Book Review: La Victoria

Jessica Noriega Palmero

2026-11-24

Federica Montseny,*La victoria: Novela en la que se narran los problemas de orden moral que se le presenta a una mujer de ideas modernas.* Edited with introduction by Carolina Fernández Cordero. Madrid: La Oveja Roja, 2025.

2025 marked the hundredth anniversary of the original publication of Federica Montseny's most famous novel, *La victoria* in which she problematizes women's liberation and its relationship with love practices, which were heavily influenced by bourgeois morals even within libertarian circles.[1] The subtitle of the novel emphasizes Montseny's engagement with the problems of modern women: *Novel in which the moral concerns of a woman of modern ideas are narrated*[2] (my translation). The narrative follows Clara, a young woman living in an undetermined city, as she undergoes a libertarian awakening and experiences several heartbreaks during 17 chapters. This new edition of *La victoria*, published by La Oveja Roja,[3] restores Montseny's text for contemporary readers, prefaced by a new critical introduction written by Spanish literature specialist, Professor Carolina Fernández Cordero (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid).

Fernández Cordero begins her critical introduction by locating the novel within its broader economic and political context: during the first three decades of the twentieth century, Spain went through an economic crisis resulting from the disappearance of informal markets, which in turn opened a space for the anarcho-syndicalist movement to flourish. The presence of anarchist unions was particularly important in Catalonia, where Federica Montseny was born and raised, due to its developed industrial landscape. As Fernández Cordero informs readers, the repression of activists Montseny knew while growing up is at the heart of her anarchist militant consciousness and writing.

Montseny's writing was also influenced by her family's editorial enterprise: the Montseny-Mañé family owned and published the anarchist-oriented and divulgative journal, *La Revista Blanca*, where many pieces authored by Federica — both essayistic and fictional — appeared. Even when compelled to bypass censorship enforced by the authorities, the Montseny-Mañé family expressed a belief in the importance of "configuring an autonomous cultural field" committed to the education of workers and the promotion of libertarian values and ideas. Federica found in fiction, and particularly within the genre of romance novels, an outlet that allowed her to package her politi-

[1] The title could be translated as "The Victory." To my knowledge, none of Montseny's fictional texts have been translated into English. The editor of the book does not reference any translations of Montseny's novels either.

[2] *Novela en la que se narran los problemas de orden moral que se le presentan a una mujer de ideas modernas* (Spanish original). All the translations provided in this review are mine unless the opposite is indicated.

[3] La Oveja Roja is an independent publishing house focused on releasing texts (essays, novels, poetry, children's books, etc.) that deviate from the mainstream discourse.

cal claims about women's liberation and free love in an entertaining and educational product.

Women's liberation and free love are the main topics of Montseny's novel, and Fernández Cordero presents and analyzes them across three sections of her Introduction.

First, in the section "The dispute about the modern woman and *La victoria* as a study on femininity,[4]" Fernández Cordero explains how the turn of the century constituted an inflection point for traditional gender roles, as new ideas and incarnations of femininity — departing from and battling the "angel in the house" bourgeois woman ideal — emerged: "The *garçonne* took up the symbolic space and entered the cultural imaginary of the 1920s as archetype of the liberated and autonomous woman through an all-encompassing iconography that included cinema, publicity, the press and, of course, literature.[5]" As Fernández Cordero notes, it is precisely against this *garçonne* image —popularized by Victor Margueritte's character, Monique Lerbier — that Montseny puts forward her ideal of womanhood, embodied by Clara, the main character of *La victoria*.

Even if the men of the novel insist on defining Clara as a masculine, cerebral or genderless woman, characteristics that could also be attributed to other female ideals of that time, the truth is that her gender identity is heavily shaped by her political beliefs and her libertarian insistence on the emancipation of women from the conservative restraints of society. Three men try and fail to romance Clara; Roberto Montblach, a worker and anarchist agitator who interests our main character in matters of libertarianism, constitutes her first heartbreak, as he prefers the love of a simpler, kinder, "more feminine woman." Clara's second romantic interest during the novel is Emilio Lucerna, a nihilist who stands on a completely oppositional intellectual shore, hence the attraction felt by the heroine. Nonetheless, Lucerna's love for Clara quickly transforms into obsession and once she has turned him down, he threatens to assault her. The third and final love prospect is Fernando Oswald, a renowned fiction writer who idolizes women and tries to cure Clara of what he understands to be a love disease. At this point in the narrative, Clara is eager to find a partner who can esteem and respect her as an equal, as a woman with the same rights and responsibilities as men:

> I want a man, neither an executioner nor a vassal. And here it is what men don't know how to be. I want a friend, a comrade, bound to me by an affinity of character, love, taste. I want companionship and joy; not a despot, neither a servant nor a champion. I don't need those. My ideas

[4] "La disputa por la mujer moderna y *La victoria* como estudio sobre la feminidad" (Spanish original).

[5] "La *garçonne* ocupó el espacio de lo simbólico y se instaló en el imaginario cultural de los años 20 como el arquetipo de la mujer emancipada y autónoma a través de toda una iconografía que incluyó el cine, la publicidad, la prensa y, por supuesto, la literatura" (Spanish original).

> rebel against the first; my dignity, against the second, and, against the third, my ability to defend and suffice myself in the fights for life.[6]

However, Clara does not understand — and neither does the author of the book — her desire for equality as a feminist claim. Instead, Clara counters feminism because it is "petty and lacking in idealism." This tension between feminist and anarchist thinking is addressed by Fernández Cordero in a section of the introduction titled "Feminists and anarchists,[7]" in which she reproduces quotes from Montseny's essayistic pieces, connecting them to the narrative topics of *La victoria.* The question of feminism quickly turns to marriage — understood as a bourgeois economic arrangement — and the problem of love, the next topic of the scholar's introduction: "Free love and individualistic anarchism.[8]" Fernández Cordero introduces the subject of free love by locating it against its nineteenth-century background, highlighting Émile Armand's "Anarchist Individualism and Amorous Comradeship" theory, which Montseny did not condone. Instead, Montseny's view of free love was "paradoxically idealistic and almost mystifying" and it privileged "the affective component as the pillar of relationships." Montseny, through Clara's character, insists that for free love to be achieved "all human beings must own themselves, and their will and desires must triumph over any social mandate."

Following her analysis of *La victoria's* key topics, Fernández Cordero turns to the particulars of its form, characterized by Montseny's use of dialogue. She singles out dialogue as the predominant stylistic procedure found in the novel and highlights its function as the most direct form of communication, which in turn "lightens the discourse and, moreover, strengthens the bond between the text and its readers." Dialogue also works as a mechanism that informs readers of the characters' ideology, a strategy that sets Montseny's work apart from the more traditional bourgeois novel, in which description usually fulfils this role, according to Fernández Cordero.

The last two sections of the introduction are devoted to the passionate responses and criticism that *La Victoria* elicited after its publication, which resulted in Montseny writing an open defense of Clara which was included as a prologue to the story in its subsequent editions, including the present one. Finally, Fernández Cordero also comments on her edition of the text, whose printing errors, missing prepositions and accentuation have been amended and updated while remaining, nonetheless, close to the original.

The introduction and its list of works cited prove useful to academic readers interested in the works and legacy of Montseny, potentially prompting further research and

[6] Yo quiero un hombre, no un verdugo ni un vasallo. Y he aquí lo que no saben ser los hombres. Yo quiero un amigo, un camarada, unido a mí por la afinidad de caracteres, de amor y de gustos. Yo quiero una compañía y una alegría; no un déspota, ni un criado, ni un defensor. No los necesito a estos. Contra el primero se rebelan mis ideas; contra el segundo, mi dignidad, y contra el tercero, mi capacidad para defenderme y bastarme en las luchas por la vida (Spanish original).

[7] "Feministas y anarquistas."

[8] "El amor libre y el anarquismo individualista."

new editions as the Spanish academy reexamines, once again, *la Edad de Plata* on the centenary of *la Generación del 27*. Nevertheless, Montseny's *La Victoria* also speaks to a broader contemporary reading public in Spain, as signaled a review one reader wrote on Goodreads: "a highly topical book I would say.[9]" The only shortcoming of Fernández Cordero's introduction is the lack of space devoted to a discussion about the importance of publishing Montseny's work today. How does *La Victoria* align with current debates about gender roles and romantic relationships? How is the text in dialogue with subsequent Spanish anarchist traditions? These are some of the questions left unanswered by this specific critical edition, which is, nonetheless, informative for both academic and leisure readers.

Jessica Noriega Palmero, Universidad Complutense de Madrid Note: Jessica Noriega Palmero currently holds a Fundación Ramón Areces pre-doctoral fellowship.

[9] "un libro de rabiosa actualidad diría yo" (Spanish original). Elena, March 5, 2026 "un libro de rabiosa actualidad diría yo" (comment on Federica Montseny, "La victoria," Goodreads), *www.goodreads.com*.

The Ted K Archive

Jessica Noriega Palmero
Book Review: La Victoria
2026-11-24

Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies, Vol. 2026, No. 2 (2026): Indigenous Community, Autonomy, and Organization in Abya Yala.
<www.journals.uvic.ca/index.php/adcs/article/view/22972>

www.thetedkarchive.com