving from his extraordinary command of the Catalan language and, more specifically, the Majorcan dialect.

Josep Pla perfectly captured the nuances of Alcover's gift for storytelling, conclusively stating that the folktales in the *Aplec* are a "monument to our language, a prodigy of popular palpitation, projected onto paper with an impressive vitality, with a Dionysian grappling, with a unique and direct flavour" and that "...delights of insignificance, they are amongst the most important things to have ever been written in any language. Next to them wise, petulant and academic literature merely provokes laughter. It is nothing." (*Les illes*, OC 15, p. 139).

It seems only right that *l'Aplec de rondaies mallorquines d'en Jordi des Racó* should have a hallowed

position in the Catalan literary canon, akin to that of the Brothers Grimm's *Kinder und Hausmärchen* in Germany: That it is not is due in equal part to sociolinguistic and interdialectal dynamics particular to Catalan and the short-sightedness of those who appraise literature.

Translated by Katherine Reynolds