

Salvador Espriu

by D. Sam Abrams

Salvador Espriu is a sorely welcome exception to the general rule of the world literary community's ignorance of modern Catalan literature. Believe or not, Espriu made Harold Bloom's highly exclusive list of essential writers of Democratic Age, tacked onto the end of his controversial *The Western Canon*.

Born in the 1913, he formally began his literary career as a prose writer at the age of sixteen. In the thirties he published, in rapid succession, two novels, four collections of stories and nouvelles, and a play. Like most of the members of his generation, his literary and professional ambitions as a young man were shattered by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The deep sense of frustration it engendered led to the wildly ironic and sombrely elegiac notes in his later work.

After the war, his work branched out into the fields of poetry and criticism. In the late forties, Espriu's poetry began to take the upper hand and outweigh his longstanding dedication to fiction. This shift was probably a conscious shift due to the cramped working conditions, on one hand, and the call for a national literary symbol to represent Catalonia in the struggle of the seventies, Espriu wrote most of his significant poetry in a linked series of short, very terse collections of verse. He died in Barcelona in 1985.

Esriu is considered by his non-Catalan readers the most representative writer of the postwar period. He has been widely translated into other languages. For example, everything he wrote is available in Spanish, which certainly cannot be said for most modern and contemporary Catalan writers. Curiously enough, however, his foreign publishers have chosen to focus almost exclusively on his poetry rather than his fiction or plays. As an indication of this general tendency let us briefly see what has been published in English.

The first Espriu to appear in English was an anthology by Kenneth Lyons, *Lord of the Shadow*, published by the Dolphin Book Co., in Oxford, 1975. Then we have *The Bull-Hide* (1960), Espriu's most politically oriented collection, translated by Burton Raffel and originally released in 1977, although there was a subsequent reissue by Marlboro Press in 1987. In 1989, translator Magda Bogin published the *Selected poems of Salvador Espriu* (W. W. Norton), drawn from his nine books of verse. Josep Espriu, the poet's brother, had Ricard Giner's full translation of *Mrs. Death* (1952) printed in 1995. And most recently, Michael Schmidt's Carcanet Press published in 1997 a new *Selected Poems*, translated by Louis J. Rodrigues.