

# Translation of an Interview with Elena Poniatowska

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*Elena Poniatowska, the French-born Mexican journalist and writer, is undoubtedly a major representative of what is known as “literatura documental o testimonial” (“documentary or eye-witness literature”). The genre, very much alive in Latin America today, especially among writers in exile, comprises a growing collection of works of a documentary, fictional or semifictional nature which capture and/or denounce the atmosphere of unrest, the socio-economic problems, and the political upheavals of the last twenty years or so.*

*Ms. Poniatowska’s preoccupation with social causes and with the lot of the underprivileged, in particular, with that of her “pobre, pobrecito país” (“poor, poor dear country”), is well-known and has been admirably expressed in each of her thirteen books, most of whose titles she gives below, with illuminating comments on the genesis or background of some of them.*

*I first “met” Elena Poniatowska, the acute journalist, sensitive interviewer, poignant writer and penetrating critic some ten years ago, when a friend lent me a copy of *La noche de Tlatelolco* (translated as *Massacre in Mexico*), indicating that I would be fascinated with it. I couldn’t put down this book full of the whispers, voices, cries and screams of those who, through Ms. Ponia-*

*towska, are able to tell us about the significance, the very dimensions of the tragic days of that painfully unforgettable October of 1968. Many of her works have been translated into French, Italian, German, Polish, and Czechoslovakian, as well as English.*

*When Elena Poniatowska was granted the highly regarded Villaurrutia Prize for *La noche de Tlatelolco*, she rejected it. In an open letter to then President Luis Echeverría—successor to President Díaz Ordaz, who had declared himself responsible for the massacre—she wrote that hers was a book about death, about a horrible massacre, and that it was not something “para festejarse ni para festejarse” (“to be rewarded or celebrated”). In concluding her letter, she asked President Echeverría, “Quién va a premiar a los muertos?” (“Who is going to reward the dead?”).*

*I finally met Elena Poniatowska on a visit of Mexico in the summer of 1982. For me she “created” a half-hour between two previously arranged and consecutive appointments, one on behalf of her housemaid who wanted to become a teacher, and another with two Chinese diplomats who were kept patiently waiting while Elena was answering my last questions. This conversation with one of Latin America’s most*

*respected writers was for me an extremely satisfying experience, and my first interview.*

### Interview<sup>1</sup>

Q: Shall we start with a few biographical and literary data?

PONIATOWSKA: All right. I was born in Paris in 1933. When World War II was almost over I came to Mexico because my mother, whose maiden name is Amor, is Mexican. I went to an English school, "The Windsor School," and afterward finished high school at the "Holy Heart" Convent in Philadelphia. Then, in Mexico once again. I found myself involved in journalism from one day to the next, with the *Excelsior*, beginning in 1954.

Q: So it is with the *Excelsior* that you were initiated?

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, that's where I first started with journalism. And I continued with it for almost twenty-eight years, from 1954 to the present, actually ... and in that time I also wrote thirteen books. In 1978 I won the National Journalism Award, and it was the first time that a woman received it in my country. And then I also received some other literary awards.

Q: What did you start out with: journalism or literature?

PONIATOWSKA: I worked at both at the same time. It was a simultaneous effort. The first literary work I published, *Lilus Kikus* came out in 1954. *Lilus Kikus* initiated an entire series, that of *Los Presentes*, in which later on Carlos Fuentes became known with *Los días enmascarados*, and José Emilio Pacheco....

Q: And what came after *Lilus Kikus* ...?

PONIATOWSKA: Well, next I wrote *Melés y Teleo*, a play that pokes fun at intellectuals. It's

meant to be a satire on "Me lees y te leo" ("You read me and I read you"), and I converted them into two Greek characters, Meles and Teleo, that end up killing each other, bashing each other's head in, because it's a satire on "Si tú me lees, yo te leo a ti" ("If you read me, I'll read you"). That piece came out in 1955, I think. Then I published a book of interviews called *Palabras cruzadas*, interviews with people that are dead by now—not all of them though—like Diego Rivera, Lázaro Cárdenas, Fidel Castro; a few Frenchmen, François Mauriac ... and a whole series of people, Zavattini.... That book was published almost twenty-five years ago. Next there was a volume of poetry, *Rojo de vida y negro de muerte*. Three of those poems appeared in Carlo Coccioli's anthology. Then I published *Todo empezó el domingo*, a book on how poor people spend their Sundays. After that *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* came out; that's about a woman who brought about the Mexican Revolution and who received absolutely nothing in return from her country.... Then there is *La noche de Tlatelolco* on the student movement of '68, a book which has had tremendous response from students ... it's going into its fortieth edition. Then I published *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*, then, *Fuerte es el silencio*, and also a book of photographs with Mariana Yampolsky called *La casa en la tierra*.

Q: Is that your last book to date?

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, it's the last book.

Q: Let's return to the first one then... *Lilus Kikus* is full of children's fantasy, of curiosity, of love.... As Rulfo puts it so well, it is "a book of dreams; the gentle dreams of a girl called Lilus Kikus...." Are these dreams, perhaps, those of your own childhood, your memories, your experiences?

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, *Lilus Kikus* is a story of childhood, a story that may be autobiographical, or perhaps woven of the lives of several

friends of the same age and with similar experiences.

**Q:** You said earlier that you spent time in Philadelphia, in a convent, just as Lilus Kikus does in the last chapter.

**PONIATOWSKA:** Yes, the part about the convent is also a chapter from my own experience.

**Q:** Speaking of personal experience, and seeing that the theme of the tragedy of Tlatelolco is a recurrent one in your work: did you participate directly in any way in the movement of '68?

**PONIATOWSKA:** Directly, no. I went to a few demonstrations and attended a few other events. I came to know the students very well, but I never involved myself actively for the simple reason that I was not a student.

**Q:** You've dedicated most of your works to Jan...

**PONIATOWSKA:** Yes, to Jan, my brother, who died at the age of 21...

**Q:** ... in '68. Was he one of the many victims?

**PONIATOWSKA:** No, Jan was not killed in the student movement. He was at the university, but he died in a car accident on December 8 of that year.

**Q:** It appears that '68 was a doubly tragic year for you. In *Fuerte es el silencio*, where I think you more or less gather the events of a decade, the struggle of '68 once again takes over your writing and you devote just under fifty pages to it, not counting the twenty or so photographs you have included there....

**PONIATOWSKA:** Yes, you are completely right. That book does contain the events of a decade or so, from '68 to the present, to be exact. But besides this chronicle of sorts of the student

movement of '68, there are four other stories: that of the "angels of the city," people who have come here into the midst of misery to live, filling the city to bursting; there is a section on the hunger strike of the mothers of political prisoners and of those who "disappeared" in 1978; there is also a story on those declared "missing," and there are many of them, Argentinians as well as Mexicans. And finally, in the last section of the book, I write about what happened in 1973 to the colony of Rubén Jaramillo in Cuernavaca.

**Q:** One of the most striking aspects in the majority of your works is the element of "documentation," whether in direct form—photographs, interviews, literal transcriptions of radio communiqués, etc.—or indirectly, as, for example, when you fictionalize a real person, such as Jesusa Palancares. Do you feel that your work as a journalist has had a structural influence, or any other, for that matter, on your literary work?

**PONIATOWSKA:** Naturally, I would say. Books of the testimonial type, like *La noche de Tlatelolco*, and *Fuerte es el silencio* are obvious chronicles, except for the section on the colony of Rubén Jaramillo, which is more of a reality-based fiction: I never knew Güero Medrano, never knew any of the characters I speak of there. I visited the colony of Rubén Jaramillo only twice, but found enough suggestions there to want to write a story on it.... Naturally that was done from a journalist's point of view. Had I not been a journalist for 28 years, I don't believe I would be writing that sort of book. It is tied entirely to my journalistic work. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is based on my conversations with Jesusa. I had started to tape them but stopped when she found herself disturbed by the tape recorder. After that, I would spend my nights reconstructing and writing down what she had told me. The other stories, too, are always based on reality. You'd agree, wouldn't you, that generally speaking I am not a writer of fiction?

Q: But your short stories are fiction, aren't they?

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, they are, but on the whole it is a fiction based on fact. It is not a literature of the fantastic...

Q: I agree absolutely. It is not a literature of the fantastic. Reality sneaks in wherever you look. There's Jesusa Palancares for instance: she is the principal character in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, and you also mention her in the paper you read here at the Fourth Inter-American Congress of Women Writers....

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, I'm always bringing up her name.....

Q: Maybe you think of her as embodying the Mexican woman in some way?

PONIATOWSKA: No, not the Mexican woman. I see her as someone unique. She is not the typical Mexican mama: that devoted, humble, submissive person. The woman Jesusa is fundamentally a rebel. She is not submissive. Therefore, I don't believe that she represents the Mexican woman, but that she does honor to the Mexican woman.

Q: Since that great woman appears so often in your work, would you say that Jesusa Palancares has had an effect on your own life?

PONIATOWSKA: Undoubtedly... I believe she has had a very decisive influence on me. I always feel that everything I think and do, my books, the things I write, everything has a little aftertaste of Jesusa... I had known of social injustices and all that before, but in truth she is the reason that I became aware of the great injustice that was being done to the very poor people of Mexico.

Q: And in your work you denounce that injustice, and often you give a voice to a great number of these people. Griselda Gambaro said that "wri-

ting is not a gratuitous act," that for her it is "an act of inexorable necessity, of responsibility and lucidity." Could you say why you write? And for whom?

PONIATOWSKA: I write because I like to, because I've been doing it for many years, because it's my way of living on earth and of being—therefore I write. Not because I feel that I have a specific function or a certain audience. I don't really know who reads my things... I've written books to give a voice to those without one, to those who are always silent....

Q: You're referring especially to *Fuerte es el silencio*, aren't you?

PONIATOWSKA: Yes, *Fuerte es el silencio* is one of those books. But in *La noche de Tlatelolco* I also gathered the testimony of students, of housewives—of people, in short, who were never going to have access to the media.

Q: Do you think that you can change reality with your books, that literature can effect life in some form, no matter how small?

PONIATOWSKA: I'm not pretentious enough to think that literature influences people's lives. Literature is a trade like any other, and I don't think it changes a thing in the world. I'd like to be able to change it, but literature is not politics. If literature would count, or if it had any sort of influence, monstrosities such as Israel's invasion of Lebanon or any of the wars we have experienced would not happen. I think there have been around 137 wars in the last few years, a vast number of barbarous wars and a vast number of atrocities committed.... Literature sees itself as preaching the opposite. There has never been a literature of assassination or such. What this shows, then, is that the influence literature exerts on life or on politics is less than nothing. And furthermore, I, who am working in an illiterate country, where many people cannot read, where books are luxury objects—even more so now with

the devaluation—because they cost far too much, I cannot pretend that my literature is changing anything. The only thing that I as a journalist and as a writer can do is to denounce. And that is what I am doing. I try to denounce.

Q: For awhile now people—literary critics mainly—have talked much about the existence or non-existence of a “female style of writing,” whether or not a text written by a woman has special characteristics. Griselda Gambaro says that “we write what we are.” As a woman-writer, would you call your style of writing “female,” or perhaps “feminist?”

PONIATOWSKA: Well, I do believe that I write as a woman. The fact that I chose a female character like Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* is proof in itself that I see myself as obviously aligned with women. But I don’t know if my writing is female or feminist. I don’t think it is. I believe that simply all I am trying to do is to write, to write to the best of my ability.

Besides, I had done it for many years before there was talk of feminist movements, or before they even existed, especially in Mexico, or before *fem* magazine was published. What I’m saying is that I don’t think that my work carries a purely feminist stamp, even though I feel that something within me is constantly coming to the aid of women. In *Fuerte es el silencio* also, the female characters always achieve heroic stature.

Q: When you say—in the paper we mentioned earlier—that “a true women’s literature has to come as part of the great flood of the literature of the oppressed,” are you speaking of all literature written by women?

PONIATOWSKA: No, not of all women writers, but of certain ones, those who want to be that way, who want their voices to be part of the voice of the oppressed, those, that is, who are defending social causes. But there are many women who do not do that—and aren’t they within their rights? Borges is probably the great-



Elena Poniatowska (Mexico, 1982).

est of Latin American writers, and his political stance is not something one can support or with which one could be in agreement, for we cannot be in accord with Pinochet or with the things he has stood for. Yet at the same time he is a great writer, possibly the greatest writer in Latin America.

Q: Which ones do you include among those women writers who work within that "literature of the oppressed" that you speak of?

PONIATOWSKA: Well, there is of course Marta Traba from Argentina who wrote a great novel on political disappearances, on the political struggle in Argentina and other Latin American countries.

Q: You're thinking of *Conversación al sur*, aren't you?

PONIATOWSKA: Exactly, I think it is an extraordinary novel. In this country, María Lusía Puga has also written some things on the oppressed. Yet Marta Traba is clearly the one who has committed herself the most, the deepest. And before her, you could say that Rosario Castellanos did it in her writing of the indigenous population. And others, too, in certain ways; Elena Garro, for example.

Q: But as you yourself have said, "women have not been women's best friends."

PONIATOWSKA: True. Take Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi. They represent power, any person in power, not a man in power but *anyone* in power.... It is always said that women practice those virtues that men don't have time to practice, and that is not true. All that stuff about the "feminine condition," that we are submissive and devoted, all this is more lip service paid to an image than the truth, for the minute a woman obtains power, she acts as the man in power does.

Q: Leaving aside literature and politics... do you think that in the cinema one could say that women have been their own best friends?

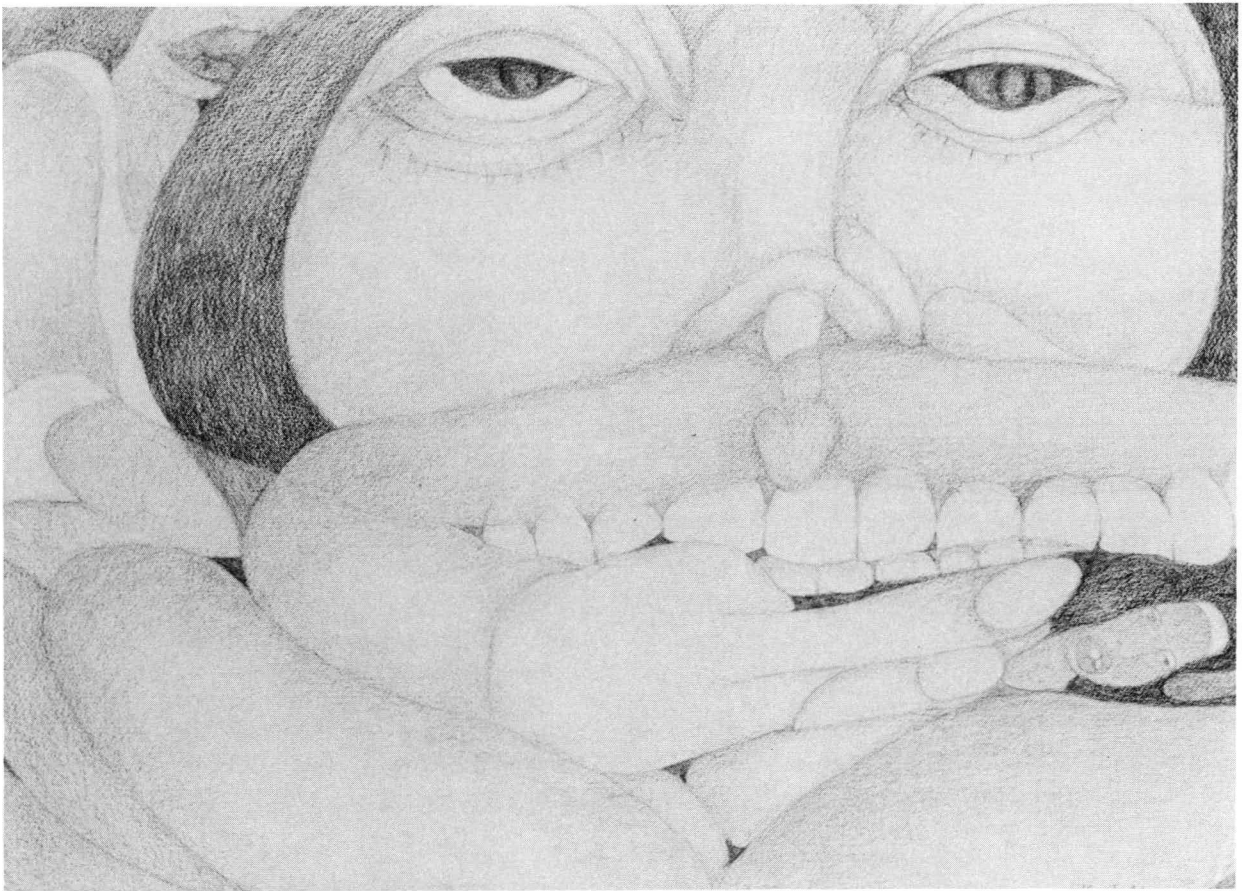
PONIATOWSKA: Of course not. In my paper I speak of Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmuller. In my view, these two have presented a tremendously perverse and cruel vision of women. Just the same, however, the opposite will hold true. Joyce Bunuel, for instance, made a film in France entitled "*La jument à vapeur*" ("The Steam-powered Mare"), which is on the conditions of women, and it is a film that tells the truth of a woman's life and of the loneliness she feels. There is one scene where all the home appliances (the blender, the dishwasher, the washer and dryer, the mixer) start up at the same time and make a hellish racket. And there is the women, queen of the hearth, in the middle of all these machines that are like a little inferno. Not because they really are, that is, but because the woman is so tied to the simple duties of the home...so...it is almost like a jail, if one cannot break away...

Q: ...as you can do with your writing.... And by the way, what are you writing at the present moment?

PONIATOWSKA: A book on Tina Modotti, the Italian photographer, who lived in Mexico and who died in 1942, alone in the taxi, of a heart attack. She had also been in the Spanish Civil War, and she was the lover of and model for Edward Weston, the well-known American photographer.

#### NOTES

1. This interview took place in July 1982 in the home of Elena Poniatowska in Mexico City.



*PINK FEROCIOUS MOUTH* (graphite and coloured pencil), by Sharron Zenith Corne, 1982.