

# Cultural Daily

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## Review: *To the Cypress Again and Again: Tribute to Salvador Espriu* by Cyrus Cassells

Jordan Smith · Wednesday, April 26th, 2023

In 1984, Cyrus Cassells received a phone call from a friend. She had read his draft translations of Catalanian poet Salvador Espriu and wanted to discuss them right away. And in person. That night at her house in Provincetown, she told him, “This man’s about to die and you must do everything in your power to see him before he goes.” Cassells left for Barcelona where, through the kindness of friends and strangers, he was able to spend an evening with the “notoriously quiet and reclusive” poet, during which he received permission to serve as his translator, an amazed rebuke for not having read *Don Quixote*, and a memory that would sustain his efforts in the nearly four decades that would follow Espriu’s death early the following year.

All of this is from the introduction to Cyrus Cassells’ hybrid volume, *To the Cypress Again and Again*, which, along with personal and historical commentary, includes both translations of the poems of Salvador Espriu and Cassell’s own poems written in response to his long contemplation of the history, language, and poetry of Catalonia. If Cassells’ account of his love for Espriu’s work borders on the uncanny, so does the intensity of his sympathetic response to the Catalanian writer’s poems, which places them squarely within the difficult country between loss and survival. A writer in a language that was banned by the Franco regime, Espriu turned from novels to a spare, deeply attentive poetry in which he attempted to conserve the most elemental words, the most elemental sense of self and of connection to his home:

Down stream-paths coursing  
through vine-and-fennel-laden hills,  
the leave-taking sun’s chariot sweeps—  
through hills, so unforgettable.  
I’ll pass through a hall  
of cypresses,  
so green, immobile above  
the hushed sea.

In this first section of his long poem, “Sinera Cemetery,” Espriu catalogs the essential bits of his home landscape (“Sinera” rearranges the letters of Espriu’s hometown, Arenys de Mar). The cypresses, the streams and vines and hills, the glimpses of the sea appear, disappear, reappear within the thirty sections of the poem, just as they would in the field of vision of someone walking his country. But this repetition is less an inventory than an invocation, and in a forbidden language, of what is endangered when word and thing are severed: a kind of spirit, a distinctive affinity

between self and place that animates the world through the specificities and associations of language, whose absence leaves the poet stranded:

Bereft of names and symbols,  
beside the mourning trees,  
beneath a tidbit of sandy,  
rain-stiffened dirt.

(“Sinera Cemetery,” III)

In this linguistic absence, Espriu’s presence in his own poems, as his novelist friend, Maria Aurèlia Capmany said, seems almost posthumous:

Tuneless bird, wordless wood,  
fast-asleep prince, wind gust!  
Prediction: I’ll reach my end,  
anonymous, minus even a trace,  
stripped of wounds or memories.

(“Omnis Fortasse Moriar”)

And yet Espriu, writing only in the suppressed language of his place, put his self-effacement on the page like a sacrifice: “I’ll have to pay my old price, death,” begins “Felt in the Style of Salvador Espriu,” before recognizing the power that this undoing has released: “Immersed in silence, I rise as night’s sovereign,” a claim only underscored by the question, “how do I lead such limitless sorrow / to the sanctum of night’s language.”

Out of this constrained and tenuous landscape, Cassells has fashioned not only these forceful translations but his own poems, written in homage to Espriu. “Two Poets Quarreling Under the Jacarandas,” a sequence spoken by Espriu to the memory of his friend, Bartolomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel, a young poet from Mallorca who died of tuberculosis in 1938, is a lovely, loving reclamation of the world and the words Espriu might have had were it not for the twin losses of his friend and of his country’s linguistic sovereignty:

you’d urged us to flee the country,  
and I had confessed, foolishly:  
I couldn’t imagine giving up Barcelona  
even for you...

In the island moonlight, you halted,  
to emphasize your point;  
your insurgent bangs cascaded  
over your impressive forehead  
and penetrating eyes,  
then, all at once, you jettisoned  
your fail-safe, wire-rimmed glasses,  
and pulled my wary face to yours,  
like a Roman or a Neapolitan!

(“VI. Ashes and Jacarandas”)

In these rich poems, in settings from Mallorca to John Keats' room in Rome, to Greece, Cassells takes on a different, perhaps even more difficult translation, becoming not just Espriu's words, but his voice, and not in solitude but, in the spirit of Richard Howard's Two-Part Inventions, in conversations in which plenitude and loss go hand in hand.

Like the Polish poet, Tadeuz Ró?ewicz , Espriu lived through a Fascist occupation which sought domination through a vicious contempt for anything not made in its image, and essential to this was an assault on the connection between language and what it represented. Like Ró?ewicz, Espriu understood that resistance and restitution depended on the recovery of our trust in the rightness of our words. Like both of these poets, Cyrus Cassells has undertaken this task with clarity, grace, and determination. How else can we persist in a struggle that never ends.

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*To The Cypress Again and Again: Tribute to Salvador Espriu* by Cyrus Cassells

**Purchase *To The Cypress Again and Again: Tribute to Salvador Espriu* by Cyrus Cassells**

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## Payare Conducts “Darker America”

R. Daniel Foster · Friday, April 21st, 2023

Conductor [Rafael Payare](#) led the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#) in a performance of “[Darker America](#)” by composer [William Grant Still](#) on April 13, 15, and 16 at Walt Disney Concert Hall. The evening was a powerful tribute to Still (1895-1978) known as “the dean of African American composers.” Over his six-decade career, Grant composed operas, chamber music, symphonies, choral works, songs, and concertos.

Payare is the Music Director of [Orchestre symphonique de Montréal](#), an association that began with the 2022/23 season. The Venezuelan is now marking his fourth season as Music Director of the [San Diego Symphony Orchestra](#).



Conductor Rafael Payare / Photo provided courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association

The program also included Wagner’s “[Wesendonck Lieder](#)” with soprano [Dorothea Röschmann](#), and concluded with Brahms Symphony No. 1

“[Darker America](#)” is a suite of seven pieces that were first sketched in 1924 and first performed in 1930. A final revision dates to 1935. It’s considered to be one of Still’s most important works. The 12-minute piece reflects the rich cultural heritage of African Americans, drawing on spirituals, blues, and other musical traditions. The work is a celebration of the beauty and resilience of Black culture, even in the face of adversity and oppression.

The piece’s solemn introduction by the strings relayed a haunting melody. It soon gave way to complex rhythms and rich harmonies, executed with clarity and depth.

The fourth movement is a tribute to the African roots of Black music — it features intricate rhythms and evocative passages relaying both the diversity and beauty of the continent. Payare’s whole being leaned into the conducting (as in the Brahms symphony), and the orchestra responded as if hand in glove.

“Darker America’s” final movement finished the performance with verve. The syncopated rhythms were a match to popular African American dance music of the time. It was an infectious groove.

The acclaimed German soprano Dorothea Röschmann easily mastered Wagner’s “Wesendonck Lieder,” an iconic song cycle composed between 1857 and 1858. It’s based on poems by Wagner’s muse [Mathilde Wesendonck](#), the wife of one of Wagner’s patrons. Lush romantic melodies flowed from Röschmann especially during the emotional tour de force “Schmerzen,” the fourth song in the cycle.



Soprano Dorothea Röschmann / Photo provided courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association

Payare conducted Brahms No. 1 sans sheet music, the expansive otherworldly opening flowing like a foreboding mist from the orchestra. The woodwinds shone in the second movement, their solos expertly woven in. Payare led the third movement, marked allegretto, with a light touch, drawing out the playful dance-like quality of the music.

Payare carefully constructed the final movement’s accelerating tension, and the ultimate climaxes were explosive — still, they never overpowered.

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Feature photo: Composer William Grant Still / Photo by Carl Van Vechten via the Library of Congress, in the public domain

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