



SALVADOR ESPRIU

IN MY OPINION, *PRIMERA HISTÒRIA D'ESTHER* IS SALVADOR ESPRIU'S GREATEST WORK AND ONE OF THE GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY WESTERN LITERATURE.

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SONG REHEARSAL IN THE TEMPLE

Oh, how tired I am of my
cowardly, old, so savage land,
and how I would like to get away,
towards the north,
where they say the people are clean
and noble, cultured, rich, free,
wakeful and happy!
Then, in the congregation, the brothers would say,
disapproving: "As the bird that leaves the nest,
so the man who goes from his place",
while I, already far away, would laugh
at the law and the ancient wisdom
of this my arid country.
But I am never to follow my dream
and I shall stay here until I die.
Because I am also cowardly and savage
and furthermore I love with
desperate pain
this my poor,
dirty, sad, unfortunate country.

SALVADOR ESPRIU

Translated by Andrew Langdon-Davies



The first examples of Salvador Espriu's literary genius fall into the realm of narrative: *El Dr. Rip* (1931), *Laia* (1932), *Aspectes* (1934), *Miratge a Citea* (1934), *Ariadne al laberint grotesc* (1935), *Letícia i altres proses* (1937). The first, *El Dr. Rip*, was intended to be an autobiographical novel, but he soon rejected it and its psychological narrative approach and changed to a style of fiction which was more clear-cut, more situational, like *Laia*, subtitled *Retaule de siluetes d'arran la mar* (Altarpiece of silhouettes from beside the sea), and compared by the critics of the time with the Castilian fiction of the Galician writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán. And when, many years later, he rewrote *El Dr. Rip*, he subtitled it *Potser només un relat* (Perhaps only a story). The other titles mentioned correspond to single fictional pieces, generally very short, except for *Miratge a Citea*, *Letícia* and *Fedra*—included in the last of these collections—which are a bit longer. This short fiction of Espriu's is dominated by irony, sometimes by sarcasm, a certain measure of poetry, impeccable style and an obvious element of protest: Espriu was a moralizing spirit—in this he shows his semitic mentality and background.

The Civil War changed the course of his intentions: in those years, or soon after, he wrote *Primera història d'Esther*, not to be published until 1948, and in 1939 he composed *Antígona*, published in 1955,

and first performed in 1958. These two works are both dialogues: the second does not hide its theatrical side, since it is a reworking of the classical legend based on the texts of Aeschylus—*Seven against Thebes*—and of Sophocles, with the addition of certain elements unconnected with the dramatic versions; *Primera història d'Esther* was written as a dialogue because that is how the author conceived it, but it is unlikely that he ever hoped to see it on the stage, in the same way that neither Lluís Vives nor Plato expected to see their *Dialogues* acted.

Nevertheless, it appeared in an efficient theatrical production whose success was alien to artistic value; not, perhaps, in the first staging, in 1957, but certainly after the second, in 1962. It is a difficult play to understand through a stage production which is necessarily quicker than reading the book, but at that time—from 1960 on—Salvador Espriu had become the symbol of the struggle against the dictatorship which particularly affected Catalonia. In my opinion, *Primera història d'Esther* is Salvador Espriu's greatest work and one of the great achievements of contemporary western literature. Based on the biblical story of King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther presented in a puppet-show in the town of Sinera, on the Catalan coast, in it the author traces a parallel between the persecution of the Jews in ancient Persia and the situation in modern day Catalonia, with a mixture of

puppet-actors and real personalities of the town and the fleeting transformation of some puppets into townspeople. The language is precise and appropriate and makes use, as the author himself says through Ahasuerus, of "the subtlest forms of metonymy", in this way succeeding in demonstrating to locals and foreigners alike the expressive richness of the Catalan language, both in its most popular, everyday usage and in more cultured use, whether simple or complex.

The prohibitions which went with the establishment of the dictatorship, amongst them that of writing, publishing or even—outside the home—of speaking Catalan (this last, because of its absurdity and the constant struggle of the Catalan people in defense of their natural rights, started to ease up after 1951), led Salvador Espriu to write poetry, which, being considered a minor art-form and allowing more of "the subtlest forms of metonymy" was less exposed to the rigours of censorship. In 1946, Espriu's first book of poetry appeared. *Cementiri de Sinera* is a *suite* of thirty short poems, on the theme of deeply-felt yearning for the past and the memory of a world now dead, which take the form of an appeal for the death of the poet himself, because alone in that "vast tomb that was the land of my parents", without that other world that brought hope and meaning to life, "I die", he says, "because I know not how to live".

Next came the two first parts of the trilogy

Les hores—the first in memory of the poet and fellow student B. Roselló-Pòrcel, the second in memory of his mother—and *Mrs. Death*, all of which was published, along with *Cementiri de Sinera*, in a volume called *Obra lírica* in 1952. Later, in 1954, he was to complete *Les hores* with a third part: *Recordant allunyadament Salom*. The three parts of this trilogy each bear a date: those of the deaths of the two people remembered, and the third, 18 July 1936, the beginning of the Civil War. Salom is the name of Espriu's alter ego, and appears in his work as a lucid, non-conformist intellectual who lives, however, in a relatively habitable world, a world, at any rate, where he was "used to hearing talk of ideas, when one could pretend to have them"; obviously the Civil War had to kill this Salom who was able to express his ideas freely and in the knowledge that he would be understood.

In 1954, he published a collection of poetry, *El caminant i el mur*, in three parts, each preceded by a poem: the first by the Galician poet Rosalía de Castro; the second from the Castilian *Romancero*, and the third by the fifteenth century Valencian poet Roiç de Corella. In this way, the three literary languages of the Iberian Peninsula are represented in the book. This pan-Iberianism is also the basis of *La Pell de Brau*. Before this he published *Final del laberint* (1955), which is a result of his search for a transcendental truth. The collection has two lemmas, one from the treatise by Master Eckehart *On Detachment* and the other from *De docta ignorantia* by Nicholas of Cusa. This collection has to be seen in context with *Mrs. Death*, the last poem of which is titled "The end of the labyrinth".

La pell de brau was published in 1960 and is a collection of poems on the same theme: the ills that afflict Sepharad, that is, Spain, and its situation as a vanquished country, independently of the fact that the war was won by one or other of the warring factions. The book started the widespread diffusion of the name of Espriu and made him known beyond the borders of the Catalan language: it was translated into Castilian, Italian and French in the space of a few years (1965-1969). There was also a successful stage version and Espriu went from being an obscure writer, difficult to understand,



to being one of the most widely-read Catalan authors. The singers belonging to the movement known as *la nova cançó* (the new song) put music to his poems and university students learnt them off by heart. The quotations that begin and end the book are significant: first, some words from the *Crónica del Gran Capitán*, and the second, from the *Libro de Buen Amor*, by the Archpriest of Hita.

Espriu's interest in the theatre dates from this period—although he was never what you would call a "man of the theatre"—, and in 1966 *Ronda de mort a Sinera* was staged for the first time. The play is a collage of texts in verse and prose, some from earlier anthologies and some new ones. The latter were published in 1963, in the collection *Llibre de Sinera*, part of *Obra poètica*, a volume which brings together all of Espriu's books of poetry, starting with *Les cançons d'Ariadna*, which contains his earliest poems as well as his most recent, since in successive editions and re-editions of Espriu's poetry, *Les cançons d'Ariadna* acted as a ragbag for everything that did not fit into the other

collections. These poems are satyres, sometimes related to his prose work, commissioned works, poems of homage etc.; some of them are among Espriu's most successful compositions.

In 1971 he published *Setmana Santa*, a collection on the theme of Holy Week, with some very skillful poems, which ends with a typically Judaic warning: he warns that not a single word should be touched, and concludes, addressing himself to possible scholiasts or philologists: "Well you know that you could not: what I have written is written." After *Setmana Santa*, his publishers produced some collections of poetry of varied subject matter and little interest, except perhaps for the forty haikus in *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs* (1967).

However, before he died, in 1985—prematurely, in my opinion—he gave us two interesting works: a play and a collection of short stories: *Una altra Fedra, si us plau* and *Les roques i el mar*, respectively. The two are linked. He started to write the stories in 1975, at the request of a student of fine arts who asked Espriu to illustrate with a brief text some of his drawings of classical mythological subjects. The writer liked the idea so much that he agreed, and even wrote more stories than were wanted and published the complete collection in 1981. The play was written at the request of the actress Núria Espert, who first staged it in 1978. Both the play and the stories respond to a particular mood and the same intentions: it seems that, from the end of 1975, Espriu once again found the joy of living which had abandoned him in July 1936, that critical clearness of vision of the world around him, the ability to laugh at the mythical gods and at the human mythologies; then he wrote some short stories, commentaries on the Greek and Roman divinities in his familiar, painstaking style that mocked grammatical impositions, with the irony and cheerfulness that had disappeared after the collections of 1934 and 1935, with a humour and wisdom that might have worked the miracle of returning Salvador Espriu to his original condition of a writer of minorities. This is why I say that his death, at the age of seventy-two, on 22 February 1985 was premature. He could still have told us a lot. He could have carried on brightening up the life of the sad Catalan. ●