

Espriu's Sinera: A Sense of Place, a Sense of Space

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Like many people I got to know Sinera before Arenys de Mar; in other words it was the palindromic rather than topographical form that shaped my initial responses. Although there are those who set great store by the complementary experience – what they might consider the completing authenticity – of a visit to a place that is a literary setting, there will be others who will understand the reservation expressed by Seamus Heaney. Writing of a visit to Burnt Norton, the location of the last of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, he mentions how he did indeed encounter features of the place – the rose garden, the dry concrete pool – mentioned in the poem, but found 'this very documentary congruence between poem and place oddly disappointing', and concludes: 'I did not really want a landscape to materialize since I had long internalized a soundscape' (Heaney, 2002: 38).

I'll return to the idea of a soundscape below, but in the meantime I wish to explore this dysfunction of real and imagined places. I would not go as far as Heaney and speak of disappointment as such; indeed the place was evocative enough, not least the walk up to the cemetery above the town and the sea. It was, rather, that the experience was other than what the poetry had prepared me for, different from the 'internalized soundscape'. In my mind Sinera had acquired the same kind of status as Machado's Soria or Hardy's Wessex. The place of the poem, and in the poem, is not lacking in visual or tangible detail; indeed, these are instantly enhanced as in the 'fonollars i vinyes' of the first fragment of *Cementiri de Sinera*. But the place is also transformed: it is not so much painting in words, but rather a succession of scenes that resonate with the character of a myth. They are, then, locations that are described as they are and are yet more than they seem.

Let me suggest how ignorance of a real place could be an advantage, though in a way rather different from that envisaged by Heaney. I refer you to the fourth fragment of the collection:

Els meus ulls ja no saben
sinó contemplar dies
i sols perduts. Com sento
rodar velles tartanes
pels rials de Sinera!
Al meu record arriben
olors de mar vetllada
per clars estius. Perdura
en els meus dits la rosa
que vaig collir. I als llavis,

oratge, foc, paraules
esdevingudes cendra. (Espriu, 1988: 176)

This is not quite a nostalgic understanding, because there is not here that peculiar blend of sorrow and contentment peculiar to the emotion. These lines speak quite simply of loss. The poet is compelled to reach into his imagination to be able to recall the sights and sounds of Sinera. Evocation is by memory and experiences are perceived in absence. There is then, I contend, a matching response in the reader who has not been to Arenys; put another way, my handicap through not knowing the place parallels the poet's loss of the cherished past. We share common ground through two kinds of deprivation.

What also makes Espriu's Sinera distinctive for his readers, whether they have been there or not, is what I would define as a sense of space. It has been many years since I first read these poems, but I can recall that what struck me initially was something achieved by editorial choice or chance rather than poetic design. The text I possessed was an appropriately modest bi-lingual edition published by the Institute of North American Studies (1978). In this volume, unlike in others that I might have chanced upon, each poem is allocated a single page, however short it may be, and the effect is enhanced by the appearance on the facing page of the translation rather than the next poem.

What the eye registers with such a lay-out could be analysed in terms of a complex of responses: these poems have space to breathe, the individual words seem weightier, and the areas of unfilled page seem to constitute both a space for and an invitation to meditation. Then, when we move from this sensory perception of the page to a consideration of the details of the text, another impression of space becomes apparent. This is a realization of the scope of the work, produced by the linkages in the form of lexical connections between successive pieces. We sense continuity, a linear progression: we discover very quickly that there is always going to be more to come.

Now this is more unusual than it seems for such tiny poems. Lyric poems are most often self-contained and complete, characteristically capturing an isolated moment of experience. With *Cementiri de Sinera* and – as I was subsequently to discover – most of the other books of Espriu's poetry it does not happen like this, or not only like this. The fragments look back as well as forward: they are not isolated but integrated, even more than in an analogous structure, the so-called sonnet sequences of the Renaissance. Indeed an appropriate way of defining an Espriu cycle would be to say that it is a macro-poem comprising a numerically significant set rather than a random number of micro-poems. Such compositions do not so much record a succession of fleeting experiences; rather, they trace or shadow a trajectory of a life with the fluctuations that will arise from the continuity of manner and the unity of form: the developments and setbacks, the confirmations and contradictions, the anticipations and reverses.

The most profound sensation of space is, however, in what I could describe as the *tempo* and the dynamics of the poetry – concepts for which the musical terms *adagio* and *piano* seem appropriate. Indeed, I have a concrete musical analogy in mind: the set of piano pieces entitled *Música callada* by the Catalan composer Frederic Mompou. In *Cementiri de Sinera* there are many moments of stillness and slowness that, while not necessarily serene in nature, nonetheless produce an effect of concentration, even ecstasy. Could one imagine a more poetic rendering of *adagio* than the closing lines from the third fragment of the collection?:

Claror d'abril, de pàtria
que mor amb mi, quan miro
els anys i el pas: viatge
al llarg de lents crepuscles. (Espriu, 1988: 175)

If we look at the brief fourteenth and fifteenth fragments – the midpoint, in some ways the still heart, of the book – we discover a similar notion of tranquility, though it is not a silent one exactly:

Cristall, memòria,
remor de font, de clares
veus allunyades.
La llarga tarda miro,
amb pauses d'or i somni.

Per la maresma
s'estén un fred, lentíssim
toc de campanes.
Boires i grills dominen
tots els camins del vespre. (Espriu, 1988: 186-87)

Now one could argue that the effects from these fragments are easily explicable. For a start, the very vocabulary ('lents', 'llarga', 'pauses', 'lentíssim') provide clear semantic indicators of the requisite *tempo*. Additionally, the recourse to the enumeration of single words and short phrases at the start of fragment XIV invites us to meditate briefly on each of these in turn. Moreover, the form of these poems is that of the Japanese *tanka*, akin in its function to the better-known *haiku* (also cultivated by Espriu) in prompting the reader to visualise and ponder upon the scene conveyed. Read aloud, these fragments benefit from a slow delivery. But there is, also, the more intangible question of sound and rhythm, and to explore this I refer to what T.S. Eliot designated the 'auditory imagination'.

Eliot's essays are now perhaps out of fashion, and the concept of the 'auditory imagination' has been somewhat dismissed by recent commentators. Eliot's thoughts on poetic creativity have, however, found a champion in Seamus Heaney, an acute and sophisticated commentator on poetry. Heaney has found much of value in the notion of the 'auditory imagination' especially as a means of describing what his own response to poetry was like in his youth

(Heaney, 2002: 16-38). For my own part, I suggest that Eliot's formulation is useful as a contribution to specifying the distinctive virtues of Espriu's work. We should remember, too, that Eliot's criticism dates from near the period when Espriu was writing his earlier poetry. It is worth quoting him in full on this matter:

What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality. (Eliot, 1953: 94)

It is not difficult to see how critics could find fault with this definition. Apart from the problematic syntax of the last sentence (exactly how are these phrases constituted and divided?), some of the phrasing and expressions have a nebulous quality; they have a whiff of the mystical and the grandiose. Yet there is, too, a remarkable sensitivity for what poetry can achieve, and specifically what I think the initial fragment of *Cementiri de Sinera* realizes:

Pels rials baixa el carro
del sol, des de carenes
de fonollars i vinyes
que jo sempre recordo.
Passejaré per l'ordre
de verds xiprers immòbils
damunt la mar en calma. (Espriu, 1988: 173)

The notion of 'every word' being invigorated is evident here. The words of this extract have weight or – to keep the acoustic analogy – resonance: not only in the nouns themselves with their specification of place ('rials', 'carenes', 'fonollars', 'vinyes') but also in the fine tuning – in the apparently smaller detail. For example, the normally casual verb 'passejar' is given an unexpected emphasis through the synthetic future tense, injecting a sudden sense of purpose into the seemingly whimsical, depiction. We will not acknowledge it as we read for the first time, but this form 'passejaré' is to mark the initiation of a poetic journey that leads us through not only *Cementiri de Sinera* but all the succeeding unitary books.

In these few lines at the start of Espriu's first such collection other characteristics of Eliot's 'auditory imagination' appear: I refer to such notions as 'primitive', 'forgotten', 'origin', and 'bringing back'. Here is suggested a world at once immediate and remote, a world that in Eliot's theorizing and Espriu's verse partakes of the timeless, the unchanging. And finally, there is beyond these definitions, the prime feature of the 'auditory imagination' – the 'feeling for syllable and rhythm'. I draw attention again to what I described as the *tempo* and dynamics of the poetry with reference to the close of this first

fragment: ‘. . . l’ordre/ de verds xiprers/ immòbils/ damunt la mar en calma’ (Espriu, 1988: 173).

The tripartite division of these last two heptasyllabic lines not only describes stillness, but enacts it by bringing about what poetry uniquely can: it is more than it means or, in terms that a Romance language like Catalan does better than English: ‘significa més que vol dir’. In this connection Craig Raine has observed how ‘Eliot put “meaning” firmly in its place – somewhere between the writer’s conception and the reader’s reception – and in any case secondary to the fusion of content and form’ (Raine, 2000: 318), while in his essay entitled ‘Learning from Eliot’, Seamus Heaney speaks about how he was ‘encouraged to seek for the contour of a meaning within the pattern of a rhythm’ (Heaney, 2002: 34). Both he and Eliot have much to say on this issue of a meaning *beyond* what we imperfectly, that is, either tentatively or impetuously, take as meaning. In his essay ‘The Music of Poetry’, Eliot argues that ‘only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase’, and this is because ‘the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist’ (Eliot, 1953: 57). In turn, Heaney speaks of how it is possible to ‘hear rather than abstract a meaning’ (Heaney, 2002: 28), and, in a beautiful formulation, describes how one passage in *The Waste Land* yielded itself eventually to him: ‘the breath of life was in the body of sound’ (Heaney, 2002: 35).

When we allow ourselves to be receptive to poetry in this way, we can start to speak of a function of poetry that is rather different from others commonly ascribed to it, that is to say, its ethical or aesthetic properties. What Eliot acknowledges through this mode of reception amounts to a surprisingly modest claim: in his essay ‘Poetry and Philosophy’ he quite plainly states that poetry is ‘useful and beneficial’ (Eliot, 1953: 55). Such a sentiment puts one in mind of Espriu’s own understanding of poetry when asked by an editor in 1952 to supply an autobiographical sketch: ‘no sé lo que es la poesía, a no ser que se trate de alguna ayuda para vivir rectamente y quizá para bien morir’ (Capmany, 1971: 9). Note the characteristic downplaying of significance in the phrase ‘alguna ayuda’: maybe it’ll help, he seems to imply. If Espriu’s poetry has an ethical force – and I follow the consensus in thinking that it does – it is important to understand its source. Arthur Terry, a one-time friend and acquaintance of Heaney, shrewdly observes in a review of Espriu’s best-known collection of poetry that ‘[s]i Espriu ha sentit la necessitat de prendre part en la polèmica sobre l’Espanya contemporània – i és l’aspecte de *La pell de brau* més comentat -, el més important és que l’hagi fet com a poeta’ (cited in Gassol i Bellet, 2003: 21). Espriu’s poetry is not didactic; indeed I would venture to say that it is not even pedagogic. If we benefit from it, this is not because it informs or instructs; rather, it works by embodiment, or, more radically, by existing.

One such implicit lesson that emerges from Espriu’s poetry and especially from *Cementiri de Sinera* is patience. Not once does he use this term, but the whole book radiates it. The slow *tempi* of which I

spoke earlier contribute to this as does the distinctive scope of the work. By ‘scope’ here I am trying to convey the fusion of place and time that acquires an immensity, the concentrated focus that will yield a limitless potential. Crucial to this attitude are the two temporal cycles that between them constitute the central section of the book: the two sequences of short poems – several of which are in the form of the Japanese *tanka* – that move through time.

The first group takes in the span of a day, beginning at section XI, with its reference to ‘el vent nocturn’, through dawn (XII), midday (XIII), afternoon (XIV), evening (XV) and night again (XVI and XVII). The second grouping outlines the passage of the seasons: summer (XVIII), autumn (XIX), winter (XX), and Spring (XXI). The landscapes or settings in which this flow of time elapses – whether of hours or of seasons – are detailed with delicate precision, yet we do not feel about them, as we do with much lyric poetry, that they arise by chance observation and are thus in the nature of moments or stages in time. Thus the afternoon and the autumn, to pick two examples, emerge as not one well-observed afternoon or one acutely-experienced autumn; they are any afternoon, any autumn, or, just as well, all afternoons and all autumns.

The impression is twofold: of life, as it is depicted in these temporal sequences, as enduring, and of the poet as witness – not merely watching but waiting. In this connection, I would go further and suggest that the propensity and willingness to wait is a keynote of Espriu’s poetry as a whole. Even in that most urgent and celebratory of poems, the much-quoted ‘Inici de càntic en el temple’, an anthem if ever there was one, a notable element in the process of recovery and awakening is the act of waiting. The adverb ‘ara’ in the refrain ‘ara digueu’ is resonant not least because this is a ‘now’ that has not come readily or speedily:

Ara digueu: «La ginesta floreix,
arreu els 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....
(Espriu, 1988: 146)

Yet in most instances the feeling we get is that the waiting is an end in itself. I can do no better in attempting to explain this experience than cite by way of analogy a poem entitled ‘Sea-watching’ by R.S. Thomas (born in the same year as Espriu):

Grey waters, vast
as an area of prayer
that one enters. Daily

over a period of years
I have let the eye rest on them.
Was I waiting for something?
Nothing
but that continuous waving
that is without meaning
occurred.
Ah, but a rare bird is
rare. It is when one is not looking,
at times one is not there
that it comes.
(Thomas, 2000: 306)

Comparing this waiting to an act of prayer, Thomas adds that '[y]ou must wear your eyes out/ as others their knees'. In a word, what we have in this poem, and ubiquitously in Espriu, is the sense of perseverance that is tantamount to patience. Now the term 'patience' is linked etymologically through Latin to the concept of suffering and it is not unusual to find this connection in Espriu. For example, in a poem from *El caminant i el mur* there is a poem entitled 'Ho canta sempre una escanyada veu', where we read the following:

sents com pels llargs camins de les teves ferides,
enllà de les dents closes dels teus morts,
en una resignada solitud arriba,
des del fons de la teva petita rebel.lia,
una clara, plena, humil, acceptació.
(Espriu, 1988: 350)

Note in particular the metaphor of the wounds ('ferides') associated with the slow passage of time ('llargs camins') and the humility that is a by-product of this resigned waiting. It is in the poem 'El jardí dels cinc arbres' from *Mrs. Death*, however, that the concept of patience achieves a peculiar depth and grace:

Després quan ja m'havia
fet molt de mal i quasi
sols podia somriure,
vaig triar les paraules
més senzilles, per dir-me
com passaven levíssims
ors de sol damunt l'heura
del jardí dels cinc arbres.
Era groc breu de posta,
a l'hivern, mentre queien
els últims dits de l'aigua
serpentina, d'alts núvols,
i l'estrany temps m'entrava
en presons de silenci. (Espriu, 1988: 289)

Here, too, there is an emotive sense of place: the garden of the family house in Arenys de Mar. As a child, Espriu suffered from ill health and this poem has a clear autobiographical frame of reference.

There is here what could be described as a double vulnerability: the child and the illness. It is a poem that bespeaks fortitude and discipline, and this is all the greater if we think of the collection as a whole, for the opening poems of *Mrs. Death* evoke a world of violence and a malaise that is both spiritual and physical. 'El jardí dels cinc arbres' is an availing poem because it succeeds in facing down the preceding hubbub and degeneration in a non-assertive fashion. It is the fruit of patience, of a passive dignity whereby the child serves as rebuke and redemption – a shaming, but restorative presence.

The function of place in this poem is indicative of how Espriu conceives Sinera and I want to continue by exploring this idea. Mythical places such as the ones I cited at the start of this essay often come over as complex creations; the shifting response of the poet to place and people in Machado's *Campos de Castilla* is an example that comes to mind. We could be tempted to think of Sinera, especially in view of the tenor of my observations hitherto, as a place apart: an oasis of calm, conducive to contemplation and meditation. Yet this would not provide a true or, at least, a full picture. If my emphasis has been on Sinera as a place where the poet discovers stillness, a place where he finds inner peace, it is not exactly a retreat, and certainly not a *locus amoenus*. It is *of* the world, not apart from the world; the term 'petita pàtria' repeatedly used in the collection hints at this, suggestive of a microcosm.

It may be that the Sinera of *Cançons d'Ariadna* and the prose writing yields its protean character more obviously, but even in *Cementiri de Sinera* we never quite lose sight of a world of turmoil. Indeed, the opening description – 'Pels rials baixa el carro/ del sol' (Espriu, 1988: 173) – has a telling complexity. The picture is that of the shafts of sunlight in the lanes that lead down to the town – a brilliant and violent evocation. Indeed the marked enjambement from line 1 to 2 is impetuous in effect. The phrase 'carro del sol' envisages the sun as Apollo's chariot, but the 'carro' also evokes the peasant's wagon and through the mythological circumlocution the vehicle of warfare. There is, in particular, a menacing quality about the verb 'baixa', suggestive of an invading force; 'swoop' would be as good a translation as any for this verb.

The martial connotations of this opening metaphor suggest strife, and, indeed, especially in the later part of the book, Sinera is a place that is pervaded by darkness. In the sinister seventeenth fragment death stalks the poet:

Ai, la negra barca,
que per mi vigila
des de la nit alta!

Ai, la barca negra,
que ve pel meu somni
del mar de Sinera! (Espriu, 1988: 189)

The culmination of this bleakness, this shadow that falls over Sinera, comes in the twenty-fifth fragment, though such is the

narrative impulse that the immediately preceding sections speak of the rooms of a lost house ('estances/ de la casa perduda') and the sudden coming of inclement weather ('car és vingut de sobte/ el temps dolent'). So it is not strictly true that fragment XXV irrupts into the sequence, but it still shocks not least because of the confessional urge that it articulates:

A la vora del mar. Tenia
una casa, el meu somni,
a la vora del mar.

Alta proa. Per lliures
camins d'aigua, l'esvelta
barca que jo manava.

Els ulls sabien
tot el repòs i l'ordre
d'una petita pàtria.

Com necessito
contar-te la basarda
que fa la pluja als vidres!
Avui cau nit de fosca
damunt la meva casa.

Les roques negres
m'atrauen a naufragi.
Captiu del càntic,
el meu esforç, inútil,
qui pot guiar-me a l'alba.

Ran de la mar tenia
una casa, un lent somni. (Espriu, 1988: 197)

In effect, this micro-poem falls clearly into two parts: a before and an after, divided by this expression of a compulsive need to talk of catastrophe. The lines that follow resonate with defeat and destruction; if ever there was an appropriate sound-byte for the disaster which even Sinera could not escape then it is in the terror of 'Avui cau nit de fosca/ damunt la meva casa'. Indeed this utterance crystallizes personal anguish and historical awareness as sharply as any of Espriu's later, more overtly civic or political, poems, such as we will find in *La pell de brau*. Yet even while he laments what is now clearly gone, through the symbol of the lost house that glint of light that we will catch again over the many years of waiting is there, albeit incorporated in the forlorn question 'qui pot guiar-me a l'alba?'

This fragment seems to mark a point of no return, and the allusion to 'el sepulcre vastíssim' (Espriu, 1988: 198) in the next section would seem to confirm it. J. M. Castellet suggests that the final parts of the collection constitute an entry into the tomb, and thus an acceptance of death (Castellet, 1984: 30). This seems to me if not too bleak, then too simple an assertion. Yet again we discover the

fruits of patience, the aids to survival. In the twenty-eighth fragment there is a sense of peace that is implicitly the product of waiting and watching. There is an allusion to the still centre of Espriu's Sinera, the garden of the five trees:

Aquesta pau és meva,
i Déu em vetlla.
Dic a l'arrel, al nùvol:
«Aquesta pau és meva.»

Des del jardí contemplo
com passen lentes hores
pels meus ulls enigmàtics.
I Déu em vetlla. (Espriu, 1988: 200)

The cemetery is evidently the focal point of Sinera; indeed, in the second fragment it was envisaged in terms that connected it intimately to the place of the home: 'Quina petita pàtria/ encercla el cementiri' (Espriu, 1988: 174). Seldom has the concept of a homeland been so vigorously and sensitively explored in modern poetry. The Anglo-Saxon mind cannot as readily grasp the precise significance of the word 'pàtria' as those who live in Mediterranean regions; our inclination to think in terms of the notion of 'patriotism' is by comparison crude and misleading. Espriu's own understanding of the word would certainly differ from what we would imagine it to be.

In the essay, written in Spanish, on the history of the ancient world that he contributed to the three-volume work on world history in the early 1940s, he reflects upon the significance of the term and observed that for the inhabitant of the Mediterranean 'patria' represented 'la ciudad donde nacieron y murieron los antepasados, donde él nació y morirá algún día, y el terreno circundante que el ojo abarca sin esfuerzo y comprende hasta en sus menores detalles' (Espriu, 1943: 178). This is as good an understanding of what Sinera means as any. But if this sense of belonging is complete and visceral, it is also unsentimental. Nostalgia is an allurements to be kept at arm's length, not an emotion of first resort. The attachment to home is consequently clear-sighted, on occasion hard-headed, yet never other than heartfelt. It is in the last analysis a comprehensive impulse: this is a life, located in a place, and made into poetry.

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