

TERESA PÀMIES

(b. 1919)

Janet Pérez

BIOGRAPHY

Teresa Pàmies i Bertran was born in 1919 in Balaguer, a small town in the Catalan mountain province of Lérida. Her father, Tomás Pàmies Pla, an extraordinarily durable influence in her life, was a colorful, romantic, eccentric, self-taught revolutionary born in the same town in 1889. A womanizer and a chauvinist, he was also a hardworking idealist, an admirer of the Soviet Union, and an organizer of workers' and peasants' cooperatives and syndicates. Teresa, the third child born of his second marriage and his first surviving offspring, followed in his footsteps, unlike her younger siblings. Their mother, Rosa Bertran, had inherited a house and a bit of land. She supported the family, thus allowing Tomás to spend his time in politics. She helped to raise money when he was jailed, and saved enough money so that the elder son could study in Barcelona.

This model of the primal family becomes almost a paradigm of Pàmies's fiction; a much-used archetype in her writings is the hardworking, self-abnegating woman who lives for an ungrateful activist. Teresa, accustomed as a child to her father's frequent incarcerations, often visited him in jail and brought him food and small necessities. She recalls in *Testament à Praga* (1971; *Testamento en Praga* 1971; "Testament in Prague") his imprisonment "for daring to claim the land for those who worked it, demanding the nationalization of properties of nuns and priests, the separation of Church and State, free lay schools, women's emancipation, rehabilitation of prostitutes, free love and so many other outrages" (52).¹

Largely self-educated, Teresa became known in leftist and feminist organizations at a young age. Biographical information must be deduced, for the most

part, from her heavily autobiographical “fiction,” along with the scant additional data appearing on cover blurbs, one of which notes that she began working in a sweatshop at age eleven, while another indicates that she left school at age twelve to work as a dressmaker’s apprentice. Both accounts may be true; her works (e.g., *Dona de pres* 1975; *Mujer de preso* 1975; “The Prisoner’s Woman”) certainly show familiarity with the seamstress’s trade and textile manufacturing. A correspondent for the Socialist revolutionary press while still in her teens, she wrote war chronicles for the JSUC (Catalan Young Socialists Union). Pàmies became politically prominent during the Second Republic (1931–36), presiding at meetings, delivering speeches, and working in information and propaganda. She visited the Civil War battlefield, and traveled for the Republic in an attempt to obtain support from foreign governments. Her political experiences, wartime activism, family background, and exile are all rich sources of literary inspiration, supplying the narrative framework, settings, and models for characters in some two dozen books.

The Spanish Civil War separated the family. Pàmies’s father worked in the leftist Central Committee of the region, from which he was later expelled for independent thinking and criticism of opportunism. Teresa and her father lost contact with the rest of the family, and she never saw her mother again. She and her father joined the Republican exodus on foot to France, where he spent time in a concentration camp, then worked on farms for room and board and helped supply food to the French Resistance during World War II. Teresa experienced the hardships of refugee camps, then spent time in Paris, where for three months she was jailed as an undocumented alien. Eventually she made her way to Latin America, living temporarily in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. She studied journalism in Mexico and remained there for nearly eight years. She moved to Prague in 1947, where she lived for some twelve years, working as an editor for Radio Prague’s broadcasts in Catalan and Spanish.

Her father remained in France until 1953, when ill health contributed to his decision to join Teresa in Prague; there he worked as a municipal gardener, sometimes taking his youngest grandson with him so that Teresa could go to work. Accused of complicity in the execution of Falangists, he was denied a passport to return to Spain, and died in Prague in 1966.

Pàmies spent more than thirty years in exile. From 1959 until 1971, the year of her return to Catalonia, she lived mostly in France, visiting Spain only briefly. She married and bore at least five children: a daughter who died young of an incurable illness, and four sons. Many personal experiences, wartime hardships, and real-life characters appear almost unchanged in Pàmies’s heavily “testimonial,” autobiographical fiction, but her marriage and maternal trials remain cloaked in privacy.

Prior to publishing *Testament à Praga* and while still in exile, Pàmies completed *La filla del pres* (1967; “The Prisoner’s Daughter”) and won the President Companys Prize for Prose in the Catalan literary competition and celebration, Jocs Florals, held in Marseilles in 1967. She did not become known in Spain

until 1971 with *Testament à Praga*, which had won the 1970 Josep Pla Prize. Three subsequent editions in Catalan and four in Castilian evince continuing public interest in this novel; deprived of the Republican perspective during most of the Franco regime, Spanish readers were increasingly avid for accounts of this silenced portion of their recent history. Pàmies's often polemic and intensely personal text alternates two viewpoints or narrative voices, that of Teresa and that of her late father. His voice is heard through his handwritten memoirs, composed in his final years (1958–66), which he instructed Teresa to type verbatim as his legacy to his four children. Teresa's narrative voice comments on, contradicts, modifies, clarifies, speculates, and reminisces in a mono-dialogue with her father in entries written during 1968–70. In one revealing passage, she reflects on his influence on her life: "Perhaps there was a time when I mythified you, but that helped me. In my adolescent political exaltation, mythifying my father neither slowed my career nor did me any damage. You were the man of integrity and valor whom I wished to resemble, and if any of your friends said that I did, it made me happy" (215–16).

Shaken and provoked by the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, Pàmies attempts to reconcile the crushing of one socialist people by another. Her recollection of what her father stood for politically is juxtaposed with thoughts of the final years when, already aged, sick, and becoming senile, he was somewhat of a burden. Attempting reconciliation with her father's spirit, she confesses her shortcomings but also denounces his philandering and lack of consideration for her mother, his absences when her brother and sister were born, and his ignorance of her mother's sacrifices, which included doing laundry in the public washhouse and picking olives to aid her husband in jail and feed the four children. At the same time, she attempts an ideological "rapprochement" with a party that continues to change, a party that no longer represents the ideal that she and her father first espoused.

Following her return to Catalonia in 1971, Pàmies devoted herself with characteristic energy to a career as a novelist. In the first decade, she published fourteen books in Catalan and four in Castilian, a rapidity suggesting that many must have been written wholly or partly in exile. When the Catalan daily *Avui* was established in 1976, she became a regular contributor, later writing also for the leftist Castilian weekly news magazine *Triunfo*. Her interest in women's problems and issues led to articles for women's magazines, including such nonfeminist publications as *Hogar y moda*.

MAJOR THEMES

Pàmies possesses an extraordinarily rich store of personal experience upon which to draw for her literary accounts; her themes and plots are almost without exception autobiographically grounded. Frequently repeated topics include labor conflicts, working-class problems, the organization of workers' parties, and political imprisonment. Political motifs appear insistently in *Crònica de la vetlla*

(1976; "Chronicle of Vespers"), set in Balaguer, where both Pàmies and her father participated with passionate enthusiasm in local politics. Prior to the Civil War, the most left-leaning Spanish political organization was the radical faction of the Socialist Party, to which she and her father belonged; the Communist Party became increasingly prominent with the war's outbreak, and was the only organized opposition to Franco. In exile both belonged to the Communist Party, (officially known in some countries as Socialist).

In Pàmies's writing, the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–30) and early years of the Republic are evoked together with ideological rivalries among Socialist Party dissidents and the leftists' bitter, treacherous infighting, which Pàmies highlights more than the conflicts between Right and Left or the differences between the rich and the poor. Her intense involvement in these struggles and their role in her father's career are echoed in *Testament à Praga*. Ideological strife occupies less of the foreground in *Memòria dels morts* (1981; *Memoria de los muertos* 1981; "Memoir of the Dead"), a dreamlike reconstruction of the past provoked by a return to Balaguer and the discovery of her mother's grave, a surreal encounter with her mother's spirit that enabled Pàmies to experience peace. In this book, Teresa recalls learning that her mother was drowned in July 1942 under mysterious circumstances, variously interpreted as suicide, political intrigue, or vengeance. With her family in exile and her husband accused of war crimes, some wanted to bury her in a potter's field, but Tomás's brother intervened, paying excessive charges so that the devout Rosa could receive a Christian burial.

Ideology is likewise prominent in many of Pàmies's works focusing upon exile; modification of ideologies over time is a theme. The Spanish Civil War is another pervasive major theme that appears in *Crònica de la vetlla* and *Romanticismo militante* (1976; "Militant Romanticism"). War's shadow also looms in her novelized, romanticized biography of the fiery Communist orator La Pasionaria, *Una Espanyola llamada Dolores Ibarruri* (1977; "A Spanish Woman Named Dolores Ibarruri") and in *Records de guerra i d'exili* (1976; "Recollections of War and Exile"). Occasionally present in *Testament à Praga* and *Memòria dels morts*, war occupies center stage in *Quan érem capitans* (1974; "When We Were Captains"), winner of the Joan Estelrich Prize. Subtitled "Memoirs of That War," this novelistic memoir depicts civil conflict from the committed Socialist perspective of a young woman familiar with many historical figures personally known to Pàmies. The pain and sorrow of losing the war and the anguish of exodus are passionately re-created.

The autobiographical basis of the theme of exile and exiles is too evident and significant to be termed a substratum; like war, it is a traumatic experience for Pàmies and much of her generation. Together with love of the Catalan homeland, exile—already prominent in *Testament à Praga*—becomes the primary, nearly exclusive focus of *Cròniques de naufrags* (1977; "Chronicles of Shipwreck Survivors") and *Gent del meu exili* (1975; "Unforgettable Characters of My Exile"), in which it is portrayed from the perspective of others. Composed in

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epistolary form, *Cròniques de naufrags* comprises experiences of some forty refugees of varying ages who struggle to survive with dignity in extremely trying circumstances. Still more personal is *Gent del meu exili*. The reader senses that Pàmies actually knew the people described, while the “letters” might have been stories heard from other exiles rather than trials witnessed at close quarters. Enormous pathos pervades these descriptions of war’s innocent victims, predominantly women and children: the crazed woman whose three-year-old son was sacrificed in the Nazi holocaust; aging French sisters dying of cancer in Mexico; outcasts in a strange, reclusive world, imprisoned by loneliness and despair.

Works viewing exile from the perspective of Pàmies herself are *Quan érem refugiats* (1975; “When We Were Refugees”) and *Va ploure tot el dia* (1974; “It’s Going to Rain All Day”), a finalist for the Prudenci Bertrana Prize. In the latter work, a Catalan woman exile returning home after thirty years spends a rainy day lost in memories prompted by police questioning. *Quan érem refugiats* is an autobiographical text depicting the trials of women in French refugee camps and jails, the passage to South America, and life in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, all experienced firsthand by Pàmies. Interspersed are grim glimpses of Catalonia, treated harshly by Franco as a consequence of traditional Catalan separatism and the deeper rooting there of leftist and liberal parties. Homer’s *Odyssey* has been seen as the prototype of exile literature, with the hero’s twenty years of wandering. Wandering is still more prolonged for Pàmies and her characters, with the further difference that the woman’s point of view, the plight of innocent victims, and the antiheroic nature of internment and incarceration provide striking contrast with the heroic prototype.

Newfound postwar Spain provides three major themes or facets of Pàmies’s work: clandestine resistance to Franco; the difficulties faced by the defeated and the profiteering and abuses at the hands of the victors; and variants on travel books wherein Pàmies visits areas of Spain previously unknown to her. Four of the latter seem strangely atypical and out of context in Pàmies’s overall production. The travel books explore the concept of the journey topos, life as a voyage; and unlike anything previously undertaken by Pàmies, their purpose is enjoyment. Earlier ideological preoccupations and political intent are relegated to the background in *Busque-me à Granada* (1980; “Seek Me in Granada”), *Matins de l’Aran* (1982; “Mornings in the Aran Valley”), *Rosalía no hi era* (1982; “Rosalía Wasn’t There”), and *Vacances aragoneses* (1979; “Vacation in Aragon”).

The four travel works divide naturally into two groups, according to the author’s relative familiarity with the areas: those closely resembling Catalonia—*Matins de l’Aran* and *Vacances aragoneses*, involving regions contiguous to Pàmies’s native Pyrenees—and those with more “exotic” culture, history, and appearance, *Busque-me à Granada* and *Rosalía no hi era*. In her book on Galicia and Rosalía de Castro, feminism is again a prominent theme, as the author’s visit to the beloved province of the nineteenth-century poet inspires a sense of

identification with this literary foremother. Rosalía's status as a writer in a minority language of the peninsula (outlawed under Franco, as was Catalan), her loss of her mother and her experience of the loss of a child, and her devotion to the cause of the peasants are points of similarity with which Pàmies identifies strongly. Rosalía's criticism of male insensitivity and the suffering undergone by unwed mothers and illegitimate children also strikes a responsive chord in Pàmies (Rosalía herself was the offspring of an affair between a priest and an unmarried country girl). Pàmies attempts to re-create Rosalía as woman: her words, her thoughts, her life—and her early death from cancer.

Clandestine resistance to Franco is a major concern in *Amor clandestí* (1976; "Clandestine Love") and *Dona de pres*, both employing a woman's perspective on illegal political activism and depicting ways that political circumstances intrude upon private lives and change private feelings. *Dona de pres*, obviously inspired by Pàmies's primal family, recounts the life of Neus, a convent-educated daughter of the small-town mercantile bourgeoisie in postwar Catalonia. She is swept off her feet by a member of the underground resistance, has an affair with him, and bears him a son. Her married lover is imprisoned, while pregnant Neus is ostracized and disowned. Facing life as a single parent and unmarried mother in a rigid, Victorian society, and stigmatized as "the prisoner's woman," she steadfastly makes herself his emotional and financial mainstay. She serves as the "secretary" of the illiterate wives of other prisoners, leads campaigns to improve their lot, and raises her son to revere his father as a hero. "Sisterhood," although never named by Pàmies, is a strong subtheme and among the virtues possessed by nearly all her heroines. Feminist themes—as important as the political ones in many of Pàmies's books—often echo her perception of her mother's sacrifices and her father's egotism. Emotional abuse (through infidelity, neglect, and verbal assault), financial exploitation, and abandonment of wives appear frequently, as do the neglect and abandonment of children. Unwanted pregnancies and the inaccessibility of contraceptives and abortion are repeated in a number of works, along with the double standards of morality and conduct, which are uniformly portrayed as causes of women's suffering.

A more contemporaneous view of post-Franco Spain appears in *Cartes al fill recluta* (1984; "Letters to My Son the Recruit"). Centered on the narrative viewpoint of a mother writing to her son in military service, two temporal planes intersect: one corresponds to a series of letters written regularly by the mother over many months; the other, which she writes upon a single occasion of emotional stress, is stimulated by the abortive military coup attempted by conservatives wishing to reassert Falangist control by occupying the Cortes (Spanish Parliament) on February 23, 1984. Fragments of the single long missive alternate with the periodic notes, showing the traumatic effect on Pàmies (and other returned exiles) of the threat to Spain's democracy. Save for this work, political concerns become less important in Pàmies's writings after *Memòria dels morts* in 1981, being symbolically laid to rest along with her mother.

Another, earlier work whose major concern is political—although not inspired

primarily by Spanish politics—is *Si vas a París, papá . . .* (1975; “If You Go to Paris, Daddy . . .”). The leftist student revolts of May 1968 in France inspire a meditation on French ideals (intuited or experienced during nearly twelve years of exile in that country) and their connections with contemporary Catalan political issues. Obviously, the year 1968 (which also saw the “Prague Springtime” and Russian suppression of that movement, as evoked with anguish in *Testament à Praga*) symbolizes for Pàmies the abyss that separates revolutionary dreams from the conservative and repressive actions of established governments of any political persuasion whatsoever. Another recent title by Pàmies, *Praga* (1987; “Prague”), although ostensibly one of a series of tourist guides to cities, recalls her disillusionment along with that of the Czech people. Covering the funeral of the Communist president, Klement Gottwald, for Radio Prague in 1953, she stressed for Spanish listeners the outpouring of grief, which was “authentic, because Czechs and Slovaks hadn’t yet felt the tremendous jolt of revelation of the crimes committed in the name of the Socialist homeland” (70). She refers to the slow erosion of ideals in the Socialist bloc as a malignant tumor, growing until 1968, “when Czech Communists themselves tried to extirpate it and regenerate the Republic” (71). Pàmies’s political maturation leaves her with sympathy for Socialist ideals but without radicalism; disillusioned, she is no longer unwilling to criticize Russia and other Communist nations.

Pàmies’s ideology has evolved more in political matters than in feminist ones. She writes knowingly of divergences between Trotskyites and Leninists and of obscure differences between Marxist splinter groups in Catalonia, and communicates lucid perceptions of evolving Communist dogmas. Her feminism reflects time’s passage less clearly: in comparison with younger feminists in Catalonia during the 1980s, Pàmies is unquestionably of another generation. More concerned with class than with gender (as is generally true of Third World feminism in its initial stages), she makes no mention of elimination of *machista* or sexist language, women’s personal and sexual fulfillment, or equal pay for equal work. She does not advocate lesbianism or attack marriage as an institution, nor does she address such issues as educational opportunities for women in prison, provision of day-care centers, or equal access to professional and managerial careers and promotions. Her feminist concerns include male egotism, the oppression and exploitation of women and neglect of women and children, women’s sacrifice to support their families in order to allow their husbands to pursue political or other goals, the nonexistence of divorce in Spain (prior to 1983), and lack of access to contraceptives and abortion. She treats adultery, but not subtler problems such as sex-role stereotyping, and tends to idealize mothers and motherhood—along with their exploitation. While she excoriates masculine vanity and insensitivity, Pàmies gives little thought to feminine self-realization beyond marital or quasi-marital relationships; even her female revolutionaries fall prey to masculine wiles.

Like her own mother, Pàmies’s heroines are hardworking and uncomplaining, as is the heroine of *Dona de pres*, who complies with the expectation of “con-

crete, daily abnegation, [and] constant resignation” (107). In the unexpectedly sentimental ending of the novel, Neus dies of tuberculosis, having deprived herself of medical care to devote herself to the prisoners’ causes. Her lack of awareness, of protest, contrasts with the heightened consciousness of women portrayed by younger Catalan feminists (Esther Tusquets, Maria Antònia Oliver, Montserrat Roig, and Carme Riera) or more mature ones, such as Mercè Rodoreda and Nùria Pompeia. Pàmies does not disdain occasional recourse to the melodramatic, and appears unaware of the paradox implicit in a feminism that patriarchally idealizes a woman’s sacrifice for men. On a personal level, she does not point out that her father’s chauvinism and womanizing contradicted his leftist advocacy of women’s emancipation, nor does she lament her mother’s lack of liberation, although her sympathy for such women is apparent throughout her work.

Pàmies’s texts repeatedly raise the theoretical problem of the relationships between autobiography and fiction, autobiography and truth. Although her father commanded her to copy his memoirs without changes or omissions, she was unable to resist “censoring” his amorous episodes (*Testament* 215), critiquing his inclusions and exclusions: “You devote folios and folios to your mistresses and girl friends and don’t mention important events which we, your children, witnessed. For example, that All Saints’ Day in 1926, a day we remember because that’s when María was born and you weren’t home” (217). The self-centeredness of Tomás’s memoirs runs counter to her expectations as a reader: “It’s in this matter that your memoirs disappoint me, Father” (219). Pàmies argues that her father’s “biography” cannot give short shrift to her mother, because only thanks to her abnegation was he able to be what he was (220). Questioning the “truth” in autobiography, of real concern to contemporary critical theorists, is of necessity relevant to readers of Pàmies’s other writings as well. Even her ostensible guide to Prague is filled with personal reminiscence and political judgments, along with her comments on Czech poets, music, theater, hotels, restaurants, monuments, night life, history, and bookstores, and repeated contrasts of the “tourists’ Prague” with the working-class areas and neighborhoods known only to long-term residents that she experienced as an exile.

Implicitly, Pàmies raises questions of reception aesthetics and reader-response theory, as well as the correlation between author and narrator, author and character or persona, writer and audience. And when she discusses her own recollection of Tomás’s “testament” with relatives in Barcelona a few years later, she is interrupted by shouts: “Your father couldn’t possibly have thought that. Never!” (220). In addition to questions raised by reader-response theory as to the integrity and reliability of the text, Pàmies herself is challenged as editor and narrator, in regard to her obvious subjectivity, her “censoring” of her father’s memoirs, and her evolving ideological biases. Readers must exercise caution in extracting “facts” from her autobiographically based texts. Undoubtedly the safest way to read them is as fiction inspired by some of this century’s most significant historical events.

Rural Catalonia, the growth of working-class political consciousness, the organization of political parties in the villages, and the relationship between Catalan interests and those of the central government are emotionally charged issues, as is the ideological strife preceding and imbuing the Spanish Civil War. The bitter infighting within leftist organizations in Spain and abroad, the trauma of war and exile, the anguish of exodus and the loss of family, the drama of clandestine resistance and persecution of the defeated—these are themes almost impossible to treat with objectivity, themes that are central to Pàmies's life and work. It is equally difficult to address feminist questions dispassionately. Pàmies, however, never pretends to be objective or dispassionate: Her recurrent themes are repeated within a variety of contexts, viewed from different moments in her life, and occasionally modified enough for the reader to become familiar with the external stimuli as well as the internal reactions from a variety of perspectives.

SURVEY OF CRITICISM

Due in part to her long exile (which made her an unknown in Spain), as well as to her writing primarily in a "minority" or vernacular language, Pàmies has received little critical attention. Unknown to the literary community and critical "establishment" alike until relatively late in life (her first novel was published when she was fifty-two), she was an obscure figure even in Catalonia until the mid-1970s. Most of the critical commentary has been written by Catalans, primarily in the post-Franco era, and reflects the political as well as the tendentious and journalistic aspects of her work.

Book reviews in such newspapers and periodicals as *Destino*, *La Vanguardia*, and *El Correo Catalán*, the vernacular *Avui*, and similar outlets, form nearly the totality of secondary works.

When Pàmies's first novel appeared in Spain, daily newspapers in Catalan were still not allowed by the Franco regime, and the Castilian press took little notice of writing in the vernacular languages (Catalan, Galician, Basque). The fact that Pàmies published her works in such rapid succession (two works in 1974, four in 1975, seven in 1976, and four more before the end of the decade) may also have interfered with early critical studies. The absorbing nature of events in Spain during this period of transition to democracy likewise distracted would-be critics.

Pàmies is not mentioned in literary histories, not even those in Catalan, with the exception of J. M. Serviá's *Catalunya. Tres generacions*, in which she is studied as part of three coexisting literary "generations" in Catalonia. There are few relevant scholarly treatments of any length, no analytical essays, and no study of her complete works beyond an introductory overview (Pérez, *Contemporary Women Writers*). Not only are there no structuralist or formalist exegeses of her novels, there are not even sociological or Marxist approaches (to which Pàmies's writing would be especially amenable). Nor are there dissertations or thematic or linguistic studies, despite the fact that her use of language

and dialogue invites examination. There are no biographies, apart from her autobiographical writings. Only isolated aspects have been studied, as in the brief article by María Lourdes Möller-Soler, who in ten pages examines the impact of the Civil War on the life and works of Pàmies and two other Catalan women novelists. The only other article of any length, by Genaro Pérez, focuses upon the importance of mother and homeland as remembered in exile and "recovered" after the exile's return. The remainder of the scant bibliography on Pàmies comes almost exclusively from generally inaccessible reviews, usually brief and impressionistic, occasionally somewhat polemic. The criticism is far from proportional to Pàmies's importance as a chronicler of war, revolution, and exile; but neglect of women writers is too frequent and widespread for this to cause surprise. Pàmies stands almost alone in her generation as witness to women's participation in some of the major events of twentieth-century Spanish history.

NOTE

1. All quotations are from the Castilian editions.

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Translations

There are no translations in English of works by Teresa Pàmies. Several of her works are available in Castilian, although it is difficult to know which are translations and which she originally wrote in that language, as she writes with equal facility in both Castilian and Catalan. In some cases, titles appeared simultaneously in both languages. Eight of the titles mentioned above appear to have been published only in Castilian; those listed below are cases where it is clear that the Castilian version appeared later (or that the original was in Catalan).

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