

LYDIE SALVAYRE

CRY, MOTHER SPAIN

*Translated from the French by Ben Faccini*



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## Translator's Note

I am indebted to a number of people for their advice with this translation. Above all I would like to thank the author for her guidance in helping me understand the complex personal and historical threads in her book and for giving me precious insight into the hybrid French-Spanish spoken by the main character, Montse.

A range of engaging characters inhabit the book alongside Montse and each one, in his or her own way, is emblematic of a faction in the opening months of the Spanish Civil War. I have included a glossary to make these warring political and military organisations as clear and distinct as possible.

I would like to thank William Fiennes, Roland Chambers, Gala Sicart, María Victoria García Benavides, James Phillips, Nicole Hubbard, and my wife, Emily, for their ideas and suggestions – and Christopher and Koukla MacLehose for first introducing me to this book.

BEN FACCINI

London, 2016

## Author's Preface

In 2012 I read *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* by the French writer George Bernanos (1888–1948). I was shocked by it, indeed so shocked that I ended up writing *Pas pleurer*, translated in its English edition as *Cry, Mother Spain*.

In his book, Bernanos describes the Francoist atrocities he witnessed in the opening months of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. In many cases, these crimes were carried out with the complicity of the clergy.

The book was published in France in 1938 and caused an immediate uproar. The diehards on the right accused Bernanos of betrayal, while the left-wing intelligentsia praised him to the skies, perhaps not fully understanding his stance.

Bernanos refused to be pinned down by anyone, however. Exponents of both right and left would never succeed in claiming his work as their own. Though he declared himself to be passionately Catholic and a monarchist, his freedom of spirit meant he eschewed all labels, prejudices and ideologies.

Bernanos is not read much in France nowadays and remains largely unknown abroad. Is it because he was a solitary writer and so hard to categorise? Is it because he refused to mould himself to the attitudes of his time? I don't know. I'm just delighted English-language readers will now get the chance to discover his writing through my book.

LYDIE SALVAYRE

Paris, 2016

*What art thou afraid of, cowardly creature? What art thou weeping at, heart of butter-paste?*

*¿De qué temes, cobarde criatura? ¿De qué lloras, corazón de mantequillas?*

CERVANTES, *Don Quixote*, II, 29  
(translated by John Ormsby, 1885)

# I

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* A ceremonial ring on his venerable hand, the Most Reverend Archbishop of Palma pointed at the chests of the “guilty poor”, singling them out to the vigilante firing squads. This is how the writer Georges Bernanos reported it; a fervent Catholic told it this way.

Spain, 1936. The Civil War was about to erupt. The “guilty poor” were those who dared open their mouths, and on July 18, 1936, my mother opened her mouth for the first time. She was fifteen. She lived up in the hills, cut off from the world, in a village where wealthy landowners had kept families like hers in the most abject poverty for centuries.

At the same time, Georges Bernanos’ own son was getting ready to fight in the Madrid trenches, dressed in the blue Falangist uniform. For a few weeks, Bernanos believed his son’s enlistment in the Nationalist forces was justified. Bernanos’ views were known to all. He had been a militant for *Action Française*, an admirer of Drumont. He declared himself a monarchist, a

Catholic, a scion of traditional French values, closer in spirit to what he termed the “working-class aristocracy” than the moneyed bourgeoisie he loathed. In Spain, at the time of the generals’ uprising against the Republic, Bernanos took a while to gauge the scale of the unfolding disaster, but he had soon to accept the evidence he saw around him. The Nationalists were carrying out a systematic purge of suspects and, between killing sprees, Catholic dignitaries were granting them absolution *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. The Spanish Church had become the executioners’ whore.

Helpless, Bernanos watched this vile connivance take hold. He realised with painful clarity that he had to break with his old sympathies and note everything down, become a reluctant witness.

He was one of only a handful from his political camp to show such courage.

*A mis soledades voy,  
De mis soledades vengo.\**

*I go to and from my solitudes.*

On July 18, 1936, my mother, accompanied by my grandmother, was introduced to the Burgos family, the *señores* who wished to employ a new maid – the previous one having been sent home because she smelled of onions. When it came to pronouncing a

\* Lope de Vega, “La Dorotea”, 1632

final verdict on my mother, don Jaime Burgos Obregón turned to his spouse with a satisfied look. He studied my mother from head to toe, and stated with an air of assurance that my mother has never forgotten: *She seems quite humble*. My grandmother thanked him as if he were congratulating her, *But that comment, my mother says, throws me into turmoil. For me it's an insult, a patada in the arse, a kick in the culo, it makes me leap ten metros within my own head, it jolts my brain which had been slumbering for more than fifteen years. It makes me understand the meaning of the words my brother José had just brought back from the Anarchist communes around Lérida. So when we are in the street again, I start to shriek, to griter: "She seems quite humble"! Do you realise what he meant? Keep your voice down, your grandmother implored me; she was a woman who liked to keep a low profile. What don Jaime means – I was really boiling, my darling, ma chérie, I was boiling with rage – is that I will make a good maid, sweet and thick, and obedient with it. It means I will accept doña Sol's orders without flinching, that I will clean up her shit without protest. It means I seem to have all the qualities of an idiot, and I won't balk at anything, I won't cause any sort of moleste to anyone. It means don Jaime will pay me, how do you say it? clopinettes, peanuts, and I'll have to say muchísimas gracias with my sweet, grateful, humble face. Oh Lord, your grandmother whispered to herself, looking alarmed, keep your voice down, they'll hear you. So I begin to shriek, even louder: I don't care if they hear me. I don't want to be some dim maid for the Burgos family, I'd rather go and be a whore in town. For heaven's sake, your grandmother begged me, don't say such terrible things. They didn't even*

*invite us to sit down, I tell her indignantly, they didn't even bother shaking our hands, I remember it clearly, I do remember, because I had an inflammation on the tip of my thumb, I'd bandaged it up – a panadis, isn't it called? – oh, a panaris, a whitlow, is that even a word? If you say so – but don't keep on correcting me or I'll never finish. Anyway, so, your grandmother, to shut me up, her voice all hushed, told me about the considerable benefits awaiting me if I got the job as a maid: I'd be housed, fed, and kept clean, and I'd have time off every Sunday to go and dance the jota in the church square, and I'd even get a small stipend and a little yearly bonus to build up a dowry, maybe even put some money aside. At these words I say: I would prefer to die, dying would be better, plutôt morir. Oh, heavens above, your grandmother whispered, even more quietly this time, throwing nervous glances at the houses along the street. And I started to run at full *vélocité* towards my attic room. By sheer good fortune, war broke out the next day and I never went to work as a maid for the Burgos family, or for anyone else for that matter. The war, *ma chérie*, came in the nick of time.*

My mother had been watching television that evening and the random image of a man interviewing the president of France had abruptly reminded her of her brother José's enthusiasm on his return from Lérida. His impatience and new-found revolutionary zeal had made him seem so handsome. And it came back to my mother in one fell swoop: don Jaime Burgos Obregón's little remark, the elation of July 1936, the euphoric discovery of city life and the Frenchman she loved so passionately, the man my sister

and I have called André Malraux since we were children.

My mother is Montserrat Monclus Arjona, a name I am happy to appropriate and revive for a short while, rescuing it from the oblivion to which it has been consigned. For the time being, I don't want to introduce any invented characters into my account. My mother is my mother. Georges Bernanos is the admired writer of *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* and the Catholic Church is the despicable institution it was in 1936.

*Fuente es mi vida  
en que mis obras beben.*

*My life is a fountain  
from which my deeds are nourished.*

My mother was born on March 14, 1921. Her family and friends call her Montse or Montsita. She's ninety years old as she sits and remembers her youth in the crossbred, trans-Pyrenean language she has adopted since Fate hurled her into a village somewhere in the south-west of France more than seventy years ago.

My mother was beautiful once. They tell me she used to have that particular carriage Spanish women had in the old days when they balanced water pitchers on their heads and now only seen in ballet dancers. They tell me she used to move like a boat, its sail upright and supple. They tell me she had the body of a film star and she carried the kindness of her heart in her eyes.

Now she's old, wrinkled, her body decrepit, with a bewil-

dered, unsteady gait. Yet the mention of Spain in 1936 reawakens a youthfulness in her gaze, a light I haven't seen before. She suffers from dementia, and everything she's lived through, from the war to today, has all but vanished. Yet her memories of the summer of 1936, when the unimaginable took place, are still intact. It was a time, she says, when she discovered life – without doubt the only adventure of her existence. Does this mean, therefore, that what my mother took to be reality for the following seventy-five years was somehow not as real? I often think so.

That evening, I listen to her stoking the ashes of her lost youth, and I see her face becoming animated again as if all her *joie de vivre* were gathered up in those few days of the summer of 1936 in the great Spanish city, as if time had stopped still on the calle San Martín, on August 13, 1936, at 8.00 in the morning. I listen to her invoking her memories while my parallel reading of Bernanos' *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* fills in any gaps and darkens the picture at the same time. I try to unravel the reasons why the two accounts disturb me so much, and I'm afraid the disturbance will lead me in a direction I have absolutely no intention of taking. More precisely, these memories release contradictory and sometimes confused feelings in me through hidden sluices. Though my mother's rush of freedom in 1936 fills me with a sort of amazement, a childish joy, Bernanos' chronicling of atrocities – his observations of the darkness of men, their hatreds and furies – stirs my fears of seeing today's bastards revive the

noxious ideas I thought had been put to rest a long time ago.

On the morning my fifteen-year-old mother, accompanied by my grandmother, applied for the job of maid, doña Pura – sister of the aforementioned don Jaime Burgos Obregón – was sitting bolt upright as usual in her stiff-backed leather chair reading, in a state of ecstasy, the headlines of her newspaper, *Acción Española*: “A young general has decided to take control of eternal Spain as it slides towards democracy and socialism, in the hope of building a dam against the Bolshevik invasion. Other generals have, without a moment’s hesitation, rallied around this extraordinary leader of men, and the nation’s forces have been reawakened. But will spirit, intelligence, devotion to the national cause and heroism be enough to overcome the base appetites and bestial instincts elevated to the rank of government by Moscow as it sets its sights on poisoning the whole of the European side of the Mediterranean?” The article ended with this question and it threw doña Pura into such a state of alarm that she was overcome by heart palpitations. Doña Pura was prone to palpitations, and even though the doctor had ordered her to avoid all sources of vexation, her patriotism meant that she couldn’t stop reading the Nationalists’ paper. *It’s my duty*, she told the doctor in a faltering voice.

Over the following days, doña Pura lived in constant dread of her house being pillaged, her land stolen and her fortune plundered by a band of thieves led by Montse’s brother José. Maruca, the grocer’s wife, had confided in her how the Anarchists carried

out their bloody hold-ups, raping and eviscerating nuns, sully-  
ing their convents with abominable desecrations. Doña Pura imag-  
ined them bursting into her own bedroom, ripping down the  
ivory crucifix watching over her immaculate white bed, stealing  
her enamel-encrusted jewellery box and giving themselves over  
to the most unspeakable abuses. Despite this, she continued to  
greet the parents of the village hotheads when she came across  
them. She really had a good heart.

But come night-time, kneeling at her *prie-dieu*, she beseeched  
the Lord to protect her family from these savages who had no  
respect for anyone.

*May they die and go to hell!*

No sooner had she uttered this pronouncement than she  
blushed with shame. Might the Lord, undoubtedly endowed  
with exceptional powers, have heard her words? She would have  
to confess to don Miguel (the village priest who had not yet fled)  
the following morning. He would prescribe three *Ave Marias*  
and a *Pater Noster*. These had the same medicinal effect on her  
conscience as a dose of aspirin. It was well known that whatever  
crime the Catholics committed against the Reds – whether by  
blade, gun, club or iron rod – they were immediately exonerated  
and forgiven as long as the criminal showed contrition in time  
for evening prayer. Such arrangements with the Spanish heavens  
could be truly magical.

Doña Pura resumed her prayer and pleaded with the Holy  
Virgin Mary to put an end to the actions of the brazen fools  
insulting her God. Taking a swipe at her wealth was an insult to

the Lord. She understood better than anyone what constituted an insult to God. She was, in fact, what people in the village, thanks to an eloquent linguistic shortcut, called a *facha*. When the word is pronounced with the Spanish *ch*, it is accompanied by a spit.

There were a few *fachas* in the village and what united these fascists was the belief that:

### THE ONLY GOOD RED IS A DEAD RED

My uncle José, Montse's brother, was a Red, or rather a Red-and-Black.

He'd been fuming with anger since his sister recounted her visit to the Burgos household.

The Reds in 1936 were always cross, even more so when they were both Red and Black. José thought his sister had been insulted. Spain in 1936 was brimming over with insulted people.

*"She seems quite humble"? "She seems quite humble"! Who does the bastard think he is? He'll regret it, the barefaced cabrón. I'll teach that bourgeois to think twice before opening his mouth again.*

José had been transformed by his time in Lérida. His eyes were filled with light from the heavenly marvels he had seen. His mouth spouted words from another world, to the point where his mother said, *They've gone and changed my son.*

Every year, between harvesting the almonds in May and the

hazelnuts in September, José worked as a hired hand cutting hay on a vast estate near Lérida. The job tested the limits of his endurance and paid a pittance, but he happily gave the money to his parents.

From the age of fourteen, José's days had been consumed by work in the fields, from dawn till dusk. His life was regulated by it. He hadn't thought to question his existence or dream for a second that things could be different.

Yet when he arrived in Lérida, with his friend Juan, he discovered a city that had been shaken up to the point of dizziness. Its moral codes had been turned upside down, its surrounding farmlands had been collectivised and its churches transformed into cooperatives. Cafés buzzed with rallying calls, everyone laughed with happiness. He'd never forget the excitement and the emotion of it.

José discovered words so new and so bold that his young soul became enraptured by them. These were immense words, grandiose, etched in fire, sublime, words for a new era: *Revolución! Comunidad! Libertad!* When shouted with the stress at the end, they were like a punch to the face.

José was as filled with wonder as a child.

Things he'd never thought about before began to fill his mind.

Immeasurable things.

He learned to raise his fist and sing "Hijos del Pueblo".

He chanted *Down with Oppression, Long live Freedom. And Death to Death.*