

Folding the Cardboard Olympus:
Democratic, Queer, and Feminist Transitions in Esther
Tusquets' *The Same Sea as Every Summer*

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Abstract:

This thesis analyses Esther Tusquets' novel *The Same Sea as Every Summer* as a historical document to assess how the historical transition Spain went through immediately following the death of Francisco Franco affected Spanish queer and feminist literature. Using a framework adapted from Gema Pérez-Sánchez, this thesis provides a brief overview of gender and sexuality under the Franco regime, followed by an analysis of the novel. It analyses the novel focussing on 5 aspects: the changing economic and geopolitical position of Spain, the depiction of patriarchal figures, the subversive use of mythology, the centring of a taboo lesbian relationship, and the novels failure to fully escape Francoist discourse. This thesis finds that the death of Franco and the ensuing democratic transition provided the grounds for the renegotiation of established patterns and conventions surrounding gender and sexuality, as Tusquets does, but that the patriarchal, dichotomous ideology of the Franco regime did not disappear immediately, and was still a dominant influence on the newly emerging Spanish queer and feminist literature.

Table of Contents:

The author, her work, existing literature, and research question.....	2
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Homosexuality under the Franco regime.....	6
Analysis.....	9
Conclusion.....	18
Bibliography:	19

Folding the Cardboard Olympus: Democratic, Queer, and Feminist Transitions in Esther Tusquets' *The Same Sea as Every Summer*

The use of works of literature as historical sources has always been somewhat contentious, and some academics have disavowed “the traditional old historicist project of locating literary works in their historical context”.¹ Though there is an argument to be made for this, and it is, as Edward Said once said, difficult “to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time map its affiliations,” to a degree “we must attempt this, and set the art in the global, earthly context”.² Acknowledging the complex and potent ways politics, history, and literature can combine, and the ways in which classic works of literature can act as vessels of ideological and cultural development in their own time, as well as microcosms of a particular historical context in hindsight, is of particular importance in the study of queer and feminist literature, so often the site of ideological contention, historical momentum, and complex nodes of definitional power. In this thesis I will explore one such site, Esther Tusquets' *The Same Sea as Every Summer*.

The author, her work, existing literature, and research question

Barcelonan author Esther Tusquets is considered one of the most important authors in the history of Spanish queer literature. One of the first women in Spain to run a publishing house, *Lumen*, which she took over in the 1960s, Tusquets didn't publish any of her own work till the late 1970s. In her relatively short career as a novelist, she published 5 major works: *The Same Sea as Every Summer* (*El mismo mar de todos los veranos*) in 1978,³ *Love Is a Solitary Game* (*El amor es un juego solitario*) in 1979,⁴ *Stranded* (*Varada tras el último naufragio*) in 1980,⁵ a collection of short stories called *Seven Views of the Same Landscape* (*Siete miradas en un mismo paisaje*) in 1981,⁶ and *Never to Return* (*Para no volver*) in 1985.⁷ Known for their complex, intoxicating rhythms, explicitly feminine and feminist approach to eroticism, and hauntingly beautiful depictions of love gone awry, Tusquets' novels reached international acclaim throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and are still

¹ Gema Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture: From Franco to La Movida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 5.

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1994 [1993]), 7.

³ Esther Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, trans. Margaret E. W. Jones (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990 [1978]).

⁴ Esther Tusquets, *Love Is a Solitary Game*, trans. Bruce Penman (London: John Calder, 1985 [1979]).

⁵ Esther Tusquets, *Stranded*, trans. Susan E. Clark (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991 [1980]).

⁶ Esther Tusquets, *Seven Views of the Same Landscape*, trans. Barbara F. Ichiishi (Austin: Host Publications, 2011 [1981]).

⁷ Esther Tusquets, *Never to Return*, trans. Barbara F. Ichiishi (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999 [1985]).

regarded as seminal works in Spanish feminist and lesbian literature. Her first three novels comprise a trilogy in a number of key ways. Firstly, they all deal with upper-class Catalan characters in the 1970s (though she wrote in Castilian), “a social setting which enables Tusquets to focus on her character’s emotional sufficiencies rather than on their economic dependencies”.⁸ Secondly, there are recurring character names, with all three novels featuring a different Elia as a protagonist, all in a way disillusioned with love, seeking in various ways, often through “erotic experiences [,] a self-defence, an escape from frustration, and an avenue of self-discovery”.⁹ The parallels don’t end there: each Elia is, at middle-age, forsaken by a husband, disillusioned with the fairy-tale forms in which she imagined her life, attempting to find meaning in life again through romantic and/or sexual relationships with younger characters. All three novels feature a character called Clara, who is always young, lonely, sultry, and lost, and always falls hopelessly in love with an older woman (Elia in *The Same Sea as Every Summer* and *Love Is a Solitary Game*, Eva in *Stranded*). Two of the novels, the first and third, feature a character called Jorge, a man who abandoned Elia at what she sees as the height of their love, leaving her behind alone, and prompting her mid-life search for self. In this thesis I will focus on Tusquets’ first work: *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, as I deem it the richest and most complex of her novels in relation to its historical circumstances.

Relatively little English-language scholarship has been published about Tusquets’ early work, and what does exist, though valuable, leaves a few key topics relatively unexplored. The one edited volume available on her work, *The Sea of becoming: approaches to the fiction of Esther Tusquets* edited by Mary Seale Vásquez,¹⁰ deals with a range of topics mainly focussed on *Never to Return*. The articles focussed on Tusquets’ early work in this collection deal with a range of themes including “aestheticism, memory, metaphor, intertextuality [,] and actor and spectators”,¹¹ none of which are immediately relevant to my research. Barbara F. Ichiishi’s book *The Apple of Earthly Love: Female Development in Esther Tusquets’ Fiction*,¹² one of the most expansive works published on Tusquets’ oeuvre, extensively analyses the style, form, and language of her work from a feminist perspective, exploring themes such as women’s psychic development, Freudian and post-Freudian feminist ideas (the search for the primal mother and the relationship between childhood development and gender identity, for example). Though themes of patriarchy and women’s emancipation are explored, they are presented as rather disconnected from their historical context. Catherine G. Bellver’s article “The Language of Eroticism in the Novels of Esther Tusquets”¹³ and Linda Gould Levine’s

⁸ Linda Gould Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon: The Narrative Web of Esther Tusquets’ Trilogy,” *Anales de la Literatura española contemporánea* 12, no. 1/2 (1987): 203.

⁹ Catherine G. Bellver, “The Language of Eroticism in the Novels of Esther Tusquets,” *Anales de la Literatura española contemporánea* 9, no. 1/3 (1984): 13.

¹⁰ Mary Seale Vásquez, ed., *The Sea of becoming: approaches to the fiction of Esther Tusquets* (Westport, Ct: Praeger Publishers, 1990).

¹¹ Nicole Dobianer, “Auto-Fiction and Identity in Esther Tusquets’ Fiction” (PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 2013), 16.

¹² Barbara F. Ichiishi, *The Apple of Earthly Love: Female Development in Esther Tusquets’ Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995).

¹³ Bellver, “The Language of Eroticism in the Novels of Esther Tusquets,” 13-27.

“Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon: The Narrative Web of Esther Tusquets’ Trilogy”¹⁴ are both informative articles on Tusquets’ work from a distinctly feminist viewpoint, but they focus on the literary form, style, and language of Tusquets’ work without much regard for the historical circumstances they reflect. Similarly, Stacey Dolgin Casado’s “From The Modern to the Postmodern Novel: The Case of Esther Tusquets”¹⁵ discusses how Tusquets’ novels are distinctly modernist in style, while *Seven Views of the Same Landscape* reflects a cultural shift to the postmodern. As I’ll be focussing on Tusquets’ first work, this article is of limited use only. Finally, Nicole S. Dobianer’s PhD thesis in Hispanic Studies, “Auto-fiction and Identity in Esther Tusquets’ Trilogy”¹⁶ proved useful not just in its concise, organised reflection on the extant literature about Tusquets, but in its treatment of her later autobiographical work and how Tusquets related to many of the historical events and developments she lived through. Dobianer’s main focus is still explicitly literary not historical: her work is most concerned with “personal development and identity formation in Esther Tusquets and the female protagonists”¹⁷ of Tusquets’ first three works. Her analysis closely compares the development of the female characters in this trilogy with Tusquets’ own life, exploring themes of identity formation, womanhood, as well as “love, sex, motherhood, career, solidarity, individuality and independence”.¹⁸ Though other work on Tusquets exists, in my eyes the aforementioned books and articles are most relevant to my research.

As far as I am aware, no sustained analysis of Tusquets’ early works as historical documents has been conducted or published in English (nor in Spanish, though my lack of proficiency in the language prevents me from claiming this with any certainty), this thesis aims to fill this gap in the scholarship. The central question I am attempting to answer is: to what extent did the transition Spain went through immediately following the death of Franco affect Spanish queer and feminist literature? Specifically, I am analysing *The Same Sea as Every Summer* as a historical document that captures a moment in time in the middle of the collapse of the Franco regime and Spain’s transition into a democracy, a time where feminist and queer ideas hesitantly emerged into Catalan high-cultural discourse, reflecting a changing historical landscape and a blossoming feminist and queer literature that, though pushing boundaries, had not yet escaped the patriarchal, dichotomous ideology of the Franco era. Before analysing the novel I will provide an overview of the developments leading up to Spain becoming a democracy and the way homosexuality and gender roles were conceptualised under the Franco regime, for which I am mostly informed by Gema Pérez-Sánchez’ work. To answer my research question I will look at the five aspects of the novel that I consider most enlightening. I will look at how the changing economic and geopolitical position of Spain in the Franco era is reflected in the novel. Next I will look at the depictions of patriarchal figures and their relation with the women in the novel, depictions Tusquets uses to

¹⁴ Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon,” 203-217.

¹⁵ Stacey Dolgin Casado, “From the Modern to the Postmodern Novel: The Case of Esther Tusquets,” *Hispanófila* no. 133 (September 2001): 43-52.

¹⁶ Dobianer, “Auto-Fiction and Identity in Tusquets’ Fiction.”

¹⁷ *Ibid*, II.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

undermine patriarchal authority, followed by an exploration of the role mythology plays in *The Same Sea as Every Summer* and how it subverts the male literary canon by changing the gender dynamics of classic stories. Then I will look at the controversial queer love story at the centre of the novel, and how Tusquets' use of highly eroticised language further exacerbates the taboo. Finally, I will explore the novel's main shortcoming as a feminist and queer statement: its failure to fully escape the discourse of the Franco era.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse Tusquets' work as a historical document I've adapted a framework developed by Gema Pérez-Sánchez in her book *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture: From Franco to La Movida*.¹⁹ In this work, the word "transitions" resonates in three primary ways.²⁰ Firstly there is the "Transición Democrática proper", a historical paradigm shift that, in the years immediately following Franco's death in 1975, "changed Spain from a premodern, quasi-fascist, military dictatorship to a postmodern, parliamentary, democratic kingdom fully assimilated into a late-capitalist globalized economy".²¹ This national paradigm-shift (for convenience I will refer to it as the "Transición"), though significantly sped up by Franco's passing, has roots going back to the economic and political developments of the 1960s. The second meaning of the word transition (which I will simply refer to as "transition") refers to the "changing perceptions and performances of acceptable gender roles and proper sexual practices, and the development of contemporary Spanish novels written by lesbian, gay, and bisexual writers in relation to those transforming perceptions and performances".²² Though this encompasses a range of literature across a wide variety of genres, topics, and locations, Tusquets' novels are all distinctly so-called "high cultural", modernist novels set in Catalonia (specifically in and around Barcelona) and dealing with the Catalan upper classes of the 1970s. Consequently, the third aspect of "transitions" Pérez-Sánchez uses, referring to the "numerous and constant moments of transit between so-called high and low cultural practices, particularly in the queer Spanish world",²³ will be left out of this analysis, as *The Same Sea as Every Summer*'s focus on "high culture" make this aspect superfluous.

To analytically distinguish between the "Transición" and the "transition" I'll refer to Pérez-Sánchez' use of basic Althusserian theory:

"For Althusser, the state 'has no meaning except as a function of *State power*,' by which he means the 'possession, i.e. the seizure and conservation of State power'. He further distinguishes between state power and state apparatus. The latter is often unaffected by struggles to seize or maintain state power. This particular characteristic of the state apparatus is exemplified by Spain's transition into

¹⁹ Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture*.

²⁰ Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, 1.

²¹ *Ibid*, 1-2.

²² *Ibid*, 2.

²³ *Ibid*, 2.

democracy (1975-1982), during which a democratic parliamentary structure coexisted with the old, full-fledged repressive and ideological Francoist state apparatus.”²⁴

On top of this, Althusser distinguishes between the “repressive state apparatus” and the “ideological state apparatus, the former including “the government, the administration, the army, the police, the judicial and penal systems” amongst others, while the latter encompasses “educational, religious, and family institutions; political parties; and communications and cultural systems”.²⁵ These distinctions facilitate a split in my analysis, where you have on one hand the legal structures repressing people who deviated from the Franco regime’s strict categorisations, and how these were enforced, and on the other hand the cultural factors and general discourse surrounding this deviance, in which realm one would find Esther Tusquets’ novels. The divide between these two forms of state apparatus is, of course, not a perfect one, “every state apparatus functions both by repression and by ideology, the difference being that the repressive state apparatus functions predominantly by repression, whereas the ideological state apparatuses function predominantly by ideology.”²⁶ Additionally, the repressive state apparatus can be said to function mostly in the public sphere, while the ideological state apparatus has its foothold in the (still quite strictly controlled) private sphere.²⁷ I will start with the repressive state apparatus.

Homosexuality under the Franco regime

Though in the years immediately following the Civil War, “the Francoist regime paid little attention to homosexuality”, from the 1950s onwards the regime “developed an inexplicable concern with codifying, pathologizing, and containing the activities of homosexuals”,²⁸ with mobilising the repressive state apparatus against what they deemed “deviant behaviour”. This increase in paranoia can largely be attributed to Spain’s increased exposure to the outside world, with droves of tourists visiting the country from the 1950s onwards, bringing with them “secularism, consumerism, and all other aspects of the ‘modern’ life-styles” of the global north, as well as the increased influence of foreign companies and capital.²⁹ The unrest the country faced in the decades following, ravaged by inflation, civil unrest and student protests, and the oil crisis,³⁰ led the regime to attempt to tighten its control over the population through the creation of a strong national identity, the reinforcement of strict gender roles, as well as the persecution of “internal enemies”.³¹

²⁴ Ibid, 14.

²⁵ Ibid, 15.

²⁶ Ratna Kapur and Tayyab Mahmud, “Hegemony, Coercion, and Their Teeth-Gritting Harmony: A Commentary on Power, Culture, and Sexuality in Franco’s Spain,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 33, no. 3 (2000): 416.

²⁷ Kapur and Mahmud, “Hegemony, Coercion, and Their Teeth-Gritting Harmony,” 415.

²⁸ Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, 25.

²⁹ Ibid, 19-20.

³⁰ Ibid, 20.

³¹ Ibid, 11-13.

Underpinning the Franco regime's understanding of gender and sexuality was a rigid system of binary categorisations not unlike those of similar (quasi)-fascist regimes. Much of fascism's ideology is based on a strict gender binary, one in which women assume a passive, subservient role, not necessarily inferior but relegated to being "largely passive in their role as wives and mothers".³² On the other hand, the "virile man was considered the driving force of history and one of the principal symbols representing the nation's strength and harmony".³³ The central role of young men and the strong emphasis on male camaraderie led to the creation of many homosocial spaces where "the strong bonding experiences of men at war could solidify".³⁴ This homosocial bonding and the concomitant "fascination with the beauty of the vigorous, youthful male body", Pérez-Sánchez argues, carried with it the constant threat, the "fantasmatic possibility of a slippage from homosocial acts to homosexual acts".³⁵ This and "fascism's more obvious fixation on violent masculinity and its 'glorification of war and struggle'" led to the creation of and hyperfixation on internal enemies, people that were deemed a threat to the nation and its identity, including a number of racialised groups as well as those considered "asocials" like homeless people and "sexual deviants".³⁶ Gema Pérez-Sánchez argues that, in addition to the fear of corrosion of the nation from the inside by these "deviants" and how they undermined the dichotomies the Francoist ideology was based on, the obsession with enforcing these gender binaries (and persecuting those deviating from them) was a result of the regime's insecurity about "its own position within the Western international community", one of "marginality and deviance".³⁷ This led to further emphasis on the strict gender roles that characterised the regime, and increasing wariness of those deviating from them:

"Toward the end of the dictatorship, homosexuality became a complex node of definitional power relations: a locus in which the repressive state apparatus ... and the ideological state apparatus ... sometimes came into conflict over establishing a harmonious understanding of homosexual identity."³⁸

As Ratna Kapur and Tayyab Mahmud put it: "sexual normativity is [considered] integral to a nation-state's identity. Reintegration or containment of 'deviant' sexual actors remains particularly acute at moments of profound social change and political disorientation."³⁹ To maintain its stability and status in both the domestic and global imaginaries, the Franco regime sought to control and contain sexual deviance in numerous, sometimes asynchronous ways.

Homosexuality was broadly defined. In 1962, for example, judge Antonio Sabater characterised homosexuals as being "characterized by a deviation, an anomaly of the sexual instinct", "primitive beings" relying on instinct rather than reason, and "highly dangerous to ethical, cultural, and judicial barriers, and the

³² Ibid, 11.

³³ Ibid, 11.

³⁴ Ibid, 12.

³⁵ Ibid, 12.

³⁶ Ibid, 12.

³⁷ Ibid, 13.

³⁸ Ibid, 13.

³⁹ Kapur and Mahmud, "Hegemony, Coercion, and Their Teeth-Gritting Harmony," 426.

progress of mankind".⁴⁰ Additional characteristics, according to Sabater, included feminine characteristics and being "imitators of women",⁴¹ which show the conflation of homosexual people and trans people in the eyes of the regime, and the strong ideas about the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality. Homosexuality played an increasingly important role in the Francoist imaginary throughout the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the characterisation of homosexuals as "*peligrosos sociales* (socially dangerous persons) followed by mass confinement, "re-education", and other such severe security measures.⁴² The 1954 law that allowed for homosexuality to be punished by confinement in work camps and agricultural colonies amongst others, was reinstated in slightly adapted form in 1970, adding "new institutions for the re-education of those who commit homosexual acts",⁴³ emphasising "curing" homosexuality over segregating it. Homosexuality, according to these laws, was something akin to an infectious disease, one that should be segregated to avoid spread, and one that could be cured not just with hard labour, but with electroshock therapy and other forms of torture.⁴⁴ Kapur and Mahmud argue that "by this gesture the Spanish law *raced* the homosexual", *racing* in this context meaning "the technology of power whereby domination is exercised and legitimated on grounds of the professed biological, natural, and immutable deficiencies of the subordinated"⁴⁵: the inherent, biological deviance the Francoist regime claimed all homosexuals suffered from (and the idea that this was contagious) was used as justification for their marginalisation, oppression, and dehumanisation, especially during the 1970s. It wasn't until 1981 that homosexuality was removed as a "category of social danger subject to security measures" under the new democracy.⁴⁶

These laws, though addressing "homosexuality" in general, were significantly less harmful for lesbians than other queer people. There was no separate entry for them in the law, and they were generally understood to "be included in the Law of Social Danger" (the same one that criminalised homosexuality), yet of the four thousand cases treated under this law, "only two of the detainees were [cis] women".⁴⁷ To understand this remarkable discrepancy one need only look at how lesbianism was conceptualised during the reign of the Franco regime. Two distinct characteristics were associated with lesbianism at the time. On one hand, a broad definition included most women that deviated from the strictly passive role allocated to women in Spain. Behaviours like donning "manly shoes and clothes", acting masculine, and being economically self-sufficient, as well as any other behaviours that could signify "women's desires for professional and economic power",⁴⁸ women's breaking with the rigid standards imposed upon them by the patriarchal regime, were considered "lesbian" behaviours. This "concern with typologizing and criminalizing lesbians [...] betrays Francoism's investment in securing firm gender

⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁴¹ Ibid, 24.

⁴² Ibid, 25.

⁴³ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁵ Kapur and Mahmud, "Hegemony, Coercion, and Their Teeth-Gritting Harmony," 430.

⁴⁶ Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 24.

roles that legitimized the heterosexual model”.⁴⁹ The other, more obvious characteristic that lesbianism carries with it, “the lesbian passion” as Antonio Sabater called it,⁵⁰ was less clear-cut than one would imagine. In the rigid patriarchal society that was Francoist Spain, women were relegated to such a passive role, one centred on the men in her life, their role as daughters, as wives, and as mothers, that “lesbianism in the Spain of the 1960s and 1970s was hard for homophobes to conceptualize”.⁵¹ The patriarchal arrogance of men in Francoist Spain was such that generally they were “unable to conceive of female sexual pleasure independent of male heterosexual pleasure”,⁵² thus “lesbianism was erased from the sexual horizon of late Francoism”.⁵³ Lesbians were considered straight women gone astray for lack of a strong patriarchal figure to control them, a failure of masculinity rather than an extant, independent form of sexuality. Though left largely alone by the repressive state apparatus, lesbians constituted a marginalised group not just as women under Francoist patriarchy, but as women “whose desires [were] resistant to and [operated] outside of the rigid categories of gender and sexuality so policed by Franco’s Spain”.⁵⁴ Barely prosecuted by what Althusser would call the “repressive state apparatus”, lesbians’ unique position under the Franco regime, especially in the years of its collapse, created a new unique site of ideological resistance. Through its maligned yet not often prosecuted position, especially after the lifting of many censorship restrictions in 1978, lesbian literature, to borrow descriptions used by Gema Pérez-Sánchez⁵⁵, “became a site in which a complex battle between hegemonic and antihegemonic discourse on gender and sexuality took place”⁵⁶: “a locus in which the repressive state apparatus [...] and the ideological state apparatus [...] sometimes grit teeth over establishing a harmonious understanding”,⁵⁷ what Althusser called a “teeth-gritting harmony”. In other words, lesbian literature was a unique avenue for controversial and boundary-pushing discourse on gender and sexuality, one in which the clash between the ideology of the Franco era and newly emerging queer and feminist ideas came into conflict.

Analysis

The Same Sea as Every Summer follows a middle-aged upper-class Catalan university teacher, Elia, who, after her husband, Julio, runs off as he has done on numerous occasions in the past – always with a younger woman in tow, inevitably to return to the comfort of his marriage in the end – retreats to her childhood home. The novel centres on Elia rediscovering herself and confronting her past, the

⁴⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 33.

⁵¹ Ibid, 33.

⁵² Ibid, 33.

⁵³ Ibid, 33.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 35.

⁵⁵ Though I am using them here to specifically refer to lesbian literature, in the context of Pérez-Sánchez’ work these quotes are part of a more general statement about homosexuality in Spain.

⁵⁶ Pérez-Sánchez, *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 17.

adolescence that is her “one and only reality”,⁵⁸ through her blossoming relationship with Clara, a young former student of hers. Elia, stifled by her restricted, unimaginative surroundings, runs off with Clara in an attempt to escape not just Julio (who could return at any moment, as he always does), but also her daughter and mother, both wanting her to conform more to the role of wife she was expected to perform – “the falsification and fraud of all roles assigned and assumed”⁵⁹ – as well as the Catalan upper class that comprised her social surroundings, what she calls the “race of dwarfs into which [she] had been born by mistake”.⁶⁰ Through her relationship with Clara Elia finds the strength to confront her past, exploring the nostalgic landscape of a rapidly changing Barcelona, describing the humiliation her mother and grandma had to endure through their marriages, and finally finding the strength to recall the most painful of her memories: that of the time she almost escaped her surroundings, the time she ran off with her greatest love, Jorge, only for him to commit suicide at the height of their passion, leaving her to return home and surrender to other’s expectations of her. Through Clara, Elia once again manages to escape her past and her surroundings, escaping into a blossoming new romance, “an impossible future”⁶¹ in which she could live her life as she pleased. Through this romance, Tusquets undermines conventions of gender and sexuality by contrasting the depiction of the stale, impotent, shallow male characters in Elia’s life with the rich, complex world Elia and Clara live in, by reinterpreting and rewriting classic mythology and fairy tales, and by the subversive use of highly eroticised language. Ultimately, though, Elia betrays Clara and returns to Julio, undermining much of the feminist potential of the novel by re-resigning to the patriarchal idea of who she should be.

Published in 1978, *The Same Sea as Every Summer* places itself explicitly in the Transición, with Elia’s sardonic observations of the upper class she grew up in and her nostalgic reminiscences allowing the reader to glimpse the spectre of change looming over and creeping through the Barcelona of her youth. Retreating to her childhood home, Elia finds her old neighbourhood barely recognisable, the homes of her friends and acquaintances “reduced to a district of banks, offices, and travel agencies”.⁶² She conflates the greed of the locals, her parents’ generation’s obsession with appearances and constantly having something new to show off, and the influence of foreign capital and tourism, blaming them all for the modernisation (read: razing) of her childhood home, the drive to “keep on replacing, destroying, renovating the most beautiful and cherished things”.⁶³ Spain’s increased contact with the outside world, steadily increasing from the 1950s onwards and, can be seen in the droves of tourists that garishly interrupt the dreamlike descriptions of Barcelona as imagined through the nostalgic eyes of Elia, who desperately tries to ignore the “Japanese hidden behind their cameras, [...] the [hordes] of sentimental Swiss, of Germans who are so well informed and so supposedly thirsty for what they suppose

⁵⁸ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 154.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 145.

⁶² Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 8.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 15.

forms part of a supposed culture, multinational fat and panting ready to be swallowed up again by the tour busses that wait in an interminable line".⁶⁴ The spirit of student revolt has been replaced by an air of complacency, where Elia's generation once violently clashed with the police, occupied their university, "climbed the tower and set the bell of freedom"⁶⁵:

"we were, or we believed we were, masters of our destiny in an inviolable and inviolate enclosure, and, although the time was still not ripe for anything, and outside, in the city, an environment hostile to us, a closed-minded lack of understanding was growing in the people congregated in the plaza or listening to the news on the radio, nevertheless something had begun to change after so many years"⁶⁶

This spirit was no longer: like their parents, Elia's generation had become lazy, obsessed with appearances, envious of their peers' success; their wealth, splendour, and power overshadowed by their "insularity, complacency, and self-importance".⁶⁷ The Catalan upper class of Elia's generation, of Esther Tusquets' generation, by the 1970s had been reduced to shells of themselves:

"the ghosts of the most brilliant generation of the post-war era, most of them inexorably defeated by total, unmistakable, gross failure, some vanquished in a more subtle – just a little more subtle – way, by the grotesque, infinitely lamentable parody of having succeeded triumphantly".⁶⁸

Their accomplishments meaningless, their lives bland, their passion and revolution gone, their promise unfulfilled: a generation once so promising, in Elia and Tusquets' eyes, had fallen into the same pitfalls as the one before them, "betrayed the ideals that they had once promised to uphold",⁶⁹ leaving Elia desperate to escape her family, her class, her generation.

The rigid patriarchal structure of Franco's Spain is one thing Elia's generation, like the ones before it, was unable to escape. She, her mother, and her grandmother all, in varying ways, were disappointed and limited by the men in their lives, men that, despite their very real authority, are described by Elia in terms of impotence and incompetence. Elia's disillusionment with upper-class Catalonia "stems in great part from her interaction with a social environment in which she is accepted only in subservient roles as daughter, wife, [and] mother".⁷⁰ She describes the three generations of men that held back "this chain of women, [...] this matriarchal family where in a certain way only [the] women seem to exist", this string of powerful

⁶⁴ Ibid, 50.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 46.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 47.

⁶⁷ Margaret E. W. Jones, Afterword to *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, by Esther Tusquets (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 191.

⁶⁸ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 29.

⁶⁹ Jones, afterword, 190.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 191.

women only held back by the unfortunate circumstance that “the castrating, tiresome males always survive too long”.⁷¹

Elia imagined her grandmother as a stately, elegant, charming woman, one who was rebellious in her youth, but shackled into conformity by a husband she was not interested in. Focussed on appearances as the Catalan upper class was, she was “permitted to have [...] costumes and lovers and even orgies”⁷² as long as she remained married, acted out the part of a faithful wife for all the world to see, permitted anything but freedom from “the ox who trampled her, who possessed her night after night in bed without understanding her”,⁷³ a situation from which only her husband’s death could free her. Trapped as she was in her marriage, she decided to act out her role to the best of her abilities, forfeit her own desire to earn the respect of her peers and the admiration of her friends, “go on dying a little each day”,⁷⁴ hoping to one day be free to live her life after her husband’s death, one that came too late. Internally she always hoped for an escape, that someone would come along and love her and break her free, a pipe-dream shattered by the “extraordinary, absolutely fortuitous and inexplicable circumstance that a woman like her should have woken up one sad morning in the bed of an ox”.⁷⁵

The way Elia describes her parents is even more telling. Her mother, throughout the novel, is a powerful presence, the “blond goddess with the white hands”⁷⁶ of her early adolescence, the “beautiful, marmoreal, distant lady” who made pacts with gods.⁷⁷ As Elia’s relationship with Clara deepens, one of the final stories from her adolescence she finds the strength to confront is that of her father’s betrayal of her mother. Despite the strength her mother exudes, she still had to bow before the “‘real’ authority” of her husband.⁷⁸ Her mother, having found out about her husband’s secret affair, confronts him, only to be publicly humiliated for it. Not only did she have to put up with her husband’s infidelity, she was publicly punished for speaking up about it, for daring to get angry at her husband. At one of the main social events of the season, there was a sale of wax roses, sold at a ridiculously high price ostensibly for charity, but that was more “to make sure that only the most powerful men in town would be able to afford a rose for a wife, for a sweetheart, for a sister”.⁷⁹ Elia’s mother watched in dismay as her husband bought not just one but every single one of these ostentatious vanity-objects, and very publicly as “a ritual punishment, a symbolic but necessary punishment, for the goddess whom he had forced to become a harpy for a few seconds”,⁸⁰ gave them not to her but to his lover. Elia’s parents’ relationship exemplifies not just the dependent role women were forced to play in their relationships, but also the cruel, vapid social games played by the Catalan upper class, the “silly, frivolous [games]” that “excite [them], and make

⁷¹ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 115.

⁷² *Ibid*, 116.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 116.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 117.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

⁷⁸ Jones, afterword, 191.

⁷⁹ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 139.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 140.

[them] feel good and alive” but which are virtually without risk: “society games that aren’t too dangerous”.⁸¹

Elia’s own relation to her husband, Julio, is similarly dissatisfying. When we first encounter Elia she has just, not for the first time, been abandoned by Julio, who every so often runs off with a movie star, expecting his wife to still be there when he comes back, to quietly and without too much resistance accept his philandering. What we learn about him before his return is that he is a celebrated, if uninspired film-director who likes to play the same vapid social games as Elia’s parents and grandparents. Conventional, bland, shallows, and safe come closest to describing Julio in Elia’s eyes. It is almost as if Julio, for the duration of the novel at least until his return, is notable more for his absence, his not being there, than he ever was for his presence before he abandoned Elia. Though Elia spends the entire novel trying to escape this marriage, by the end she is back with Julio, trapped in her unhappy marriage. There was one time when she did manage to escape her marriage and social surroundings: with her lover Jorge. She painfully recounts this episode to Clara using the terms of her childhood readings of fairy tales and mythology.

Elia’s childhood readings play a central role in *The Same Sea as Every Summer* not just in the way Elia narrativises the experiences she lives through, but also in how the novel destabilises Francoist conventions around gender. Elia’s complex relationship with her childhood readings of fairy tales and mythology are so central “in her adult life that she has come to view herself as a strange amalgam of countless textual layers”: Isolde, the little mermaid, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, and many others.⁸² Though Elia describes her life in the terms set by these stories and characters, she doesn’t submit to their tropes, and “as such she is capable of discerning the ways in which she has been forced into complicity with a male tradition antagonistic to her individuality as woman”.⁸³ Though there are myriad examples throughout the novel, her treatment of Theseus and Ariadne is particularly revealing. We first encounter Theseus as represented by Jorge, who came to save Ariadne, Elia, from the stifling, inhibiting world of her parents and the Catalan upper class. Elia recounts how Jorge was different from the “race of dwarves”, she describes him as the Theseus that helped her, Ariadne, escape from her social surroundings, scorning the empty pomposity of Elia’s class, Julio

“laughed at those false gods out of an operetta, at [their] aesthetics based on good taste, [...] at our wretched peddler’s morality, at our castes”.⁸⁴

His scorn showed Elia that there was a world outside the shallow one she was born into, that she could escape by his side and live on her own terms:

⁸¹ Ibid, 36-37.

⁸² Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon,” 204.

⁸³ Ibid, 204.

⁸⁴ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 153.

“and then the structure in which I had lived imprisoned shook from its foundations, and there was a movement of panic and disbelief in that cardboard Olympus, because the unimaginable had happened”.⁸⁵

Jorge came, Theseus came to save her from her class, from the fate of her mother and grandmother. Elia recounts:

“and I followed him on board his ship, but I would have followed him even walking on the surface of the sea, because if he had commanded me, if Jorge had asked me, if Theseus had stretched out his hand to me in the midst of the waves and said, ‘Come,’ the waters would have held me up, I would surely have walked on them to the very end of the universe, and my parents no longer existed: not their shallow world, not the race of dwarves into which I had been born by mistake, not even the place of refuge the Minotaur and I had so lovingly built together to be our lair, because at last I was moving forward with him, and he was leading me toward freedom, toward the final encounter with myself and with men”.⁸⁶

But it was not to be, Jorge committed suicide, “Theseus deserted Ariadne on the island of Naxos.”⁸⁷, and Elia returned home to an unhappy marriage, a stifling social environment, and a life without passion or desire.

Linda Gould Levine describes Elia’s predicament as “the intense struggle and anxiety experienced by women as they seek to break free from the male-authored mold they have been ‘penned into’”⁸⁸ and, by extension, the struggle of “a character trying to disengage herself from the influence of male texts and male relationships”.⁸⁹ Elia does this most clearly through her reconfiguration of roles assigned in the mythology and fairy tale centred narrativisation of her life: the almost Manichean distinctions that underlie many of these stories recedes into the background as characters come to embody, for example, both Beauty and The Beast (“and now I know that we are both Beauty and we are both The Beast”).⁹⁰ Having been abandoned by Theseus, “written out of Jorge’s text and emotionally jarred by his act of suicide,”⁹¹ Elia attempts escape again through her relationship with Clara, thirty years later. In this case, however, the roles of Theseus and Ariadne aren’t as straightforward. Both Elia and Clara embody the role of a Theseus, helping each other escape their past lives, building a new life through their love. Similarly, it is not just Elia who is Ariadne, as Clara, “emerges as an Ariadne revisited, a guide, a spinner of realities”.⁹² Elia describes how Clara, in her role as Ariadne, is

“weaving a silk cocoon around me – she is building an impossible an impossible future for both of us, [...] a future to which we will both fly very soon, transformed into radiant butterflies, [...] in which we are invariably together, endlessly together, always loving each other and turning this love into a magic lever that can transform

⁸⁵ Ibid, 153.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 154.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 155.

⁸⁸ Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon,” 205.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 205.

⁹⁰ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 144.

⁹¹ Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon,” 205.

⁹² Ibid, 206.

the world, because – Clara has decided – this exceptional love, this love which occurs only once every thousand years, can't end in ourselves, it must also embrace all oppressed people, all sad people, all people downtrodden unjustly, all the lonely people in the world".⁹³

Clara cannot fulfil the role of Ariadne alone, however, and passes it over to Elia, "offering her lover a new role that she in turn must actively assume by weaving the last thread".⁹⁴ Ultimately, Elia and Clara's relationship comes to an end – Elia does not fulfil her role as Ariadne – and abandons her to return to her husband, Julio. Regardless, Elia and Clara, through their relationship, rewrite the myth of Theseus and Ariadne, as well as numerous other myths and fairy tales, by reimagining the central dichotomy of these stories: the gendered roles assigned. As Linda Gould Levine aptly put it: "the bond of friendship and sexual passion the two experience for each other is so powerful that it casts aside stereotypical roles and patriarchal literary patterns".⁹⁵ They renegotiate gendered patterns from classic texts, both becoming Theseus as well as Ariadne, Beauty as well as the Beast, subverting the literary pattern while challenging, one might say "queering", established, patriarchal relationship patterns and ideas of romance.

On top of breaking established literary patterns, Elia "undermines male authority by depicting the patriarchal figures in her life in terms of public spectacle: Julio's actions recall the vapid, studied gestures of television commercials; her father, despite his apparent detachment, is compared to a dramatist who prepares the script and assigns roles to the women".⁹⁶ Though their authority is unquestionable, Tusquets purposefully makes it look undeserved, used malevolently, insolently, for vapid social games, to limit the potential of Elia and the other women in her family. "The system itself forces the narrator to sacrifice her uniqueness to the role that has been chosen for her, but without her consent,"⁹⁷ to play a part in a shallow, uninteresting, theatrical male world. The women in the story, on the other hand, have a rich, complex inner and outer world full of passionate, multilayered relationships played out in phantasmic settings. "Orphic myths [and] secret subterranean rites",⁹⁸ "Wonderland and Never Land",⁹⁹ Orphean descents into hell¹⁰⁰, underwater grottos,¹⁰¹ and "ancient wells of shadow",¹⁰² "art, love, and revolution"¹⁰³, the women in *The Same Sea as Every Summer* reject the "male-oriented social system"¹⁰⁴ instead inhabiting a "naturalistic green world associated with the female principle"¹⁰⁵, a rich and textured storybook world – mediated through

⁹³ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 145.

⁹⁴ Levine, "Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon," 206.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 206.

⁹⁶ Jones, afterword, 191.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 191.

⁹⁸ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 17.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 112.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 145.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, 191.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 191.

and taking the form of Elia's childhood readings – that harshly contrast the vapid social world of the patriarchal figures controlling them. This becomes especially clear in how Elia describes her relationship with Clara, the only central non-heterosexual relationship in the novel.

Though most Francoist censorship laws were abolished in 1978, the same year *The Same Sea as Every Summer* was first published in Spain, and homosexuality had been mostly decriminalised, the novel's "explicitly erotic nature [...] and, particularly, the feminine perspective on sexual matters were new to Spanish fiction", and the depiction of homosexuality and recognition of women's sexual pleasure as something not just different from men's but something that could exist *regardless of men* was still taboo.¹⁰⁶ It is not just that the novel has erotic themes and storylines, everything from the setting to the time of year to seemingly mundane objects are described in highly eroticised language. She describes the Barcelonan summers she lived through as "stifling and lascivious Mays, with a tightness in our chests and a special taste on our lips",¹⁰⁷ the first signs of summer in the trees below her parents' house's window as "frightened virgin buds, adolescent nipples [that] stiffen and grow under the still cold air" into "undulant matron's breasts"¹⁰⁸. Throughout the novel, eroticised often Freudian descriptions of mythology, fairy tales, nature, and the spaces Elia and Clara visit and live in together (cafes, a theatre, two different apartments) become "Intimately identified with the narrator's psyche" and "In this way [...] exceed their metonymic value as backdrops for erotic scenes to become symbols of female sexuality itself".¹⁰⁹ The more explicitly erotic scenes in the novel are rife with inhuman often monstrous or animalistic descriptions: "frothing jaws",¹¹⁰ moans "like the howl of a wolf with its throat cut,"¹¹¹, sexual tension like "foaming, young-animal rage,"¹¹² genitals like underwater grottos inhabited by "a strange, voracious monster from the deep that shrinks, swells, and contracts like those half-vegetable, half-animal organisms that live deep in the ocean".¹¹³ Rather than representing the Freudian idea of female sexuality as something monstrous, something that should inspire male fear and justify "destruction or dominance in [a] heterosexual relationship," Bellver argues, "in homosexual situations [these descriptions suggest] boundless energy and alluring sexual pleasure".¹¹⁴ Tusquets doesn't just focus on sexual pleasure. As tumultuous as their relationship is, there is an undeniable tenderness to Elia and Clara's relationship. As they get to know each other better, Elia realises how deep their bond has become:

"I yield under a brutal avalanche of tenderness that cuts off my breath and stops my heart, because love is surely as terrible as an army on the move, and tenderness is

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 187.

¹⁰⁷ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Bellver, "The Language of Eroticism in the Novels of Esther Tusquets," 15.

¹¹⁰ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 121.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 121-122.

¹¹² Ibid, 119.

¹¹³ Ibid, 109.

¹¹⁴ Bellver, "The Language of Eroticism in the Novels of Esther Tusquets, 16.

as cruel as death [...] and I know that all barriers have fallen and all defences are down, and here I am, helpless in my tenderness, helpless before the terrible attack of this tenderness a thousand times stronger than death, here I am, defenceless and naked as never before”¹¹⁵

Defiantly centring queer eroticism, Tusquets subversively uses explicitly monstrous language to destabilise the conventions of erotic language and literature, decentre (male) heterosexual pleasure, undermine the gender dichotomies found in the European literary canon, and most controversially, explore the ecstasy that can be found in taboo sexual relationships like Elia and Clara’s, all while emphasising the tenderness and passion at the foundation of it. In Spain in 1978, when homosexuality was posited as an infectious social danger, women were only viewed in their relationships to the men in their lives – their inner lives left unconsidered – and lesbianism as a source of romantic and sexual pleasure was all but unimaginable, Clara and Elia’s explicit relationship, described in all its passion and tenderness – the same passion and tenderness that was conspicuously absent from the impotent, stifling male-centred relationships in the novel – was not just defiant but borderline outrageous.

Though in the aforementioned ways *The Same Sea as Every Summer* manages to challenge, subvert, and outright defy the patriarchal ideology of the Franco regime, its ending reveals how it fails to entirely break free from it. As mentioned before, Elia ends up leaving Clara – betraying her in her role as Ariadne – when Julio returns home, wilfully submitting to the suffocating marriage and life she had so ardently attempted to escape, betraying not just Clara but also herself. Elia’s submission to patriarchy is upsetting enough in itself, but not necessarily surprising: Julio’s return was inevitable and Elia’s escape was under a lot of external pressure: from her mother, her daughter, her friend Maite, and the “malicious gossip”¹¹⁶ of her neighbours. What makes this ending particularly upsetting is Elia’s “submission to [Julio’s] sexual advances and the author’s subsequent description of the pleasure she feels in being literally raped by her husband”.¹¹⁷ As Linda Gould Levine puts it: “that she is once again left mute and voiceless in a world of male heterosexual power is understandable, but that her body experiences pleasure is not.”¹¹⁸ Though I wouldn’t go as far as Levine in saying that Tusquets betrayed her own narrator¹¹⁹ and that her inclusion of this scene is immoral,¹²⁰ it does shatter much of the novel’s potential as a radical piece of feminist literature. It is hard to say why Tusquets chose to write the scene this way. Perhaps, as Levine suggests, Tusquets already had her second novel in mind, in which it would have been somewhat less out of place. Perhaps, as I am more inclined to believe, it suggests a circularity to the history of the women in her family Elia gave, as there are also strong suggestions of marital rape in her description of her grandparents’ marriage. Regardless of intent, the

¹¹⁵ Tusquets, *The Same Sea as Every Summer*, 123.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

¹¹⁷ Levine, “Reading, Rereading, Misreading and Rewriting the Male Canon,” 207.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 208.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 207.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 208.

ending of *The Same Sea as Every Summer* “dubiously [projects] a male mentality”¹²¹ onto Elia, one that is eerily similar to the patriarchal, dichotomous view of gender central to the Franco regime. With Elia willingly returning to her subservient role as wife, her rejection of her independent sexuality, her forsaking her lesbian relationship when the man in her life returned, and the especially insidious suggestion that women like to be subjugated, be it socially or sexually, *The Same Sea as Every Summer* undermines its progressive queer and feminist message and reverts into the close-minded quasi-fascist gender ideology of the Franco regime.

Conclusion

The years immediately following Francisco Franco’s passing in 1975 were a tumultuous time for Spain. The rapid Transición from relatively isolated quasi-fascist dictatorship to modern capitalist democracy integrated into the global economy brought with it the chance to renegotiate many of the assumptions underlying the old regime. The unique position lesbians held in the Francoist imaginary and law meant that feminist, lesbian literature was an ideal ground for challenging and provoking the conventions and ideology of Spanish society. Through her feminist reconfiguration of fairy tales and mythology, her use of highly eroticised language centred on a lesbian couple, and her harsh portrayal of upper class Catalan society, especially the men in charge, Tusquets defiantly went against the literary and cultural conventions of her time, scandalising her readers while pushing boundaries and paving the way for Spanish queer literature to come. Seminal as *The Same Sea as Every Summer* was, it failed to fully escape the patriarchal discourse of the Franco era, reverting to some of the same cultural patterns it so defiantly challenged. Spanish queer and feminist literature were still in a fledgling phase in the late 1970s, and the complexities of Spain’s transition, the growing pains of a democratic Spain, are echoed throughout *The Same Sea as Every Summer*.

¹²¹ Ibid, 208.

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