



## Tusquets, Esther (b. 1936)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Contemporary novelist Esther Tusquets brings a highly eroticized woman's voice to Spain's post-Civil War literature. Her metafictional approach often employs secondary but emblematic lesbian characters to delineate the limits and possibilities of female sexual autonomy.

Born into Barcelona's upper middle class on August 30, 1936, Tusquets grew up during Francisco Franco's right-wing dictatorship (in power from 1937 to 1975). She received the degree of Filosofía y Letras from the universities of Barcelona and Madrid and subsequently taught literature and history. She also married and divorced.

In 1960 Tusquets took over her family's business, Editorial Lumen, then a small publisher of religious books. During her tenure as director she has transformed the publishing house into a recognized fountainhead of classic and innovative titles, including her own work.

Tusquets has said little publicly about her personal life or ideological leanings. Her inclusion in the feminist and lesbian literary canons derives from the content of her work.

She published her first novel at age 42. Distinguished by a syntactically convoluted and multi-layered prose style, her works employ a relentless stream-of-consciousness reminiscent of Proust and Woolf.

Her novels explore the interior lives of the Catalan bourgeoisie, a class that enjoyed considerable economic privilege under Franco, but whose intellectuals labored under strict censorship and had to travel to France to remain abreast of modern cultural trends. Women's participation was channeled into limits acceptable to the regime. In the post-Franco freedom that Tusquets portrays, members of the academic and cultural elite fail to live out their creative promise, falling instead into political and individual torpor, stultified by the very indulgences and self-absorption that had previously been their anodyne.

Tusquets' most discussed work is a trilogy in which female protagonists strive toward self-definition within a meshwork of problematic relationships and transitory affairs. The novels retain identically named characters who, rather than sustaining one continuous narrative, furnish variations on the themes of love and infidelity, desire and degradation. These permutations generate multiple outcomes.

In *El Mismo Mar de Todos los Veranos* (1978), widely regarded as a milestone in lesbian literature, "E." (renamed Elia in later editions), a middle-aged literature professor, assuages her grief over a philandering husband through an affair with a student, Clara. The explicitness of its lesbian sexuality was groundbreaking for Spanish fiction at the time. Bringing her new lover into the locales of youthful memories raises healing prospects for the narrator but also awakens ghosts from her past, setting up the novel's ultimate betrayal.

The thirty-ish Elia of *El Amor Es un Juego Solitario* (1979), the second novel in the trilogy, attempts to evade ennui through the sexual initiations of the young and awkward Ricardo and the hopelessly enamored

Clara. In this rendition of the romantic triangle, Clara becomes a pawn in the power struggle that develops as Ricardo attempts to establish a lurid dominance over his sexual mentor.

Yet another variant of Elia, a writer tormented by her husband's desertion, attempts to reclaim her selfhood and her creative voice in *Varada Tras el Último Naufragio* (1980), the third work of the trilogy. Her situation contrasts with that of her best friend Eva's apparently stable marriage. This novel's Clara is a disturbed adolescent emotionally dependent on Eva, who has taken the girl under her wing. Clara's naïveté in regard to social protocols leads her to divulge that Eva's husband, too, has been unfaithful, resulting in an emotional crisis for Eva and in Clara's expulsion from her beloved's presence.

In her study of the trilogy, Nina Molinaro analyzes the roles of the various Claras in the trilogy's power relationships. In *El Mismo Mar* she is the audience to the older woman's re-narration of her life. In *El Amor*, although manipulated by the others, she escapes ultimate victimization by keeping her love selfless and her will intact. In *Varada* she is the peripheral but disruptive catalyst by which the other characters resolve their various dilemmas.

Clara is always young and positioned as an outsider, connoting, respectively, youth and renewal, fragile innocence, and obsessive infatuation. While she seems to provide merely contrapuntal interludes in the heterosexual protagonists' journeys toward clarity, she exists independently of the prevailing social code and thus alludes to a wider lens through which to view it.

A later novel, *Para no Volver* (1985), which has no lesbian relationship, further expands the arc of the midlife quest through a woman's mischievously ironic account of her experience with psychoanalysis. Some critics consider this novel to form a tetralogy with the earlier trilogy.

*Con la Miel en los Labios* (1997) breaks with the theme of midlife quest to examine student political activism and lesbian relationships during Franco's final years.

The thematically linked stories of *Siete Miradas en un Mismo Paisaje* (1982) are, as Tusquets acknowledges, the most autobiographical of her writings. They explore gender, class, sexual, and cultural themes during a young woman's formative years in post-Civil War Spain and can be considered a prequel to her trilogy.

Tusquets, mother of a grown son and daughter, has also written children's books. Much of her fiction has been translated into English and several other languages. Through media and journalistic outlets she remains an active commentator on Spanish cultural life.

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### **About the Author**

**Ruth M. Pettis** is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.