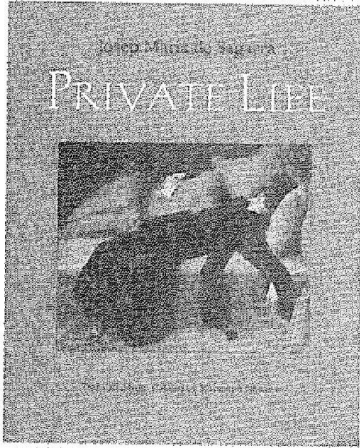


PRIVATE LIFE

Josep Maria de Sagarra

Translated by Mary Ann Newman
Archipelago Books (\$20)



For several centuries prior to the establishment of a Spanish military dictatorship in the early 1900s, the Catalan petty aristocracy disintegrated. The reasons were multiple—the Carlist Wars, a laxity in cultural conservation and political autonomy, an estrangement from agriculture—and the result was that Barcelona, the nation's capital, sank from eminence. These changes supply the setting and theme of Josep Maria de Sagarra's 1933 novel *Private Life*, which anglophone readers can now enjoy thanks to this translation by Mary Ann Newman.

Private Life recounts how an "inoffensive and cowardly person" named Guillem de Lloberola—the "thirsty" younger son of El Senyor Don Tomàs de Lloberola, a decrepit paterfamilias who all but squandered what remains of the family fortune—disguises himself as a laborer and has a series of paid liaisons with Conxa Pujol, a young lady in whose chest beats "the heart of a hysterical medusa," and also with her much older husband Antoni Mates, "the son of a rag merchant and of a woman who had butch-

ered hens," now "a cotton merchant of the highest order" newly dubbed the Barò de Falsset by the Dictator. When Guillem discovers that his older brother Frederic owes Mates a gambling debt, he reveals his identity to the respectable entrepreneur, blackmails him into relinquishing the promissory note, then extorts money from him until he commits suicide, whereupon Guillem marries his widow and acquires his wealth.

Sagarra's evocation of the crumbling upper-class Barcelonan milieu is intricate and panoramic, and the reader views the plot in perspective, as a single sequence of occurrences among many others in this social history masquerading as a novel. Broad narrative strokes lend verisimilitude to the incidents, and vivid rhetoric breathes the zeitgeist into characters and gestures: "Maria Lluïsa turned off the song and rubbed her forehead on her friend's lapel, just as one might wipe a tool or drill bit off on a sheepskin rag before making an incision." As one might surmise from the metaphors interspersed throughout *Private Life*, Sagarra translated *The Divine Comedy* into

Catalan, a labor that's no less significant than his refusal to write in Castilian: such choices restate the irrefutable case for Catalan creative writing as a world literature, while also making it clear that this author felt the *beau monde* of Catalonia should bear its share of responsibility for the contraction of Iberian political and cultural authority into a Spanish nation-state centered in Madrid. Sagarra puts his credo in Guillem's mouth: "If you could follow them in their hideous footsteps, you would have more plots than you could ever know what to do with."

Mary Ann Newman has translated the acerbic sophistication and tabloidesque salaciousness of Sagarra's laconic Catalan text into an English that's almost Elizabethan in its colloquial, Latinate muscularity; the upshot is a new voice whose tone is perhaps closest to that of Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*. Unfortunately, this edition contains many typographical errors, and a critical commentary would have been welcome. Still, this book makes a much-needed contribution to contemporary letters.

—Erik Noonan