

— *Monografías* —

THE  
POETRY OF  
SALVADOR  
ESPRIU  
TO SAVE  
THE WORDS

D. Gareth Walters



## THE POETRY OF SALVADOR ESPRIU TO SAVE THE WORDS

This first book-length study in English of the poetry of Salvador Espriu (1913–85) examines the work from two standpoints. First, it explores the structural implications of symmetry and numerology, in a chronological rather than thematic survey of the poetry – a procedure that involves a consideration of how each book (what could be termed in most cases a macro-poem) attains its distinctive character while having common preoccupations and stylistic traits. This aspect of the study entails a critical evaluation of recent investigations by Maria Rosa Delor on Espriu and the Cabbala. Secondly, it examines the tension implicit in Espriu's poetry between involvement and detachment or between the civic and the lyric. One issue addressed is why Espriu is perceived both as the symbol of moral resistance against Francoism and as a hermetic, 'difficult' poet. By drawing on ideas broached in Seamus Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*, it investigates the relationship between Espriu's private and public *personae*, notably the way in which his poetic integrity is not compromised by ideologico-political realities.

Central to the study is an awareness of the precarious status of the Catalan language in the period when Espriu wrote most of his poetry, and of how his work represents, by dint of its linguistic character, an act of defiance and affirmation, in Delor's view, a 'metalinguistic literature'.

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TAMESIS

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While the translations that appear in this book are my own, I have been guided by the bilingual Catalan-Spanish editions that appear in the bibliography and by the translations supplied by Louis J. Rodrigues for Salvador Espriu, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997). My aim has been to provide the reader who has little or no knowledge of Catalan with largely literal versions, with the intention of supplying a guide rather than explanations; the translations are not designed as disguised interpretative tools. Only a relatively small number of Espriu's poems have been translated into English verse, and while it is highly desirable that many more should be so rendered – including complete, rather than abridged, cycles – it clearly does not fall within the scope of a book of this nature to begin that task.

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D. Gareth Walters  
Exeter, September 2005

For Pella



## Part 1

# Definitions and Interpretations

### Salvador Espriu, the Poet of Catalonia

Jordi Pujol, the former President of the Autonomous Region of Catalonia, observed that Salvador Espriu was quite simply the ‘poeta nacional de Catalunya’ [national poet of Catalonia].<sup>1</sup> For Manuel Vázquez Montalbán he was ‘un dels símbols de la resistència cultural i moral de Catalunya contra el franquisme’ [one of the symbols of the cultural and moral resistance of Catalonia against Francoism].<sup>2</sup> Yet Espriu was an unlikely hero. He never sought the limelight and disliked official recognition because he did not feel he merited it; when he was awarded the Premi Nacional de les Lletres Catalanes he stated that, in his view, others were more deserving of the honour.<sup>3</sup> He could not be accused of false modesty either: his own assessment, matching the impressions of those who knew him, was that ‘el meu temperament és d’home molt reservat i solitari’ [my temperament is that of a very reserved and solitary man].<sup>4</sup> There was, however, a sharp edge to this reserve. In 1952, in response to a request from a publisher for a self-portrait in words, he provided an acerbic document in which, after listing his favourite books, he outlined his pet hates and aversions:

Detesto los premios literarios, la avaricia y la suciedad, las felicitaciones de Navidad y de santo (las cuales agradezco, desde ahí, de una vez para siempre, mientras pido a mis amigos que por favor non se acuerden nunca más de mí durante esos días), los homenajes, el viento, el desorden y el ruido, salir de noche, comer fuera de casa, lo que llama vida de relación, los conciertos, las confidencias, aconsejar, las obscenas expresiones de la vanidad.<sup>5</sup>

[I detest literary prizes, avarice and dirt, greetings at Christmas and on birthdays (for which I am for once and for all grateful, while asking my friends to have the goodness not to think of me again on those days), homages, the wind, disorder and noise, going out in the evening, eating out, what is called social life, concerts, confiding, advising, the obscene expressions of vanity.]

<sup>1</sup> *Memòria de Salvador Espriu* (Arenys de Mar: Centre de Documentació i Estudi Salvador Espriu, 1988), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> *Barcelones* (Barcelona: Empúries, 1990), p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Antoni Batista, *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal* (Barcelona: Empúries, 1985), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Batista, 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Maria Aurèlia Capmany, *Salvador Espriu* (Barcelona: Dopesa, 1971), pp. 9–10.

He concluded this diatribe with an expression of despair at humanity, which he believed was moving inexorably towards ‘un immediato y definitivo cataclismo’ [an immediate and definitive cataclysm] – an indication of Espriu’s concern with the Cold War and the Atomic Era.<sup>6</sup> In this bleak and sardonic vision, however, there appears as though by way of remedy a brief comment on the role of poetry: ‘alguna ayuda para vivir rectamente y quizá para bien morir’ [an aid to correct living and perhaps to dying well]. What kind of experiences led Espriu to this misanthropic assessment and what characteristics does his poetry possess to warrant the contradictory assertion?

The second question is the prime concern of this study, but we must also address the first in order to gain an insight into the kind of man who would write such poetry.

\*

If, from the many photographs of him, Espriu resembles a solicitor rather than what one might imagine a poet to look like then the impression is not without foundation. For twenty years he worked as a notary, effectively following in his father’s footsteps. At the time of the birth of his second son, Salvador, on 10 July 1913, Francesc de Paula Espriu i Torres was a notary in Santa Coloma de Farners, a small town in the province of Gerona. In 1915 he obtained a similar post in Barcelona, and the family settled into an apartment in Carrer Diputació in the fashionable area of the Eixample. The Esprius were a well-to-do family as a result of inheritances as well as the father’s profession, and enjoyed the services of three maids, a cook and a chauffeur. Francesc Espriu was a man of liberal and anti-clerical views, as a result of which the son did not attend the Jesuit school as would have been the norm for the Barcelona bourgeoisie.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, his mother, Escolàstica Castelló i Molas, was a devout Catholic whose religious instincts, according to Espriu, betrayed a subconscious Calvinism.<sup>8</sup>

Salvador was the second of five children: three boys and two girls. His happy, even idyllic, childhood years were clouded by illness and death. In 1924 his sister, Maria Isabel, succumbed to measles at the age of seven, and two years later his elder brother Francesc died of septicemia after a fall; he was fourteen years of age and had already demonstrated a talent for sculpture.<sup>9</sup> In response to this double loss the parents devoted even greater

<sup>6</sup> Several poems in *Les cançons d’Ariadna* [*The Songs of Ariadne*] deal with this issue. See Batista, *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Rosa M. Delor i Muns, *Salvador Espriu, els anys d’aprenentatge (1929–1943)* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Agustí Espriu i Malagelada, *Salvador Espriu* (Barcelona: Columna, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Espriu i Malagelada, 23.

attention to the three remaining children. In particular, Salvador's health was a cause of considerable concern. At the age of nine he was discovered to have an accumulation of pus on his lungs. A risky but necessary operation to drain his lungs was followed by a period of convalescence of three years, during which time he was largely confined to bed. Salvador had been an energetic and playful child. Yet if the long illness he suffered in the mid-1920s curbed his physical activity it had the compensatory effect of enabling him to acquire a remarkable knowledge of books and literature. He read beyond his years, encouraged by his father, who bought him a 46-volume world history when he started his secondary education.

For most of Espriu's childhood and youth the family divided their time between three places: the Barcelona apartment, an ancestral home in Arenys de Mar, some 30 kilometres up the coast from Barcelona, and, from the time of his illness, a house designed by the notable architect Puig i Cadafalch, in Viladrau, a small town east of Vic. The choice of Viladrau was on medical advice: it was believed that the altitude and clean air would be beneficial for the treatment of Salvador's lung problem. The property was surrounded by trees and flowers and Espriu's mother planted over two thousand roses there over the years.

Yet despite the beauty and tranquillity of the house at Viladrau and having his main residence in Barcelona for virtually the whole of his life, the place that made the biggest impact on Espriu was Arenys de Mar. In fact it had a decisive effect upon his writing, not least his poetry. The family could trace its roots in Arenys on both sides for centuries. Espriu's ancestors included navigators and merchants who had travelled widely, a reminder of the important maritime heritage of Arenys. His great-grandfather on his mother's side, Esteve Moles i Bargués (1803–79), spent most of his life as a sea-captain, travelling repeatedly to Puerto Rico and Cuba.<sup>10</sup> His paternal grandmother was the niece of Bisbe Jaume Català i Albosa (1854–1914), who was appointed Bishop of Cadiz in 1879 and of Barcelona in 1883. It was the house that he had built in the lower part of Arenys that Espriu's father inherited and which became the family home.

Even though these and other ancestors figure in Espriu's writing, the significance of Arenys resides in the place as an amalgam of people and impressions rather than as the stage for any particular individual. It figures throughout Espriu's work as *Sinera* – a word achieved by reversing the letters in 'Arenys' and replacing the 'y' by an 'i'. Although the town has suffered from urban development and the building of a trunk road it is still possible to appreciate its distinctive physical appearance. Entering from the south one immediately notices on the hill above the railway station and overlooking the sea the town cemetery. Here in a modest niche are Espriu's remains. The town itself is built around a long steep street, which has a flood channel ('riera') in

<sup>10</sup> See Carles Móra, *Salvador Espriu i Sinera* (Argentona: L'Aixernador Edicions, 1992), p. 102.

the middle – a practical measure to deal with the rush of water flowing down from the hills as a consequence of heavy autumn or winter rains, and the resultant concentration of the water into the narrow valley bed. The town is undistinguished architecturally, although the church of Santa Maria boasts an interesting baroque altar.<sup>11</sup>

When Espriu was a boy, Arenys de Mar was the kind of town that, by its size and demographic mix, was likely to contain interesting or picturesque characters. The family home itself was a focal point for the town's social life: Francesc Espriu entertained friends and acquaintances for small informal gatherings or 'tertulias'. The future poet would sometimes be present at these and would display the erudition acquired as a result of his wide reading, much to the pleasure of his father. As a boy Espriu witnessed the indications of poverty and deprivation, characteristic of small-town Spain in the early decades of the twentieth century. The beggars who passed through the streets, the tramps and vagrants, all found a place in his writing, often serving as memorable symbols. Of all Espriu's works it is perhaps his highly original play, *Primera història d'Esther* [*The First Story of Esther*], that provides the most extensive and nostalgic evocation of the Arenys de Mar of his childhood.<sup>12</sup>

In 1930, at the age of seventeen, Espriu entered the University of Barcelona to study law and humanities. The previous year he had published – in a limited edition of 100 copies, financed by his father – a novel entitled *Israel* [*Israel*], which demonstrated his considerable knowledge of the Scriptures. It was the only work of his to be written in Spanish; thereafter he would confine himself to Catalan. In the stimulating intellectual environment of the university in the early years of the Second Republic Espriu blossomed as a prose writer. He wrote two novels in as many years: *El Dr. Rip* [*Dr. Rip*], a bleak tale about a doctor suffering from cancer who commits suicide, and *Laia* [*Laia*], the story about a mysteriously attractive woman, set in a rural community. The latter prompted negative evaluations, both on account of its supposed immorality and what one critic deemed to be a defective knowledge of Catalan.<sup>13</sup> A feature of *Laia* which provoked differing responses in commentators on this novel was Espriu's predilection for grotesque descriptions and caricature. It was a trait that he may have inherited from one of the more striking Spanish

<sup>11</sup> Móra, 71–72.

<sup>12</sup> See Mathilde Bensoussan, 'Primera història d'Esther: la infantesa revisitada', in *Salvador Espriu: algunes cartes i estudis sobre la seva obra. Edició en homenatge als 10 anys de la seva mort* (Barcelona: Centre de Documentació i Estudi Salvador Espriu/Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1995), pp. 49–54; D. Gareth Walters, 'From linguistic monument to social memory: translation strategies in Philip Polack's version of Espriu's *Primera història d'Esther*', *Modern Language Review*, 97 (2002), 863–76.

<sup>13</sup> See Espriu i Malagelada, *Salvador Espriu*, p. 32. For early reviews of *El Dr. Rip* and *Laia* see Delor i Muns, *Salvador Espriu, els anys d'aprenentatge*, pp. 41–53.

novelists and dramatists of an earlier generation, Ramón del Valle Inclán, and it was to constitute an important strand in Espriu's poetry.

In the mid-1930s Espriu turned his attention to the short story, publishing several collections marked by the same acerbic tone as was present in the novels, and drawing in greater measure on the places and people he knew best, even extending his range to satirize some of his teachers at university.<sup>14</sup> His cultural horizons had been greatly expanded by a 48-day cruise of the Mediterranean in 1933. It was organized by the Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts and involved nearly 200 teachers and students from eleven Spanish universities and the Schools of Architecture in Barcelona and Madrid. Their visit took in North Africa, the Holy Land, Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, Sicily and Naples. Espriu's passion for classical literature and Egyptian history was reinforced, and for years to come the places he visited were to be the subject of description and allusion in his poetry.

Among his companions on this trip was a fellow student from Majorca by the name of Bartomeu Roselló-Pòrcel. He was a poet of considerable talent and became a close friend of Espriu. His death from tuberculosis in 1938 at the age of 24 was a bitter blow to Espriu, especially as they had grown somewhat apart as a result of political differences. Yet the memory of the friendship remained vivid for Espriu for the rest of his life. He dedicated the first part of his book of poems *Les hores* [*The Hours*] (1952) to the memory of the dead poet, and over thirty years later, in the year preceding his own death, his acceptance speech for membership of the Reial Acadèmia de Bones Lletres was effectively an evaluation of Roselló-Pòrcel's achievement as a poet.<sup>15</sup>

Yet profound though the influence of the Majorcan poet was on Espriu's life and work,<sup>16</sup> he may have unwittingly curbed and postponed his poetic career. The first record we have of a poem by Espriu dates from late 1934, a composition entitled 'Dansa grotesca de la mort' ['Grotesque Dance of Death'] – a title very much in keeping with his satirico-burlesque manner at this time. Delor i Muns has shown convincingly how this poem connects with one by Roselló-Pòrcel, the similarly entitled 'Dansa de la mort' ['Dance of death'].<sup>17</sup> Yet the Majorcan poet did not have a high regard for Espriu's poetry, and urged him to continue producing prose fiction. Whether this

<sup>14</sup> In particular Carles Riba, whose name he disguised as CRISant BAPtista MESTRES, the upper case letters forming an anagram of C. Riba, Mestre. Espriu referred ironically to Riba, his teacher, as 'mestre'. See Espriu i Malagelada, *Salvador Espriu*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Espriu i Malagelada, 94.

<sup>16</sup> The most detailed account of their personal and literary relationship is provided by Rosa M. Delor i Muns, *La mort com a intercanvi simbòlic. Bartomeu Roselló-Pòrcel i Salvador Espriu: diàleg intertextual (1934–1984)* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Delor i Muns, 63–65.

advice was decisive or not is not clear but Espriu felt neither the confidence nor the need to publish any poetry before the mid-1940s.

The political differences between Roselló-Pòrcel and Espriu related to the perilous and febrile situation of Spain and Catalonia in the 1930s. Espriu viewed the attempt to resume and enlarge Catalan autonomy as a separate and independent state within the Iberian Federation as an act of criminal folly; doubtless he would have agreed with Raymond Carr's assessment that 'by revolting against an elected government in October 1934, the forces of the left denied themselves the legal if not the moral possibility of denouncing the rising of July 1936'.<sup>18</sup> Espriu's dismay at the revolt of 1934 and the far graver events that succeeded Franco's coup in 1936 was in contrast to the enthusiasm displayed by Roselló-Pòrcel, a committed communist who offered himself unhesitatingly to the army of the Popular Front on the outbreak of war.<sup>19</sup>

For Espriu, a whole way of life was coming to an end. The most immediate impact of the Civil War was upon his academic aspirations. He had graduated in law in 1935 and in ancient history the following year. But the outbreak of hostilities resulted in his having to abandon his studies in Egyptology, having been awarded a grant for this purpose – the first of the kind in Spain. A potentially distinguished academic career was thus blighted. Espriu was conscripted soon after the start of the War but because of his delicate health was not required to go to the front; indeed his clerical duties were such that he was able to return home every evening. The realities of war were not lost upon him, however. The tit-for-tat violence that characterized the actions of the extremists on both sides in the opening weeks of the struggle reached Arenys de Mar, where the Espriu family remained during the summer of 1936 rather than go to Viladrau. On 28 July, two parish priests and a Capuchin monk were assassinated on the outskirts of the town. Some days later, Republican militiamen removed religious objects from the family home and burnt documents from the archive.

Esriu continued to write short stories in the years of the Civil War and also toyed with the idea of publishing poetry: in 1937 he had prepared a hundred poems for a collection to be entitled *Les hores*. The enterprise never came to fruition, however, and Espriu destroyed around 90 of these compositions, although a book of poems with this title eventually appeared in 1952 in a completely revised form. But no such hesitation characterized his foray into another literary genre. In the wake of the entry of the Nationalist troops into Barcelona and the defeat of the Republican cause, Espriu wrote *Antígona* [*Antigone*]. This was a play which revolved around the tale of another civil war, that between the brothers Eteocles and Polynices. Their sister Antigone

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Carr, *Modern Spain 1875–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Espriu i Malagelada, *Salvador Espriu*, p. 40.

had attempted to make peace between them, and Espriu, on his own admission, coveted a similar effort at reconciliation in Spain in 1939, hoping that the defeated would be forgiven.<sup>20</sup> He was to be disappointed.

The repression of Catalan identity that occurred in the years following Franco's victory was not unprecedented. Catalan-Castilian relations had been coloured by the conflict of centralism and regionalism since the reign of Philip IV in the seventeenth century. At the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1713 and with the defeat of the supporters of Archduke Charles of Austria – the candidate whom the Catalans had backed for the vacant Spanish throne – the new Bourbon king, Philip V, imposed a new constitutional arrangement upon the region: the *Nova Planta*. This amounted to a curtailment of Catalan political rights, and comprised an attack upon its culture as well as its institutions that had a long-term effect. Only at the start of the twentieth century was it to recover a measure of autonomy. Even these modest forms of self-government were to be removed in the 1920s during the period of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, a bitter opponent of Catalan nationalist aspirations. In 1931, however, the advent of the Second Republic led to the return of autonomous government in the establishment of the Generalitat, a constitutional and parliamentary arrangement that originated in the Middle Ages. It was not to survive for long.

The end of the Civil War plunged Catalonia into an abject state similar to the one imposed upon it by the Bourbon victory in 1714. The repression was, if anything more remorseless: as petty as it was severe. Catalonia was paying the price for supporting the Republican cause, but it was its aspiration for autonomy or separatism more than its hosting various left-wing factions opposed to Franco that was viewed as the greater evil, hence the Nationalist slogan of 'mejor rojo que roto' [better red than broken]. After 1939, the policy was not confined to the destruction of Catalan institutions: there was a determined effort to reduce Catalan culture to the status of a regional curiosity. Yet this acceptance of a quaint, folksy Catalanism did not extend to the national dance, the *sardana*, which was prohibited – presumably because it was a collective or group activity. The main focus of the attack, however, was on the language. Book publishing virtually ceased. In 1936, before the start of the Civil War, 865 books were published in Catalan; in 1944, the year in which Espriu started writing *Cementiri de Sinera*, only five.<sup>21</sup> Streets and squares were renamed to conform

<sup>20</sup> 'Antígona se sitúa al lado del hermano vencido y le ofrece honras fúnebres porque se levanta contra la justicia del vencedor. Porque hay una justicia más alta que la justicia de la guerra, es la justicia de la convivencia y la paz' [Antigone places herself beside the vanquished brother and offers him funerary honours because she is rising up against the victor's justice. Because there is a justice that is loftier than the justice of war, and that is the justice of co-existence and peace]. Capmany, *Salvador Espriu*, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> See Francesc Vallverdú, *El escriptor català i el problema de la llengua*, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1975), p. 106. That there was any publication at all in the 1940s was

to what was linguistically as well as politically acceptable: the largest street in Barcelona, now restored to its name of Diagonal, was named after Franco.<sup>22</sup> The Catalan language may have been officially tolerated in domestic life – it would have been difficult to enforce such a ban – but anyone overheard speaking the language in the street or on a public telephone was liable to be rebuked or ridiculed. Needless to say, in such a climate, intellectual and artistic life withered. University teachers who could not demonstrate complete commitment or sympathy for the new dispensation were dismissed.<sup>23</sup> Many writers, musicians and painters went into exile, and those, like Espriu, who remained endured what was termed an ‘interior exile’: deprived of the social as well as the creative outlets that the free use of their language implied. An indication of how powerfully the Nationalist victory impacted on the very sense of Catalan identity may be seen in a detail from Espriu’s experience of this time. On 30 March 1939 he wrote to Joan Llacuna about poems that Llacuna had written, stating that they deserved publication.<sup>24</sup> Because these poems were in Catalan, that was going to be virtually impossible, but what is significant is that Espriu wrote this letter in Spanish. For him not to use his own language when writing about a matter of this nature constitutes a highly unusual, if not unique, action on his part, but it is a reminder that in 1939 Barcelona was, to all intents and purposes, a city that had been occupied by a foreign power.<sup>25</sup> This was, after all, the same writer who, towards the end of his life, declared that he did not wish

mainly due to one of two factors: religious works would receive the *imprimatur* of ecclesiastical censorship, while personal contacts or friends could also facilitate the publication of the occasional work. For an account of how the edition of one of the classics of Catalan literature – Verdager’s *L’Atlàntida* – could be used in a sense against the language, see D. Gareth Walters, *The Politics of Verdager’s L’Atlàntida: Centenary Commemorations and Conflicting Editions*, University of Bristol Occasional Papers Series No. 30 (Bristol: University of Bristol Department of Hispanic, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> See Vázquez Montalbán, *Barcelones*, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> It has been estimated that the University of Barcelona lost around half of its teaching staff at the end of the Civil War. See Albert Balcells, *Catalan Nationalism: Past and Present* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> See Delor i Muns, *Salvador Espriu, els anys d’aprenentatge*, p. 471. Joan Llacuna was born in Igualada, in the district of Anoia, in 1905. He published his first collection of poems in 1934, and it seems likely that the poems that Espriu read would have been those published as *Aurora de l’Aragall* in 1948. A handful of his poems appear in *Anthology of Catalan Lyric Poetry*, ed. Joan Gili (Oxford: The Dolphin Book Company, 1953), pp. 319–23.

<sup>25</sup> The chapter of Vázquez Montalbán’s *Barcelones* that attempts to evoke the city in the early years of the Franco dictatorship is entitled ‘La ciutat ocupada’ [‘The occupied city’]. The term ‘conquest’ is one employed in a terse briefing from Franco’s headquarters on 26 January 1939: ‘Barcelona ha sido conquistada’ [Barcelona has been conquered]. A photograph of General Yagüe walking through the streets of Barcelona on the same day eerily foreshadows Hitler’s triumphant visit to Paris the following year. The photograph is reproduced in Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War 1936–39* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990), p. 159.

to leave ‘un borrall en castellà’ [a fragment in Castilian], as a result of which he never revised his only Spanish work, the novel *Israel*.<sup>26</sup>

Espriu’s feelings of cultural and intellectual alienation were soon to be exacerbated by his domestic situation. With the death of his father in 1940 he became responsible for the welfare of the family: his mother, his younger brother and his sister. Foreseeing the need for economies, the house in Viladrau was sold once his father had become ill; Espriu was so upset by this that he never went to the town again. He attached himself to a notary in Barcelona, retaining many of his father’s former clients but his relationship with his senior partner, Antonio Gual Ubach, was strained as they were so unlike each other. Espriu was even moved to write poems about the matter. The following years were the hardest of his life. He expressed his sense of desolation during this period with eloquent simplicity in an interview given to Joan Vidal in 1968:

Ustedes no saben lo que fueron los años 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50 y buenas parte de la década siguiente. Lo detallo de este modo porque si dices ‘del treinta y nueve al cincuenta’, en seguida ha acabado. Fíjense que dicho de este otro modo toma ya otro relieve. Imagínense lo que fue este lapso, pasado día tras día. Para mí fue terrible.<sup>27</sup>

[You cannot know what the years 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50 and a good part of the following decade were like. I say it in this way because if you say ‘from 1939 to 1950’ it’s over immediately. Note how when it is said in the other way it acquires another dimension. Imagine what this period of time was like, day after day. It was terrible for me.]

Yet it was from this slough of despond that Espriu emerged as a poet; it was in these years that he acquired the determination to initiate and to carry through an immense and monumental poetic undertaking. Writers often discover themselves when operating under pressure, and so it was that Espriu secured a foothold as perhaps the greatest Catalan poet of the twentieth century.

### Poetry and Politics

If Espriu seems an unlikely hero from his appearance and demeanour then his poetry does not appear to conform to what might be expected from a ‘national poet’ either. Not only is his verse lyrical rather than epic or narrative in nature, it is lyricism of an intensely uncompromising character. In a word, Espriu’s poetry is difficult; we could add that it is frequently obscure and hermetic. It is not surprising then that commentators have found the idea of a ‘popular’ Espriu perplexing. Maria Aurèlia Capmany finds it hard to account for this

<sup>26</sup> *Memòria de Salvador Espriu*, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Capmany, *Salvador Espriu*, p. 22.

‘acuerdo entre una poética y la consciencia popular’ [accord between a poetics and the people’s consciousness].<sup>28</sup>

If one were pressed for an immediate explanation then the key may be found, unexpectedly perhaps, in the self-description cited above. What this acerbic document betrays among other things is a willingness to speak the truth. If Espriu, in such utterances and, more importantly, through the poetry he wrote in the 1940s and 1950s, struck a chord with his fellow-countrymen, it was because they recognized the experiences as their own and, moreover, valued the tone in which they were articulated. For Espriu did not only write in a different language from the one imposed upon Catalonia in the years of the Franco dictatorship; he wrote a different kind of language. The official discourse favoured hyperbole and grandiloquence. The Barcelona newspapers of the 1940s not only reproduced the text of Franco’s recent speeches but also carried obsequious commentaries on them with such titles as ‘glosas al discurso del Caudillo’ [observations on the Caudillo’s speech]. Espriu satirizes such linguistic excesses in his play *Primera història d’Esther*, written in 1948, in a passage where the speeches of the fawning courtiers are cast in the form of a jangling rhyme:

Apoteòtic!  
Aquest mot exòtic  
em torna neuròtic,  
prostàtic, cianòtic,  
elefantiàtic,  
penibètic, tític  
i àdhuc apoplètic  
i arterioscleròtic.<sup>29</sup>

[Apotheotic! That exotic word makes me neurotic, diabetic, cyanotic, elephantiac, prostatic, paralytic, and even apoplectic and arterio-sclerotic.]

The humour is achieved by the dictates of rhyme leading to increasingly arcane and inappropriate terms, ending in ‘tic’. Yet the word ‘apoteòtic’ that spawns this series of rhymes was used on several occasions in obsequious pieces in the daily *La Vanguardia* in 1947 to refer to Franco, as when he paid a visit to Manresa. The headline read: *Llegada del Caudillo a Manresa. – La població le tributó un apoteòtico recibimiento.* [The arrival of the Caudillo at Manresa. – The people gave him an apotheotic welcome.]<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Capmany, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Salvador Espriu, *Primera història d’Esther. The Story of Esther*, trans. by Philip Polack, The Anglo-Catalan Society Occasional Publications, No. 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Salvador Espriu, *Primera història d’Esther*, ed. Sebastià Bonet (Barcelona: Centre de Documentació i Estudi Salvador Espriu, 1995), p. 118.

By comparison with such effusions Espriu's poetry is spare and concise. Yet it would be an error to view his poetry, challenging as it is, as removed from political realities. Indeed, one reading of his work, as we shall see below, is in terms of an attempt to define or even to redeem history. Beyond this, however, there are times when Espriu catches what can be best described as a national mood when he strikes the two notes of defiance and aspiration. Such utterances are present mainly in the poetry dating from the late 1950s, coinciding with the emergence of the 'Nova Cançó' [New Song], the Catalan protest song movement. The influence was reciprocal. Performers like Raimon set Espriu's poetry to music and, returning the compliment, Espriu wrote poems that evoked the linguistic simplicity and ideological daring of the singers of that movement. In such a vein is the poem 'El meu poble i jo' [My People and I] from *Les cançons d'Ariadna* [*The Songs of Ariadne*], whose title also serves as its refrain. This occurs ten times in the poem, and the shortness of the stanzas lends the poem the air of a communal song. It contains subtle but immediately comprehensible imagery: the people have drunk the bitter wine of mockery and have had to listen to the powerful arguments of the sabre, but there is a relish in the eventual triumph achieved by survival – a survival that is, above all, linguistic:

Salvàvem els mots  
de la nostra llengua  
el meu poble i jo.

A baixar graons  
de dol apreníem  
el meu poble i jo.

Davallats al pou,  
esguardem enlaire  
el meu poble i jo.

Ens alcem tots dos  
en encesa espera,  
el meu poble i jo.

(OC, I, 147)

[We saved the words of our language, my people and I. We learned to go down the steps of sorrow, my people and I. Down in the well, we look above, my people and I. We both arise in ardent waiting, my people and I.]

The poem is not, however, dedicated to a protest singer but to a scholar. Pompeu Fabra was a scholar and lexicographer, responsible for compiling the standard Catalan dictionary of the first half of the twentieth century, and he was foremost in establishing the norms of the modern usage of the language.

He became one of the iconic figures of the Catalan cultural resistance – a point not lost on the Nationalist thugs who burnt the books in his personal library.

However, it is the preceding poem in *Les cançons d'Ariadna* that lays claim to being Espriu's most famous and patriotic piece. Dedicated to Raimon, its title – 'Inici de càntic en el temple' [Beginning of a Canticle in the Temple] – is deceptively daunting. It is a poem that has become the unofficial national anthem of Catalonia. As in the poem to Pompeu Fabra it has a refrain, although it is used so sparingly that it hardly seems one. But the positioning of the two-word summons at the start and end of the poem gives it the air of a call to arms:

Ara digueu: «La ginesta floreix,  
 arreu als camps hi ha vermell de roselles.  
 Amb nova falç comencem a segar  
 el blat madur i, amb ell, les males herbes.»  
 Ah, joves llavis desclosos després  
 de la foscor, si sabíeu com l'alba  
 ens ha trigat, com és llarg d'esperar  
 un alçament de llum en la tenebra!  
 Però hem viscut per salvar-vos els mots,  
 per retornar-vos el nom de cada cosa,  
 perquè seguíssiu el recte camí  
 d'accés al ple domini de la terra.  
 Vàrem mirar ben al lluny del desert,  
 davallàvem al fons del nostre somni.  
 Cisternes seques esdevenen cims  
 pujats per esglaons de lentes hores.  
 Ara digueu: «Nosaltres escoltem  
 les veus del vent per l'alta mar d'espigues.»  
 Ara digueu: «Ens mantindrem fidels  
 per sempre més al servei d'aquest poble.» (OC, I, 146)

[Now say: "The broom is flowering, on the fields there is the red of poppies. Let us start to cut with a new sickle the ripe wheat, and with it, the weeds." O, young lips unsealed after the darkness, if you knew how much our dawn has been delayed, how long it is to wait for a rising of the light in the gloom! But we have lived to save the words for you, to give back to you the name of every thing, so that you may follow the straight path to attain full dominion of the earth. We looked closely into the depths of the desert, we descended to the depths of our dream. Dry reservoirs become mountain tops climbed by the steps of long hours. Now say: "We listen to the voices of the wind on the high tide of the corn." Now say: "We shall remain faithful for ever more in the service of this people."]

The poem ends with the invocation of the people – a notion that had dominated 'El meu poble i jo' – and which echoes what one of the earliest singers of the

‘Nova Cançó’, Josep Maria Espinà, had said of the singers of that movement: ‘no buscàvem, només, un public; buscàvem un poble. I el poble hi era’ [we did not only seek a public; we sought a people. And the people were there].<sup>31</sup>

It is as upfront a poem as Espriu ever composed and it seems almost churlish to venture the opinion that it is untypical. Nonetheless, its clarity and astonishing strength of imagery are not achieved at the price of an uncharacteristic coarsening of language or vision. The biblical overtones, evident in the resonant voice of the prophet and the elemental evocation of place, validate the unseen depths of suffering and patience out of which the ringing assertion of devotion will arise. It is perhaps the unambiguous note of triumph that is most at odds with what we might expect of most of Espriu’s poetry. Moreover, the resonant symmetry of phrasing and syntax make it a poem better recited than read silently. Yet it is neither a populist nor a rabble-rousing piece. The linguistic and metrical control testifies to the poet as seer, not as the people’s spokesman. Espriu’s poetic oration is fastidious, even aristocratic, in conception and realization. That a poem like ‘Inici del càntic en el temple’ should be more remarkable for its restraint than for its passion is no surprise, though, when we consider the poet’s ideological stance.

Espriu was a ferocious champion of Catalanism in the darkest years of the Franco era. But in his own way and on his own terms. He had never aligned himself to any political faction unlike his friend Rosselló-Pòrcel, although in later years he was ready to lend his signature to petitions and took part in the celebrated sit-in at the Capuchin Monastery in the district of Sarrrià in Barcelona in 1966 in support of the movement for the creation of a democratic union of students.<sup>32</sup> He was briefly detained in the wake of this protest, and over the years a police file had been kept on him.<sup>33</sup> Following the death of Franco, in the period known as the ‘Transition’, Espriu found himself drawn into a controversy when the position of the Catalan language in the new dispensation was being considered. His advocacy of joint official status for the Catalan and Spanish languages was rooted in both practical and ethical reasoning. On the one hand, he thought that it would be foolish to attempt to ban or to curb a world language – as Spanish was; on the other, he believed that to do so would be to demonstrate the same kind of intolerance as had been displayed towards Catalan over so many years. As a sign of how heated the debate had become, the writer Quim Monzó mockingly re-wrote the last two lines of ‘Inici de càntic en el

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Josep Porter-Moix, *Una història de la Cançó* (Barcelona: Departament de Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 1987), p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> A first-hand account of this protest is provided by Joan Botam in Carles Móra, *Salvador Espriu i Sinera*, pp. 107–108.

<sup>33</sup> See Antoni Batista, *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal*, pp. 113–15. Such documents are often a mine of unintentional humour such as the observation dated 14 March 1966 that Espriu was a ‘Persona de idees marcadamente catalanistas’. Evidently it had taken a long time for the penny to drop!

temple' in a mix of Spanish and Catalan: 'I ens mantindremos fidels per *siempre* más al *servicio* d'aquest *pueblo*' (the Castilian words or parts of words are indicated in italics).<sup>34</sup> Yet, it was Espriu who, in a television interview in the same year of 1976, expressed his commitment to Catalonia in the following terms: 'Vivo para mi lengua, para mi pueblo catalán, para mi nación catalana, para mi cultura' [I live for my language, for my Catalan people, for my Catalan nation, for my culture].<sup>35</sup> It was the first time on Spanish television that the concept of Catalan nationhood had been mentioned. Espriu, however, did not support separatism any more than he favoured the banning of Castilian. Whether he was naïve or sophisticated in maintaining such apparently contradictory opinions will probably depend on the position from which he is being judged – whether the political or the cultural. What is evident in his attitude is an even-handedness, an unwillingness to reach for the instant judgement – a trait that is also manifested in some of the poems that make explicit allusion to the Civil War and its consequences for Catalonia.

Espriu saw the conflict and its outcome as a catastrophe. In the opening poem of *La pell de brau* [*The Bull Hide*], after referring to the bloodshed as a blasphemy, he cites without distinction or discrimination the participants and the symptoms of the violence:

Alhora víctima, botxí,  
odi, amor, lament i rialla,  
sota la closa eternitat del cel. (OC, II, 13)

[Now victim, executioner, hate, love, lament and laughter, beneath the closed eternity of the sky.]

Similarly comprehensive is his pity, as in 'Prometeu' from the third part of *Les hores*:

M'he compadit dels homes, de la freda tristesa,  
de l'estrany temps dels homes endinsats en la mort,  
i els portava cristall i cremor de paraules,  
clarosos noms que diuen els vells llavis del foc. (OC, I, 243)

[I have had pity for men, for the cold sadness, for the strange time of men sunk in death, and I brought them crystal and warmth of words, bright words spoken by old lips of fire.]

By the same token he chides both victor and vanquished, as in 'Viatge d'hivern' from the second part of the same collection:

<sup>34</sup> Batista, *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Batista, *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal*, 35.