

The slow memory of days

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54 |

This is one of my favourite poems.

But not only by Espriu. What I mean is that if I had to produce an anthology containing the poems I have most loved over the course of my life so far, number 2 of *Cementiri de Sinera* would be right there on the list.

In fact, I could even say that *Cementiri de Sinera* is my favourite book by Espriu. Never have so many things been said, and so well, in so few words (with apologies to Matsuo Basho)! Never has such a concentration of symbolic language been achieved in such brief poems. Espriu is a good poet, perhaps even a great poet. I must admit that having spent time reading his work, and so familiarising myself with it, there are aspects of his style, or one could perhaps say idiosyncrasies, which are not so much to my liking. His tendency to place the adjective before the noun, for example. Or his weakness for using so many adjectives in the superlative form (Estellés was also very much

*Such a small homeland
surrounding the cemetery!
Sinera, the sea at hand,
hillsides of pine and vineyards,
dusty gullies. I love
nothing more, save the travelling
shadow of a cloud.
The slow memory of days
gone past forever.*

Salvador Espriu.
Translated by Sam Abrams.



Una petita pàtria
encercla el cementiri!

Aquesta mar, Sinera,
turons de pins i vinya,
pols de rials. No estimo
res més, excepte l'ombra
viatgera d'un núvol.

El lent record dels dies
que són passats per sempre.

Salvador Espriu. Cementiri de Sinera. II. *1925*

prone to this particular trait). But the poems in this book are so good that I do not even hear the bothersome music of those attributively positioned qualifiers.

I cannot remember when I read poem 2 for the first time, with its famous opening lines "What a tiny homeland / is bounded by the cemetery!". It must have been a good twenty-five years ago. It was my tutor Glòria Casals at Barcelona University who described the cemetery in Arenys to me, with its position high above, even towering over (and embracing) the village and the sea. The great power of the lyrical language is just that: our tutor gave us important directions on how to step over the ground of the text, whilst I had followed my own interpretive steps along other pathways. To begin with, I had always believed that the homeland bounded by the cemetery was that of the dead, and that the poet was thus speaking not of a place of disaffection but the record of the past: the city of the dead. It made sense to me that he should begin his text with this focus, to use a photographic term, and then end with two fine, well-rounded lines which gained such a great deal when Espriu, a great one for obsessively re-polishing his works, freed them of a conjunction tying them to the lines immediately preceding ("I do not love / anything else except the passing / shadow of a cloud / and the slow memory of days / which are gone forever").

"Cementiri de Sinera" is my favourite Espriu book. Never have so many things been said, and so well, in so few words

How could one improve a text with such an apparently insignificant decision, it's so very subtle! "The passing shadow of a cloud" is, of course, "the slow memory of days / which are gone forever". It is not something separate. Espriu ties the "shadow" to the "memory": a beautiful reading (in the sense of textual criticism, but also in a moral sense). Let's get back to what I was saying before.

The poem, in my initial interpretation, began by placing the reader facing the cemetery, or even within its hallowed grounds. The specific nature of this concept became even clearer in the three lines which follow: "This sea, Sinera, / hillocks of pines and vines, dust of streams". These are lines of a radical luminosity which have always, in their excellence, reminded me of two lines from Ramon Llull's *Cant de Ramon*, in which the mediaeval philosopher and poet defines the locus of his enlightenment: "Between the vine and the fennel / love siezed me". Espriu gave a summary of the land: his Mediterranean land, the land of the Maresme, the land further north (the Costa Brava), and even further south (the Costa Dorada). Village and sea. Woodland (nature untamed) and vine-

yard (nature controlled). The dust: here, though, in very concrete terms. Not at all metaphorically.

This gift of concrete expression, so many things said with their roots in the ground (the dead, a village, pines and vines) ends with the formula "I do not love anything else". The poet has shown us his homeland. In a way which says: Here I came into the world. Here I first saw the light. Here I will die. All this is tucked away in a bundle of love. A moral heritage. This, the roots of life, but also of mortal conscience. And it is then that, "except for the passing / shadow of a cloud" Espriu tells us that he loves not only that which is certain, but also that which has ceased to be so. The spent fuel of the past. The dust in the stream of life. The days of our existence have passed by forever, like the fleeting shadow of a cloud. Not like a cloud in itself, mind! Like "the shadow" of that cloud. The shadow which is cast on the ground, even more ethereal than the stuff of which the cloud is made. The illusion of our days.

The lyrical purity of these lines is admirable. For me, it is one of the summits of Espriu's poetry.