

## The voice of the cypresses. Cyrus Cassells and the poetry of Salvador Espriu

Dídac Llorens Cubedo  
[dllorens@flog.uned.es](mailto:dllorens@flog.uned.es)

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), Spain

### ABSTRACT

“To the cypress again and again” is Cyrus Cassells’s poetic response to the work of Salvador Espriu, a poet whose reception has been limited by his belonging to a minority culture and his commitment to the Catalan language. In its first eight sections, the poem reads as a dramatic monologue: its author adopts Espriu’s voice, successfully evoking his poetic world. In what could be considered the second part of the poem, a different poetic speaker — identifiable with Cassells — shares personal memories of Espriu: the man, his nation and his culture. At the end of the poem, the emblematic cypresses are identified with the Catalan people and their voice is heard. The poem is an example of *epistolary elegy*, a mode that allows Cassells to enter into dialogue with deceased personalities who have had artistic or historical relevance. In so doing, the American poet shows, like Espriu did, an acute sense of cultural tradition.

**Keywords:** “To the cypress again and again”, Cyrus Cassells, Salvador Espriu, epistolary elegy, poetic voice, imagery

In its website, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages defines *regional* or *minority language* as one “traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population”. As the president of the Association Internationale pour la Défense des Langues et Cultures Menacées, during the early 70s, the Catalan poet Salvador Espriu (1913-1985) fought for the survival of minority languages spoken all over the world. In an interview, he connected this responsibility with the history of his own language:

Jo vaig reaccionar des del primer dia contra la intolerable arbitrietat que suposa perseguir una llengua; va donar la casualitat que fos la meva, la catalana, però crec que hauria reaccionat de la mateixa manera contra la persecució de qualsevol altra llengua. ... [L]a meva reacció no va ser sentimental, sinó que va ser intel·lectual i ètica. (Reina 1995b: 94)

As a writer, Espriu produced a body of literature that can be considered — among other things — a vindication of his own language, persecuted and belittled during Franco’s

regime<sup>1</sup>. Despite Espriu's consistent and militant allegiance to the Catalan language, his work has been internationally received. In his acceptance speech for the Premi Catalunya, Harold Bloom (2002) referred to Espriu as a prominent figure in the Catalan canon and defined him as "a remarkable poet by any international standard".

His own liminal condition — an African American and gay man — has made the poet Cyrus Cassells (b. 1957) especially sensitive to the struggle of marginalized groups and minorities, to which he has given a poetic voice: "when you come from communities that have been oppressed [...] you just embody aspects of experience that might not have been articulated, because people's testimonies and expressions are disregarded or ignored for whatever reasons" (Jiménez 2009: 73). Surely it must have been this special sensitivity that led Cassells to read, study and translate Catalan poetry, since a decisive first encounter with Espriu's verse.

Cassells wrote "To the cypress again and again" as a tribute to Salvador Espriu<sup>2</sup>. The first version of the poem — about 160 lines long — is divided into thirteen sections of varying length and metre patterns, and different voices can be heard: mainly Espriu's, but also Cassells's and the voice of the cypresses which, as we will see, becomes a central and pervading presence. The poem contains five temporal references that could be ordered into a narrative sequence: Espriu's life prior to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1913-1936), Franco's regime, including the post-war (1939-1975), Franco's death (1975), Cassells' meeting with Espriu (1984) and Espriu's death (1985). These dates will be useful in structuring our analysis of the poem, which will be explored in its connections with Espriu's poetic production and will focus on such aspects as point of view, imagery and themes.

In his profile on the website of the *National Endowment for the Arts*, Casells tells of his stays in Barcelona, "to work on two projects, *Still Life With Children: Selected Poems of Francesc Parcerisas*, and *Rider on the Back of Silence: Tribute to Salvador Espriu*, a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the persecution of Catalan in the years following the Spanish Civil War, see Josep Benet's *Catalunya sota el règim franquista* (pp. 279-410).

<sup>2</sup> The poem was first published in the journal *Callaloo* (1986: 18-23) and later included in the collection *Soul Make a Path through Shouting* (1994). I choose to quote from the longer *Callaloo* version — composed shortly after Espriu's death — since it will allow us to explore intertextual connections in more depth. The poem's title will be subsequently abbreviated to "To the cypress".

memoir (with translations) about the Catalan poet and Nobel candidate, whom I met shortly before his death in 1985”. In section IX of the poem, the encounter is recalled:

Cassells?  
The name could be Mallorcan —  
  
How old are you?  
Twenty-seven.  
And you’ve never read *Don Quixote!* (Cassells 1986: 21)

The reader may assume that Espriu’s death causes Cassells to reminisce about the day they met, the year before. In the first eight sections of the poem, the latter adopts Espriu’s voice to compare his life before and after the war, declare his ambitions as a writer and evoke the scenery of his homeland. This imagined exercise in poetic sincerity has Espriu — essentially an impersonal poet — do what he rarely did in verse: communicate his own experience directly in a confessional tone. In fact, these sections resemble the dramatic monologue: a vivid impression of the speaker is conveyed and a sense of audience is implied (Furniss and Bath 1996: 175-176) — section IV begins with the question “Can you understand?”, section VI with the interjection “listen” and in XIII we find the vocative “Cyrus”.

## **I. BEFORE THE FIGHTING (1913-1936)**

Maria Aurèlia Capmany, a close friend of Espriu, wrote about the poet’s experience of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Her words indicate the extent to which the conflict affected him. It rendered his ideal of harmony in political difference and cultural diversity in Spain dramatically impossible and, at a personal level, it brought an abrupt end to a student career pursued, until that point, with enthusiasm and marked success:

He did not return to the university until after Franco’s death, when he was awarded an honorary degree. He earned his living by working in a notary public’s office. He flatly refused to engage in any public activity or to write in Spanish, the only language permitted at the time [...] He had decided that his world had been destroyed by the war which had just begun. He deliberately sought out the kingdom of death, the negation of the life which lay before him. (Capmany 1992: 17)

“To the cypress” opens with Espriu’s statement that “the bloodshed buried my world” (Cassells 1986: 18), in an echo of the poem “Viatge d’hivern”: “sang que no he vessat |

m'ha destruït el món" (Espriu 2003: 89)<sup>3</sup>. The voice of the Catalan poet depicts the post-war panorama of hopelessness and subjugation in his "vanquished country", with a fleeting melancholy thought for the young man that he was before the cataclysm:

Before the fighting, I was blessed,  
At twenty-three, a prodigy with five books.  
Salom, I called myself. (Cassells 1986: 18)

Espriu's choice to project himself in his own work as an allegorical character embodying peace — the name Salom evidently taken from the Hebrew word — shows how deeply the fratricidal fighting troubled him. The poems in his collection *Les hores* were grouped into three parts: part I was dedicated to a close friend and fellow poet ("recordant B. Rosselló-Pòrcel") and part II is linked to the memory of Espriu's mother ("recordant sempre la meva mare"). Espriu (2003: 57, 81) attaches, in parentheses, the exact dates of their demise: Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel died in 1938 and Escolàstica Castelló in 1950. The dedication of part III ("recordant allunyadament Salom", 2003: 103) symbolically causes two events to coincide: the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, on July 18 1936, and the death of the poet's literary alter ego. In section I of "To the cypress", as in *Les Hores*, Espriu has a "distant memory" of the young Salom, who lived in a time when peace was still a possibility:

But Salom died at the first shriek of the civil war:  
July 18, 1936 — (Cassells 1986: 18)

The war not only traumatised Espriu, depriving him of a progressive education in the best humanist tradition. It also caused his incipient and promising literary career to veer decisively. In 1936, Espriu was "a prodigy with five books", two novels and three short story collections: *El doctor Rip* (1931), *Laia* (1932), *Aspectes* (1934), *Ariadna al laberint grotesc* (1935), and *Miratge a Citera* (1935). These works of fiction are characterised by stylistic experimentation and a point of view that is often ironic or satirical. After their publication, Espriu switched to verse, his choice of the poetic mode as expressive vehicle being directly related to the war that drew the dividing line between enthusiastic freedom and discouraging repression. Had the war never broken out and especially, had it not resulted in severe censorship and the persecution of Catalan culture, he would have probably continued to write the kind of fiction that he

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<sup>3</sup> "Viatge d'hivern" is included in the collection *Les hores* which, despite containing some of Espriu's earliest verse, achieved its definitive form in 1963.

had published in the 30s. Poetry became a more suitable means of expression in the new political situation:

He dicho que mi obra refleja la guerra civil, pero es más. Mi poesía es hija de la guerra. Antes me interesaba — y ahora también — la narrativa, pero la poesía me “surgió” como más radical. La eliminación pública del catalán hacía imposible el cultivo de la narrativa, mientras que el poema pudo surgir de un modo más íntimo y necesario. (Reina 1995a: 149)

The early thirties, the years preceding the war, when Espriu was an excellent student and a promising fiction writer, are idealised and identified with the vitality of Catalan culture, the richness of the language — metaphorically associated with natural imagery — and the nation’s dynamism. In section V, Espriu addresses Cassells and the poem’s readers to dwell on the years of the Second Spanish Republic:

Listen, in that distant time, in those ardent days  
Of the Republic,  
My language filled me like a heady wine,  
Laced with the sweetness of figs, the tang of pine-nuts;  
Yes, my country was an almond tree in bloom.  
The Mediterranean was my garden — blue, voluminous — (Cassells 1986: 19)

The Mediterranean Sea, which washes the shore in Sinera, is an alternative to, an escape from confinement and political boundaries. In *Les cançons d’Ariadna*, Espriu included a poem with a Basque title, “Abesti bioztun bat entzun naiz” — which could be translated as “I heard a heartfelt song”. The Basque Country is, like Catalonia / Sinera, a small nation that turns to the sea in order to avoid isolation:

Clars solcs dibuixadíssims,  
terra petita en pau.  
Com que se sap petita,  
obre portes a mar. (Espriu 1990: 118)

This watery and seamless garden is part of Espriu’s lost world. Pijoan i Picas has analysed the garden image in Espriu’s poetics and she considers it an instance of the *refuge* archetype: “un espai delimitat, hiperprotector, que indueix a la vida plàcida perquè s’hi ha exorcitzat la mort, i, per tant, hi ha una manca d’antagonisme entre la vida i la mort” (1995: 82). The archetype in question comprises the notions of protection, peace and intellectual activity. Specifically in Espriu’s imagination, it is objectified as a happy childhood in Arenys de Mar, “before the fighting”, with its inherent unawareness of mortality and the sense that the future was full of possibility (Pijoan i Picas, 1995: 83). Poem IX of *Llibre de Sinera* is set in the “jardí dels cinc arbres”, where the poet and his siblings used to spend many summer hours at play:

Claror de l'aigua, prima  
molsa del safareig.  
Varava fràgils barques,  
en encalmar-se el vent. (Espriu 2006: 30)

The scene is evocative of “la infantesa, viscuda com una etapa paradisiaca d’atemporalitat, amb jocs i alegria” (Pijoan i Picas 1995: 60). Refuge can be sought in this space of the family house, but also in the more extensive setting of Sinera, its natural surroundings and “blue, voluminous” sea. The following lines are from poem II of *Cementiri de Sinera*:

Aquesta mar, Sinera,  
turons de pins i vinya,  
pols de rials. No estimo  
res més, excepte l’ombra  
viatgera d’un núvol. (Espriu 2003: 10)

In the lines from “To the cypress” quoted above, Espriu’s love of his own language is expressed through gustative images unequivocally reminiscent of Sineran life and nature: the taste of “a heady wine”, “the sweetness of figs”, “the tang of pine-nuts”. The sound of Catalan is also an integrating component of Espriu’s archetypal garden and his poems communicate a painful nostalgia for its normalised use. “Advers al vent” (from *Mrs Death*) goes back to the old days of “Sineran lords”, when the gardens withered in parallel with the banishment of words:

No preguntis si penso  
encara en els vells dies  
dels senyors, si recordo  
com lentament morien  
els jardins, les paraules. (Espriu 2003: 164)

Espriu’s garden of paradise was lost as a result of the original sin of the Spanish Civil War — in his play *Primera història d’Esther*, the Altíssim, the blind man who runs the puppet show, warns the people of Sinera: “Eviteu el màxim crim, el pecat de la guerra entre germans” (Espriu 1981: 129). To the critical political situation that Espriu lived, one should add personal factors, such as the bereavement caused by the death of his father and his beloved friend Rosselló-Pòrcel:

Simbòlicament restava tot cancel·lat: la mort de la República, de Rosselló i els seus somnis d’un món diferent; la mort del notari [Espriu’s father’s death in 1940] i, amb ell, de les aspiracions professionals del mateix Espriu. Una família al seu càrrec, una guerra mundial a l’aguait de la situació a Espanya. Tot plegat, un autèntic *lost paradise*. (Delor i Muns 1993: 150; author’s emphasis)

## II. THE PROMISE OF OBLIVION (1936-1975)

Espriu recalls the post-war atmosphere and his state of mind in the first eight sections of Cassells' poem, where those years are viewed by the old poet in retrospect. In the following lines, from section II, he compares himself with two heroes belonging to cultural sources that he knew very well, the Bible and classical mythology. He felt impotent like Samson after Delilah's treachery, lost like Theseus inside the labyrinth, without Ariadne's help:

Suddenly I was powerless, like Samson.  
Who could have imagined it?  
No saviour, no Ariadne's thread,  
Just the promise of oblivion — (Cassells 1986: 18)

The erasure of its past prevents Sinera from having a present and a future. Espriu's task is a form of resistance against these barren prospects, a determined attempt to preserve the language and its culture. At the same time, it is also a lament over the deprivation suffered by Sinera. Hence, his poetry, singing of loss, is often labelled elegiac. In the poem "Perquè un dia torni la cançó a Sinera" (*Les Hores*), which contains interesting reflections about writing and the role of the poet, Espriu complains that

Mai no ha entès ningú  
per què sempre parlo  
del meu món perdut. (Espriu 2003: 118)

In section VIII of "To the cypress", we find two verse lines that can connect with these. Cassells has Espriu declare "*I am no lover of the present, | But the past*" (Cassells 1986: 20; author's italics).

The Catalan poet's work is further characterised through his own voice in the poem. In section VII, he outlines his poetic plan after wondering what his motivations in writing might have been. The lines below, conversational and anaphoric, refer to Espriu's firm refusal to write in Spanish, to his fascination with the grotesque, to the themes of death, war and repression, to the frequent mythological allusions:

Damn it, what was I reaching for?  
Something more than Cervantes' language.  
More than the brutal pantomime.  
More than the brunt of the black boot.  
More than sin or the minotaur.  
More, more than the fear of death — (Cassells 1986: 20)

Esriu's poetry consists of all the elements listed, and is more than simply each one of them. He knew "what he was reaching for": a meditation upon death "per veure-la d'una manera objectiva, serena i a partir de la qual es pot entendre el que realment interessa, que és la vida" (Batista 1985: 64).

Immediately after the lines quoted, however, Espriu's goal is defined not conceptually, but with emphasis on the imaginative dimension and on his sense of belonging to Sinera: he aspired to create "an alphabet of cypresses and sea-light" (Cassells 1986: 20). Some of the most frequent or evocative constituents of Espriu's "imaginal alphabet" are featured in the poem by Cassells: ash, cemetery, sea, song (I); stars, light and shadow, dolphins (IV); wind (V, VI, X); hills, vines, fennel, fields, hoes (VII); pines, boats (VIII); a bull's hide (IX); marble, vineyards (X)<sup>4</sup>. And of course the cypress tree which, given its relevance in the poem — signalled by the title — will be considered in more detail below.

The Spain of the 30s and 40s, turbulent and war-stricken, made Espriu's poetry what it is — gravely meditative, but also intensely lyrical. Even though Espriu's voice seems to diminish the importance of some of the more recognisable facets of his poetic world, the references to Ariadne's thread and the minotaur bring to mind a key image: the labyrinth, which could be related to the political situation in which the poet lived and, perhaps more importantly, to his Everyman's metaphysical quest<sup>5</sup>. According to Castellet, the labyrinth is "un símbol conceptual, més lligat al desorientat vagarejar dels homes per la vida [...] que a la mítica elaboració grega" (1984: 123).

As hinted at above, Espriu's poems contain frequent, more or less veiled allusions to the two fundamental strands of what could be called "universal culture" — a traditional concept no longer taken for granted, but one that is valid for a poet like Espriu. References to Biblical literature or classical mythology are an essential part of his work; identifying and examining them closely contributes to its deeper understanding. The interest of the curious poem "Rars ecos pels tombants" (*Les Cançons d'Ariadna*) lies in

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<sup>4</sup> Several images are only listed once, although they recur through the sequence. Espriu's image of the "pell de brau" was taken from a book about Iberia by the Greek geographer and historian Strabo (63 BC – 19 AD), where the Iberian Peninsula is compared to a spread bull's hide. Espriu made that image a symbol of the coexistence, not always easy, of different peoples in Spain and Portugal.

<sup>5</sup> The Theseus myth is alluded to in the titles of several works by Espriu, in prose and verse: *Ariadna al laberint grotesc*, *Les cançons d'Ariadna*, *Final del laberint*. Additionally, the third part of *El Caminant i el Mur* bears the title "El Minotaure i Teseu".

its interconnected presentation of the two cultural traditions that furnished the poet's imagination from his early years. He recalls the biblical stories that his aunt Maria used to tell him:

La tia Maria  
llegia sovint  
en llibres molt savis  
maleses i crims.  
[...]  
Quan queia la pluja  
damunt llessamins,  
contava disbauxes  
del sant rei David. (Espriu 1990: 25)

As Espriu recalls in his prologue to *Primera història d'Esther*, Maria Castelló “dominava l'art, tan sinerenc, de vivificar el que contava” (1981: 86). Her Biblical narrations made it easier for the child to assimilate classical and Egyptian mythology, into which he delved later in life. The aunt's storytelling

m'obria camins,  
enllà de l'escuma  
d'aquest mar antic.  
Petit, m'allunyava,  
a lloms de dofins,  
per freus neguitosos,  
anquines, perills.  
De cop m'acollien  
els braços del Nil,  
sentia mesclar-se  
mots grecs amb llatins. (Espriu 1990: 25)

As we have seen, Espriu's voice in Cassells' poem identifies his experiences with those lived by Theseus and Samson. The Catalan poet's life in the darkest years of the Spanish post-war — when everyday hardships combined with the struggle to pursue a literary career in a banned language, in an isolated country — is compared in “To the cypress” to the plight of other Biblical characters such as Joseph, sold by his brothers and captive in Egypt, or Job, the butt of God's seemingly unjustified rage and cruelty. The following lines are from section III:

It was like the dream of Joseph in Egypt,  
The dream-in-the-dungeon, the black well,  
Or the plangent cry of Job,  
The fortunate man who wakes in hell,  
Tested by a fire from heaven — (Cassells 1986: 19)

Espriu's great interest in the book of Job is reflected in his poetry. The realistic portrayal of the beggars and the blind men that people Sinera is reminiscent of Job's

physical suffering and pitiful abandonment. In poem XL of *La pell de brau*, the lyrical speaker appeals to a tyrannical figure who has made him a leper and deserted him:

Però tu te'n rius:  
[...]  
Em tornes mesell  
i em deixes podrint-me  
en aquest femer. (Espriu 2008: 376)<sup>6</sup>

But these poignant images inspired by the trials of Job do not apply only to the fate of Sinera and Sepharad<sup>7</sup>. Espriu thinks of the Biblical character as emblematic of the human condition, and this mythical transposition became more evident and meaningful for the poet as belligerence intensified during the first half of the twentieth century:

La terrible violència bèl·lica del segle XX, que li va tocar de presenciar quasi en la seva totalitat [...] li fornía la visió, per dir-ho amb termes bíblics, d'un món caigut en el pecat; és a dir, un món exiliat de Déu. Una època de damnació en què Déu estava més ocult que mai i l'home, tan desvalgut i angoixat com ho havia estat Job, abandonat a les arbitràries forces destructores de Satanàs (Delor 2005: 578-579)

Opposed to this world of sin and damnation is the “little homeland”, Sinera, which is still the poet's solace even — or perhaps with more reason — in the face of adversity. As we saw, in section II of “To the cypress”, already quoted from, we are offered a glimpse of paradise lost in which the beauty of the Sineran landscape and the poet's pride in his language are imaginatively linked. These two elements are also brought together when the remembered period is the post-war and not the Republic (VII). Mediterranean nature and the voices of the living and the dead comfort and inspire Espriu in troubled times:

Sometimes I'd sit before the blank page — impoverished,  
Till the rising sun reclaimed  
The hills of vines and fennel, the hills,  
So unforgettable.  
And from the wide fields would come  
The voices of peasants,  
Mingling with the voices of my dead,  
The sound of hoes striking my heart — (Cassells 1986: 20)

Esriu is, according to Cassells, “a lover of the past”, and the memory of those who ensured the continuity of his language and his culture (“the voices of my

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<sup>6</sup> The poem that follows (XLI) completes the allusion. Other poems that contain more or less direct references to the book of Job are “Perquè un dia torni la cançó a Sinera” (*Les hores*), “El vent” (*Les cançons d'Ariadna*) and poem VII of *Llibre de Sinera*.

<sup>7</sup> In *La pell de brau* and other poems, Espriu refers to Spain as Sepharad, establishing a parallelism between the Israelites' wandering in the desert and Franco's dictatorship. Sephardi Jews were those native to Spain; they were expelled or forced to convert by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

dead”) justifies and empowers him in his civil resistance and poetic mission. In section II, his idyllic youth is given the evanescent quality of a dream (“Did I dream it all?”) and the old poet’s reminiscing comes to a halt when a powerful image, alluding to one of the witches’ prophecies in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, is conjured up: “And then the armies of the dead advancing | surrounding me like Birnam Wood” (Cassells 1986: 20)<sup>8</sup>. These ghosts, initially disturbing, become soothing presences when the Mediterranean sea is no longer a garden, but the setting of the struggle to “save the words”. In section VIII, and in Espriu’s own voice, persecuted Catalan is compared to boats against a stormy wind:

And from the sumptuous balconies of pine,  
I could see the boats  
Feuding with the wind,  
Like the fierce and indrawn words  
We uttered in exile (Cassells 1986: 20)

The imagery of sailing and shipwreck has a special significance in several poems by Espriu<sup>9</sup>. In “Port de retorn” (*Les Hores*), the lyrical speaker is, as in Cassells’ poem, watching the boats cleave the waves. Their sailing has something of a mystic journey, which transcends the local immediacy of Sinera and the poet’s interior exile during the most sombre years of repression. Souls are compared to vessels heading for “the port of time”, towards a marble shore:

Perduts en la llunyana  
dificultat de l’aigua,  
passen velers que porten  
el senyal dels oratges  
soferts en la recerca  
del port del temps, on alça  
un vell poder vastíssim  
hostils fredors de marbre. (Espriu 2003: 90)

### III. AT LONG LAST (1975-1985)

Section IX of “To the cypress” is especially important as it combines the voices of the two poets — Espriu and Cassells — in dialogic form and, at the same time, separates

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be | Until Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill | Shall come against him” (Shakespeare 2008: 174).

<sup>9</sup> Interesting examples are, besides from “Port de retorn”, poem XXV of *Cementiri de Sinera*, “El passat i el pou, a trenc d’alba” (*Les cançons d’Ariadna*) or “Cançó del matí encalmat” (*El caminant i el mur*).

the sequences where each of these two voices is heard independently. In the part of the poem where the lyrical voice is clearly identifiable with his own (X-XII), Cassells draws on memories of Espriu, Catalan culture and Arenys de Mar. The association between language and natural imagery continues to be established. The metaphor THE WORDS OF CATALAN ARE BOATS AGAINST THE WIND, implicit in VIII, reappears in the lines below (“foundered language”), from section X. Another metaphor equates the language with seeds that will be hurled into the air, in a rebellious act of freedom:

Your foundered language  
Blazing inside you like sweetly-guarded seeds.

At any moment, you could have tossed them to the wind — (Cassells 1986: 21)

Cassells recalls his encounter with the Catalan poet (IX) and a visit to the village of Arenys de Mar, his mythical nation of Sinera (X). Again typically Sineran imagery is displayed:

At long last, I reached your village:  
How the cemetery crowns Sinera!  
In ecstasy, I found the cloudlet pines, the upraised vineyards.  
And the wind ushered me to  
Your hall of vibrant cypresses. (Cassells 1986: 21)

As happens with other lines in the poem, the second here comes across as a calque of Espriu’s language: cf. “Quina petita pàtria encercla el cementiri!” (poem II of *Cementiri de Sinera*, 2003: 10). In the following section, Cassells declares that, on his visit, he “married Sinera” and suitably, the little homeland is personified in terms that resemble the description of the wife in the Biblical Song of Songs: “Breasts of the greenest pines, | hips of sun-rife vines and fennel” (XI)<sup>10</sup>.

The lyrical speaker has finally had a direct sensual experience of Espriu’s world, and is especially impressed by the cypresses, true emblems of Sinera. In the dark years of repression, the Catalan poet was sheltered by “the cypress’ anointing shadow” (Cassells 1986: 18), which prevented him — like Job’s solid faith — from losing hope: “Beside the cypresses, for awhile I could believe | God was not dead” (Cassells 1986: 19). The irrepressible voice of these “testifying trees wailing” (Cassells 1986: 19) carries with it denunciation and a vindication of justice. Cassells asks these “wondrous trees that listen | and can answer back” (1986: 21) to pronounce Espriu’s most cherished word:

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 4 of the Song of Solomon.

Like gods, in green unison, the cypresses let go  
A luscious whisper:

*Liberty*. (Cassells 1986: 22; author's emphasis)

The god-like trees can finally proclaim the people's freedom. Earlier in the poem, earlier in time, they could only echo the unsettling sounds of Sinera's stunted future. To accentuate the desperation in the italicised voice of the cypresses, in section V, Cassells had eliminated the punctuation in the sentences and run them together. "For many years" Espriu heard this "on the wind":

Catalonia. Exile. Theft. Horror of Franco. Don't bark, speak  
The language of the empire.

Catalonia exile theft horror of Franco don't bark speak  
the language of the empire.

cataloniaexilethefthorroroffrancodon'tbarkspeakthelanguage  
oftheempirecataloniaexilethefthorroroffrancodon'tbarkspeak  
thelanguageoftheempirecataloniaexilethefthorroroffrancodon (Cassells 1986: 19)

The cypresses are central images in Espriu's first collection of poetry, *Cementiri de Sinera*, where their stately presence accompanies the solitary poet. Poem V ends as follows:

M'esperen  
tan sols, per fer-me almoïna,  
fidels xiprers verdíssims. (Espriu 2003: 16)

D. Gareth Walters interprets the cypress in *Cementiri* as "a constant companion to the poet", "accompanier of his defeat" and "a spur to movement", but specifies that there is "no recourse to pathetic fallacy" (2006: 40), which contrasts with the conclusion of "To the cypress".

The last section of Cassells's poem combines the voices of the two poets and those of the cypresses. Cassells desires Espriu to speak once more: "Tell me again, old poet" (1986: 21). The latter recalls the relieved excitement and hope that followed Franco's death and how he walked his way to the cemetery, the heart of Sinera, as so many times before. There, he communicated his joy to the cypresses, urging them to "see how we have grown like you — bold, indomitable" (Cassells 1986: 23).

The cypresses are identified with the Catalan people as the poem resolves. They speak its last words, quoting — as Espriu does in the last line of section I — the poem "Perquè un dia torni la cançó a Sinera" (*Les hores*). These echoing lines achieve their full

meaning when read in the light of the Biblical epigraph chosen by Espriu to open his seminal *Cementiri de Sinera*: “I les filles de cançó seran humiliades” (Ecclesiastes 12.4). The humiliated “daughters of song” stand for the repressed language that, after the dictator’s death, can hope to regain its dignity. The trees celebrate the new freedom, the return of the song and the future:

*Let the dead rivers begin to breathe.  
Let the scourged, once-taunted bell receive its tongue  
In pomp, in pure jubilee.  
For now the song has returned to Sinera.* (Cassells 1986: 23; author’s italics)

These lines have the cadence and rejoicing tone of a hymn or canticle and can compare with Espriu’s “Inici de càntic en el temple” (*Les Cançons d’Ariadna*), a poem that is exceptional in celebrating the advent of freedom and spring in Sinera. The generations that have endured and resisted, those who have kept the language alive through a symbolic wandering in the desert, offer it now onto the new generations, hoping that they will always remember their plight:

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 açament de llum en la tenebra! (Espriu 1990: 146)

#### **IV. YOUR LEGACY AND LIBERATION (CONCLUSION)**

As has been exemplified, in the sections of “To the cypress again and again” where the voice can be assumed to be Cassells’s, the poet draws largely on memories related to Espriu and his culture. In XII, he takes the reader to Perpignan, the Catalan-speaking French *arrondissement*, where he first saw people dance the *sardana*. The American poet links the dance, an image of nationhood, to Espriu’s role as a preserver of Catalan culture:

This was your legacy and liberation:  
A dawn of linked hands.  
A deep Mediterranean laughter. (Cassells 1986: 22)

The poet expresses his wish to “enter the dance”, which can be considered an objective correlative of his interest in Catalan culture.

Malin Pereira considers Cassells's work essentially cosmopolitan; the majority of poems in *Soul Make a Path through Shouting*, including the one he dedicates to Espriu,

turn to art as a witness to horror, crossing cultures from Czechoslovakia and Spain to Russia, Poland, and El Salvador. The poet-speaker traverses these cultures at ease, employing the insights born from their historical and cultural particulars toward a vision of art as a universal tool of healing from 20<sup>th</sup>-century horror. (Pereira 2007: 717)

Among other poets, Espriu was a witness of this traumatic horror and used his art to exorcise it. Decades later, Cassells has shared that role and developed a particular way to acknowledge genius, achievement or courage. As "To the cypress" exemplifies, there is a tendency in his work to make the poem a setting for conversation with dead figures who have his sympathy and admiration; on the website of *Texas State University*, Amy Francisco writes: "You could say that spirits speak to Cyrus Cassells ... [h]e has a talent for channeling life experiences — his own and those of others — into lyrical language that evokes empathy and compassion". In an interview, Jeremy Halinen asks the poet about this genre of compositions, *epistolary elegies* "where you are aligning yourself with a historical figure *during* that figure's historical moment. Time is collapsed. Voices merge" (Halinen and Laurentiis 2012: 124). Cassells replies:

I'm not sure I know why epistolary elegies keep coming up for me [...] In terms of unique effects and advantages in the direct address to the dead, there is perhaps more of an opportunity for emotional confrontation, for questioning and maybe even resolving the speaker's relationship or connection to the elegized. (Halinen and Laurentiis 2012: 130)

This "direct address to the dead" (Lorca, Montale, Van Gogh or Pavese, for instance) is of a similar nature as Espriu's homage to his deceased friend Rosselló-Pòrcel, which Delor i Muns relates to the belief, in Ancient Greece, that the dead chose a double in the world of the living to project their existence. Judging from Espriu's poetic production following Rosselló-Pòrcel's death, the latter must have chosen his friend to act as his double, so that his art continued to be expressed. Espriu's role as double is more obvious in the first part of *Les Hores*, where he naturally assimilates Rosselló-Pòrcel's style and characteristic imagery (Delor i Muns 1993: 155-163). It follows that Cassells did the same for Espriu in "To the cypress".

This instance of Greek myth is coherent with Cassells's poetic technique. Rickey Laurentiis refers to his use of "personae and the dramatic monologue" and points out "how you have insisted [...] that each 'I', each historical self you have written about or from, is legitimately one of your own various selves" (Halinen and Laurentiis 2012:

130). When it comes to literature, the American poet's sense of the past implies a veneration for tradition. The following lines are from Amy Francisco's online profile:

Our cultural legacy is very, very important [...] When we think about the 19th century, we're not going to journalism. We're going to Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. And that's part of the bigger truth culturally. So what we're doing, what we're investing in, what we're putting our life energy into is part of a spiritual and social continuum in our culture.

Cassells "we" may well include Espriu, whose poetic purpose has been described in strikingly similar terms: "inserir la pròpia obra en la constel·lació de les grans creacions de la humanitat, sobre la base d'integrar tot el passat cultural en el present, de contribuir constructivament a la prolongació del continuum històric" (Castellet 1984: 90).

The analysis of "To the cypress again and again", in many ways representative of Cassells's work, also reveals an affinity to Espriu's vision of poetry and literary tradition. The poem that we have closely examined evinces a deep knowledge of Espriu's poetics and constitutes the kind of perceptive and admiring response that can only come from one poet to the work of another. Cassells's dialogue with Espriu objectifies how the creativity of writers is enhanced by their sense of history and their appreciation of the work of those who preceded them — no matter when, where or in what language they wrote.

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