

On our Blindness: Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Salvador Espriu's *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs* (1967).¹

Javier Letrán
University of St Andrews

Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs (1967) is, possibly, one of Salvador Espriu's less well-known collections of poems. Most critics have considered this set of 40 haikus a minor or secondary work. Josep Maria Castellet only dedicates a few paragraphs to it in his pioneering study *Iniciación a la poesía de Salvador Espriu* (1971). José Batlló doesn't include any poems from it in his *Antología lírica de Salvador Espriu* for the Letras Hispánicas series of Cátedra (I have consulted the 4th edition, 1987). Neither does Enrique Badosa in his *Antología de Salvador Espriu* for the resuscitated El Bardo series (4th ed., 2005).

Gareth Walters, in his relatively recent and very useful monograph *The Poetry of Salvador Espriu: To Save the Words* (2006) pays much more attention to it than the previous three, though one perceives in it, despite the valuable and generally positive judgment, a certain attitude of condescension towards the collection; to give you a couple of examples, some *haikus* are described as “concise whimsy” and “verbal jottings” (2006: 176). Having said that, Walters' contribution signals a growing critical interest in the book, a tendency well represented by important studies by Rosa Delor (1989) and Sebastià Bonet (2005), and the excellent critical edition of the text, together with *Llibre de Sinera* and *Setmana Santa*, by Jordi Cerdà (2006).

To all these critics and scholars I am heavily indebted. I will start by recounting the circumstances in which the book was created; I will then focus on the relationship between Espriu's *haiku* collection and Bruegel's painting *The Parable of the Blind* (1568); and I will conclude by drawing a meta-hermeneutical comparison between the representation of the blind in *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs* and the poem “Prec de Nadal”, included in the collection *El caminant i el mur* (1954). All in all, I hope that what follows will act as a vindication of a book that, in my opinion, should be regarded as the quintessence of Espriu's poetical work.

Though published for the first time, as we know it today, in 1967 in the quarterly journal *Qüestions de Vida Cristiana* at the Abadia de Montserrat, the embryo of the book, with only seven haikus and originally entitled *Per al saltiri d'aquests vells cecs*, was initially planned to come out in 1956, almost ten years earlier, in the *Anales de*

¹ A first version of this article was presented as a paper at the International Symposium on Salvador Espriu organised jointly by the Centre for Catalan Studies at Queen Mary University of London, the University of Cambridge and the Institut Ramon Llull in November 2013. I would like to express my thanks to the organisers of that symposium, Professors Jordi Larios and Dominic Keown, for their kind invitation to take part in it.

la Cultura Igualadina, a local cultural journal under the auspices of the Centre d'Estudis Comarcals d'Igualada (Cerdà 2006).

Salvador Espriu attended the request of his friend, the critic Joaquim Molas, who had been asked in turn to offer an overview of Contemporary Catalan poetry and secured, as can be seen in illustration no. 1 in the Appendix to this article, the collaboration of Josep Carner, J. V. Foix, Salvador Espriu and the little known Josep Junyent. Their poems were all set to appear on page 25 of the *Anales*, but the censors intervened and forbade the publication of that page, which had to be unbound, recomposed with texts by four local poets, and bound again. According to Delor and Molas, the reason for this was not the poets or the poems (the most subversive of which, at that time, would have been Carner), but the artwork at the top of the page, signed, as you can see in the top-right handside of illustration no. 1, by Caballé (Cerdà 2006: XXXVII). In Caballé's drawing, there is a group of monks in white habits, with black faces and hands, sitting or kneeling down behind a barbed wire fence. Even the Francoist censors got it. However, I have no doubt that, had he been given the chance, the illustrator could have defended himself by alleging that he was just artistically recreating two of Espriu's haikus: the last one ("Llarga corrua / de cecs. Per la temença / remor de passos") and the second one ("Fixes, ben llises, / blancs vestits de la nostra / desesperança"). I am also sure that the censors wouldn't have been very sympathetic either.

Eventually, Joaquim Molas managed to have the four poems published, in two instalments, in the journal *Bages*, from Manresa; illustration no. 2 shows that Carner and Espriu's collaborations were published together in the same issue (number 44, 1956); Foix's and Junyent's texts would appear in number 49, in 1957. As can be observed in illustration no. 2, with regard to Espriu's text, the main difference is that now the seven *haikus* have been individually numbered and that the date of composition (March-April 1956) is no longer there.

It is, then, important to acknowledge the fact that Espriu started working on this collection (which he will, however, consider as *unfinished*) in 1956, one year after he had completed *Final del laberint* (1955) and just before he started working on *La pell de brau* [published in 1960, but with texts written between 1957 and 1958] and *Llibre de Sinera* [published in 1963, but with texts written between 1959 and 1962]. This may help to explain the many points of contact with these different titles (especially with the latter).

As stated earlier, *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs*, in its final — and unfinished — version, made up of 40 haikus, appeared in 1967 in an issue (number 37) of *Qüestions de Vida Cristiana*, a prestigious cultural and religious quarterly published by the Abbey of Montserrat. That particular issue was devoted to a very particular theme: "La por del cristià". In the short prologue that Espriu wrote for the 3rd volume of the bilingual edition (Catalan and Spanish) of his collected poetry (1981), he explained that the 40 haikus were inter-linked but that, at the same time, he had tried to give an independent poetic value to each of them. He also pointed out that all lines [versos] were feminine [that

is, paroxytone], because he thought that they would be more faithful to the 3-line, 17-syllable [5-7-5] Japanese verse pattern.² And he adds:

Mine is an open book, that is, in my intention not finished. I would like to reach a hundred poems — and in fact I have written them — but I have destroyed sixty. If I decided to introduce masculine lines [that is, those ending in oxytone words], maybe I would manage to complete it. So far I have not dared try this solution, perhaps easy but perhaps also inevitable. I leave the analysis of lexis and the examination of other problems to whoever would like to amuse themselves with it. The book starts from the contemplation of the famous painting “The Blind” by Pieter Brueghel, or Bruegel, the Elder, but my characters, or their voices, trudge through other terrains.³

As we can gather from the author’s words, the task he set himself in this book was an ambitious one: if writing haikus in Catalan using only paroxytone words at the end of each line of each poem was not difficult enough, his pointer towards the use of lexis is no less fitting. Critics, who were keen to take up Espriu’s tongue-in-cheek invitation in that respect, soon realised that he would not use the same lexical word twice (that is, nouns, adjectives, verbs — with the exception of ‘ser’ — and adverbs) throughout the collection.

Let us now turn our attention to the painting that Espriu acknowledges as the starting point for his collection of haikus: Bruegel’s “The Parable of the Blind” (also known as “The Blind” or “The Blind Leading the Blind”, see Appendix, illustration no. 3).

This wonderful, extraordinary painting — one of the last works by the Flemish Renaissance master —, illustrates a well-known biblical passage that we can find in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Matthew [chapter 15: verse 14], Jesus refers to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ hypocrisy and hardness of heart with these very famous words: “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” [King James Bible].

Esriu frames his book with this very image, as we can see in the first and the last haiku of the collection:⁴

I
Qui fa de guia
és el més cec. Alçàvem
al sol les nines.

² Some critics have challenged this point, as the Japanese language does not appear to make a difference between oxytone and paroxytone words (Cerdà 2006: LV).

³ This is my English translation. The Catalan original reads thus: “El meu és un llibre obert, és a dir, en la meva intenció no acabat. M’agradaria d’atènyer a cent poemes — i de fet els he escrits, però n’he destruïts seixanta. Si em decidia a introduir-hi versos masculins, tal vegada arribaria a arrodonir-lo. Fins ara no he gosat provar aquesta solució, potser fàcil però potser, també, inevitable. Deixo l’anàlisi de la tria del lèxic i l’examen d’altres problemes a qui li plagui d’entretenir-s’hi. El llibre parteix de la contemplació del famós quadre «Els orbs», de Pieter Brueghel —o Bruegel el Vell—, però els meus personatges, o les veus, atiranyen per altres topants” (Espriu 1981: 6).

⁴ All the quotations from *Per al llibre de salms d’aquests vells cecs* are taken from Espriu 1981 (see Works Cited).

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Amb tots nosaltres,
al fons del glaç de l'aigua,
el qui ens guiava.

The parable of the blind, in the Bible, in Bruegel, and in Espriu's haikus is, of course, symbolic, and, by its very nature, moral. The symbolism, however, is of a different kind. In both the Bible and Bruegel, as Friedrich Grossmann puts it, "the inner blindness is a greater defect than the blindness of the eyes. Those who are blind to true religion, who do not perceive its message which is symbolized in the background by the church, a strong and firm structure with its spire pointing to heaven and contrasted with the unsteady broken row of the wretched men — such people must lose their way and fall into the abyss" (Grossmann 1966: 203-204). Espriu, however, writing in a post-Nietzschean context, seems to propose something totally different: we must accept God's silence and, in order to be free, we must learn to live in the abyss:

XXXII

Però somnies
dolçors d'engany? Accepta't
lliure en l'abisme.

Coming back again to Bruegel's painting, as the Art historian Moshe Barasch points out in *Blindness. The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (2001), "like other motifs of this kind, the theme of the blind guide leading other blind men, falling into a ditch, and pulling them with him has a venerable and multisided history. Without attempting to trace this history, we can safely say that the paradoxical scene is, or was, understood as a concise, condensed statement of the world turned topsy-turvy. In the High and late Middle Ages, the sense of the established order breaking down and the whole world turning upside down was often expressed in a series of images of what seemed impossible. Among them is also the image of the blind leading the blind, all of them falling into an abyss. Thus in a poem of the *Carmina Burana*, among the evocations of such impossibilities as dancing oxen and donkeys playing the flute, the image of the blind leading the blind, and all of them plunging together into a ditch or abyss, is also formulated" (111). It is difficult to resist the temptation to apply this line of interpretation to produce a political and historical reading of Espriu's poem, but, for the time being and given the space constraints, I will merely hint at it.

Another inescapable theme shared by Bruegel's powerful painting and Espriu's collection of haikus is that of life as a pilgrimage. As Barasch (2001: 111-12) indicates, it is, however, not a pilgrimage in the sense that you know in advance the stages and directions of the road you will follow. It is rather an image in which roaming in a wide and unknown territory is combined with the sharp sense of ignorance as to where precisely the road is leading. To be a blind wanderer through life in this world, not knowing precisely where the next step will lead us, is

obviously perceived as the universal destiny of man, the fate that no human being can escape (Barasch 2001: 113). For Espriu, this motif of the *homo viator* represented by the blind beggars clearly encapsulates the human condition. In one of the rejected 60 haikus that his nephew Sebastià Bonet found after the death of the author, and to which we have now access thanks to Jordi Cerdà's exemplary critical edition of the book, we can read the following (see Appendix, illustration no. 4):

En el gran quadre
sis només representen
el comú drama.

The six people that he makes reference to, are, of course, the six blind men painted by Bruegel. Espriu recurred frequently to images of the blind, and the beggars, or both (the blind beggars) in his work (especially in *El caminant i el mur* (1954) and *Llibre de Sinera* (1963)).⁵ In a way, in *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs* (1967), he offers us his most ambitious poem on the topic. Drawing from a Japanese verse form and a Flemish Renaissance painting based on a well-known biblical passage, Espriu does really end up trudging through other landscapes, as he himself declared in the prologue to his collected poetry that we quoted above. These are the landscapes of his very own religious, intellectual, and artistic preoccupations.

To conclude, I would like to compare very briefly the symbolic representation of the blind in *Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs* with a poem by Espriu that is hardly ever mentioned in connection with the collection of *haikus* and that, in my opinion, may provide a vantage point to interpret it and to gauge more adequately its significance within the author's *oeuvre*. The poem in question is "Prec de nadal" (Espriu 1980: 302), and is included in *El caminant i el mur* (1954):

PREC DE NADAL

Mira com vinc per la nit
del meu poble, del món, sense cants
ni ja somnis, ben buides les mans;
et porto sols el meu gran crit.

Infant que dorms, no l'has sentit?
Desperta amb mi, guia'm la por
de caminant, aquest dolor
d'uns ulls de cec dintre la nit.

In the final paragraphs of his seminal article on the poetry of Salvador Espriu, included in *Contra el noucentisme* (1977), Joan Fuster focused precisely on the first stanza of this poem. He was specifically interested in the concept of "crit": "Un crit sufocat, però persistent i

⁵ According to Rosa Delor, the motif of the parable of the blind was already used by Espriu in his 1952 collection *Mrs Death*, particularly in his poem "Els músic cecs". For Delor, «els Salms [PLS] són una distensió d'aquest poema que és l'origen i la clau interpretativa d'aquest tema tan important en Espriu» (Delor 1989: 176).

dirigit. Aquesta poesia es, ha estat fins avui, un dels ‘crits’ més dramàtics de tota la nostra història literària. Caldria comparar-lo al ‘crit’ —desolat, lúcid— d’Ausiàs March” (Fuster 1977: 127). That persistent, dramatic, desolate and lucid cry is, in one way or another, present throughout *Per al llibre de salms d’aquests vells cecs*.⁶ But it is in haiku XXXIX, the penultimate offering which comes just before the confirmation of the death of all the blind men, where it becomes more evident:

XXXIX
El riu s’emporta
parracs, l’espant, els gestos,
un últim xiscle.

Rather than focusing on the first stanza of “Prec de nadal”, as Fuster did, I’d like to draw attention to the second one where fear (the theme of issue no. 37 of *Qüestions de Vida Cristiana*, as indicated previously) rhymes with pain:

Infant que dorms, no l’has sentit?
Desperta amb mi, guia’m la por
de caminant, aquest dolor
d’uns ulls de cec dintre la nit.

The paradoxically visionary image of the blind eyes in the middle of the night sums up really well what Espriu offers his readers in *Per al llibre de salms d’aquests vells cecs*: a powerful, anguished, lyrical exploration of the limits of human knowledge and human life.

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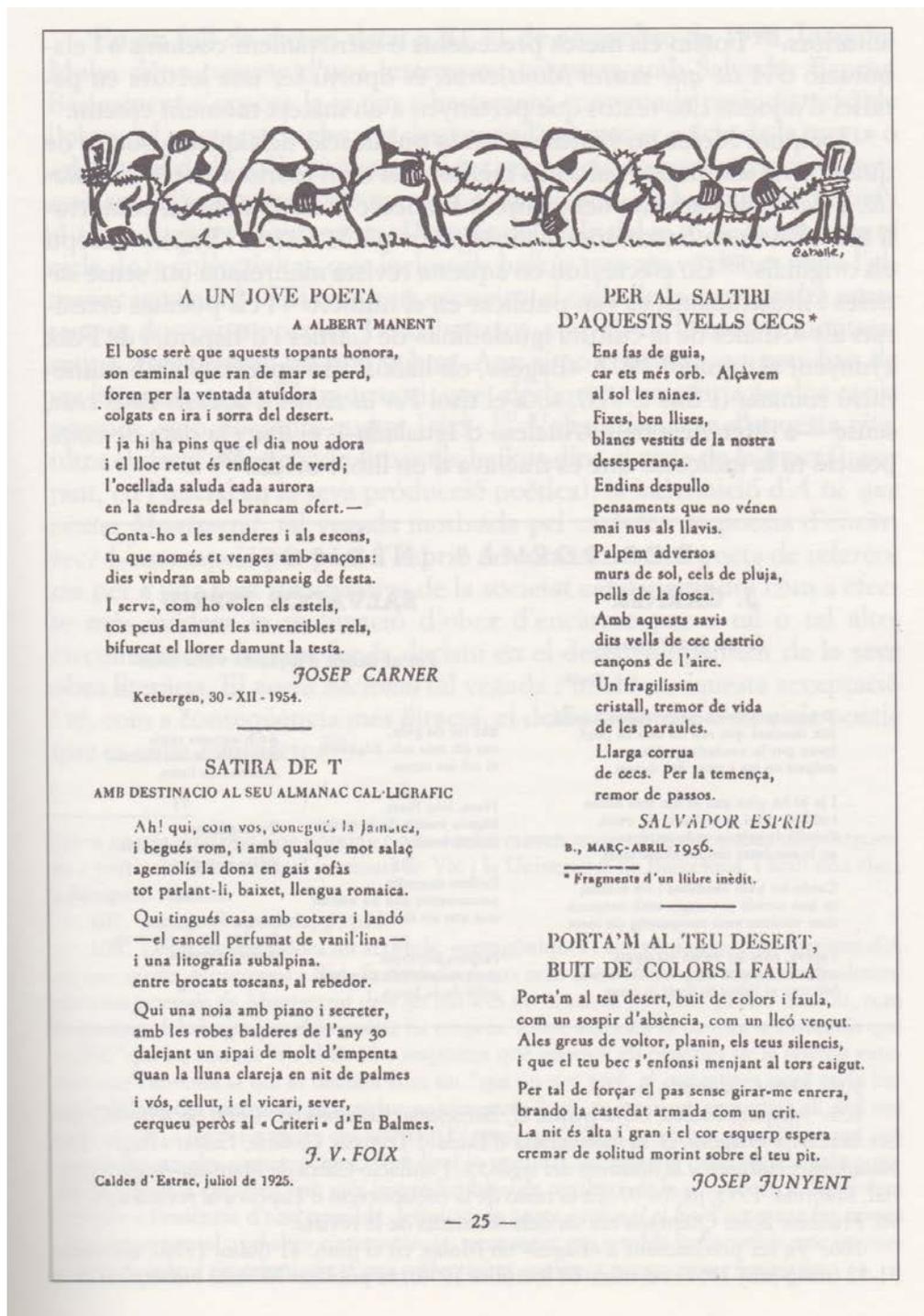
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⁶ See, for example, haikus XVII («M’envesquen trossos / de laments, filagarses / de buits diàlegs.»), XX («És potser l’home / més just que tu? Sols clama / tot el silenci.») and XXXIX (quoted above).

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APPENDIX

Illustration 1.⁷ [Censored page (25) of *Anales de la cultura igualadina*, 1956, Centre d'Estudis Comarcals d'Igualada].



⁷ Salvador Espriu, *Llibre de Sinera. Per al llibre de salms d'aquests vells cecs. Setmana Santa*, ed. Jordi Cerdà (Barcelona: Edicions 62, Centre de Documentació i Estudi Salvador Espriu, 2006), p. XXXIX.

Illustration 3.⁹ [Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind*, 1568].



⁹http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/archive/d/d0/20120122131518%21Pieter_Bruegel_d._A._025.jpg This is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art [Accessed 23 September 2015]. The painting is housed at the Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy.

