

On "Pontos", by Salvador Espriu

| VICENT ALONSO

"Pontos"

*Deep inside the peaceful eyes of the sea
I saw the fallen, broken
dream of the shrine
of an ancient god.
Oh, marble cold time, my life
wasted against the ice of words!
On death, s bare rock,
I can only erect the high column
of grief, a harsh, solitary
cry with no song,
no memory of song, while the black wings
of peat carry daylight away
to sky prisons and reflect me,
encouraging me to leave, beyond a serene
deep-set path, beyond the peaceful eyes
of the sea.*

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Translation by Sam Abrams

I am one of those people who think that the lyrical Espriu, the one that finally took shape with *Final del laberinto* (End of the labyrinth) (1955), has always prevailed over the other Espriu, the one who according to Carles Miralles, ended up providing Catalan literature with one of the "quality models" for those who at that time were determined to tread the path of social poetry. In that sense, I am not original at all. As is well known, this is the Espriu that is currently in demand by so many people. It is only necessary to look at the volume published by Proa very recently, with the comments published previously on these pages, to see to what extent the lyrical Espriu is today preferred by a significant amount of those in the profession. I do not know if the reasons for this preference are always the same, but it should be remembered that in the early 1970s, among the Valencian poets who at

that time were taking their first steps in literature, the preferences for the poetry contained in *Mrs. Death* were noticed, and this was almost always in contrast to the poetry which in *La pell de brau* (The Skin of the Bull) reminded us that "sometimes it is necessary and unavoidable / for a man to die for his people". And if clarification is required, it would also be necessary to remember that inclining towards the lyrical Espriu does not at all imply protecting oneself against commitments of all types. Quite the opposite - duties are not fulfilled by single means alone, and neither does literature have a sacred obligation to show itself in minute detail. In fact, some Valencian poets in the early 1970s preferred the lyrical Espriu whose poetry does not hide significant variations on the ways of ethical or social commitment. In both areas, Espriu was a master who was difficult to surpass and as a consequence, we all learnt from him. Some of them, as is well-known in Valencian poetry from those years, could not resist meditating on death and making it the reason for their initial poetic vocation.

In the areas I have just outlined, *Las horas* is an especially significant book. Nobody can say that its poems do not contain conclusive examples for understanding that the commitment that a poet feels to his people, his language or ethical or aesthetic values are one thing, and that feeling obliged to make this a pedagogically thought out and scanned subject for readers' general knowledge is something else again. Castellet made things crystal clear when he noted the importance of the book's civic concerns. "The dream of freedom becomes the chain / which binds me forever to my painful song."

The first two verses of the poem *Prometeo* have a striking and programmatic clarity in this regard. But *Las horas* is also a particularly significant book because it offers many examples of how Espriu's message to readers had to undergo or overcome critical filters which had a desire - legitimate, of course - to shed light on relevant aspects of the work while leaving others in absolute darkness. The criticism of Carles Miralles is an essential reference point in this field - the world views of Espriu and Riba are not so radically distant from each other for it to be impossible to read either without the useful support, in interpretative terms, of the Greek and Latin classics. A good way, for Valencians in particular, to remove some of our reading vices, which have been inherited, not always voluntarily from the maestro Fuser. This is truly the final reason, or if you will, for the summarised etiology of my relationship, which has been cyclically pleasant and always useful, with some parts of the work of Salvador Espriu. With certain poems in particular. This is true of *Las palabras* (The Words), a poem that has always accompanied me and about which I have already said that stopping at *Mrs. Death* is not, or was not, stopping halfway, and rejecting "Iberia", "Syneresis" and "Holy Weeks". Instead, it is all, or was, a journey back, which leads you to seek final shelter among what you really value. Something similar could be said of *Pontos*, a poem included in the part of *Las horas*.

I mentioned that Miralles is an obligatory reference in these matters. Indeed, he wrote what linked *Pontos* with the second of the *Bierville Elegies* and what the third part of *Las horas* meant as a new response by



Callygraphy: Keith Adams

Espru to the Spanish Civil War - the first was his Antígona. But my relationship with Pontos is not due to the clarifications by Miralles, because I have always enjoyed trying to place what had always seemed to me to be the facts in a consistent manner. I am referring to references to the classical world, as Castellet has already pointed out in his well-known introduction to Espru's poetic world, but without giving the series of titles which strangely appear grouped together in this third part of the book as "evidence". Indeed, Pontos opens a series of five poems whose titles refer to the Latin and Greek world. This is something that is significant in itself, but is even more so from a poet who at that point in his career made the architecture of his books a question of principle. Immediately after Pontos, Augusta Perusia, Prometeo, Omnis fortasse moriar and Ofrenda a Cerbero are titles that refer unmistakably to a world that we have to take into consideration to read these poems to the full. We begin with evidence as specific as that of the city - today's Perugia - which Octavian ordered burnt and later rebuilt; or that of Prometheus, bearer of fire and wisdom and the central figure

in Aeschylus's famous tragedy; or that of Cerberus, the guardian of Hades, to others that are not as specific, but with an unmistakable intention. Omnis fortasse moriar thus takes us to the Horatian ode in which the poet, proud of his work, believes he can discern the means of survival - Non omnis moriar multaque pars mei / uitabit Libitinam ("Not all of me will die; a large part of me will be stolen from Libitina"). This is also true of Pontos, which in the mythological world to which he refers, was the masculine embodiment of the sea.

However, the central theme linking all these poems, like all those in the third part of Las horas, is the Espru who sings at the death of Salome, i.e. the poet sings at his own death, which symbolically takes place on the exact and terrible date at the start of this final part: Recordando lejanamente a Salom (18-VII-1936) ["Remembering Salom from a distance (18 - VII - 1936)"]. This is the first reason for the entertainment which I mentioned above and which sets the tone for my personal relationship with Pontos - moving from Pontos to the Roman poet's Epistulae ex Ponto was not only the result of a relatively banal pun, but also the conse-

quence of an idea, one which linked Espru and Ovid, to a type of symbolic death caused by forced and painful exile. From Tomis, on the western shore of the Black Sea, and as a consequence of a decree by Augustus which exiled him to the colony recently built by Rome, Ovid sang of his sadness. Like Espru, also an exile from the horror of war. Espru's pain, which Pontos expresses categorically, is also the pain which Ovid repeats again and again from any part of the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto. "Cum patriam amisi, tunc me periisse putato: / et prior et grauior mors fuit illa mihi." ("When I lost my homeland, believe me, that is when I died: for me, that was the first and most serious death"). Often, relations between artists have nothing to do with simple repetitions of phrases or ideas. There are communions which cannot be described so easily. And it is normal for some readers, like me, to be influenced by more or less vague evidence, but which is nonetheless considerably attractive. They are, from a certain point of view, entertainment with no scientific value, but which fill you with satisfaction when they are concerned with poets you admire.