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## Can the Female Muse Speak? Chacel and Poniatowska Read Against the Grain

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From Lesbia to Beatrice, from La Maga to Dora Maar, the histories of art and literature abound with female muses whose role is often limited to silently confirming the greatness of male genius. But sometimes a change of perspective is enough to subvert this predominantly masculine perspective. Sometimes patriarchal authority starts to crumble simply when the women behind the men start to speak, thus becoming the subjects of their own discourse and not the mere objects of the artistic gaze. This is exactly what Rosa Chacel and Elena Poniatowska accomplish in *Teresa* (1941) and *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* (1978), two fictionalized (auto)biographical texts about Teresa Mancha, the famous lover of the Spanish Romantic poet José de Espronceda, and Angelina Beloff, long-time partner of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.<sup>1</sup>

These works relate to the specific context in which they were written; they appropriate and subvert the existing sources providing information on their protagonists — sources which privilege the male perspective. As it turns out, the authors themselves had to struggle for recognition in a male-dominated environment. While Chacel wrote her first novels in the misogynist cultural milieu dominated by philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, Poniatowska's work as a journalist in the 1950s and 1960s was mainly confined to interviewing prominent men — among others, Diego Rivera himself. Poniatowska's interviews with Rivera already hint at an ambivalent posture toward the painter. In spite of her admiration for him, she is disturbed by the obvious fact that he refuses to take her seriously because she is a woman. Chacel had similar problems with Ortega, whom she saw as her literary tutor but who failed to do her justice.

In the late twenties, Ortega suggested that Chacel write a novelized biography of Espronceda's muse, Teresa Mancha. Although she started the project in 1930 and finished it six years later, *Teresa* was not published until 1941 in Buenos Aires, where Chacel was living in exile. The writing process had been arduous; Chacel had not been able to find much reliable information on her protagonist. As she

confesses in a preface to the 1963 edition, however, she was able to turn this necessity into a virtue. The relative lack of source material allowed her to focus on “the poetic truth, that is, *the truth*: the fact that Teresa’s biography, without her doing a thing, was part of Spanish poetry, because her written life is the ‘Canto a Teresa.’”<sup>2</sup> This 1839 Canto, an elegy Espronceda wrote after the death of his former lover (later incorporated into *El diablo mundo*, his failed and unfinished magnum opus), is indeed Chacel’s principal source. Her reading of the poem, however, is refreshingly unfaithful to its canonical interpretation.

*Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* consists of twelve letters written by Angelina “Quiela” Beloff to her ex-companion Diego Rivera. After sharing his life with Beloff for ten years, the painter left her in Paris when he returned to Mexico in 1921. The initial plan was for Rivera to save money and, after a time, send for Angelina. But once back in Mexico he changed his mind — or at least this appears to be the case since she never heard from him again. Beloff’s letters, written between October 19, 1921, and July 22, 1922, are thus a monologue recording a painful separation from an utterly non-responsive Rivera. It takes Beloff exactly nine months finally to get on with her life.

Like Chacel’s *Teresa*, *Querido Diego* is only in part fictional. Poniatowska’s text is based on Bertram Wolfe’s renowned biography, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, which includes a series of authentic fragments of Beloff’s letters to the painter. Poniatowska appropriates these fragments, reshuffles and dates them, and supplements them with texts of her own invention. Both *Teresa* and *Querido Diego*, then, are presented as fictionalized biographies written by and about women but based on sources written by men. The following shows how both authors invert the viewpoint of these sources.

### *Teresa*

Although Chacel starts out from the “Canto a Teresa,” her reading is a highly selective one which makes maximum use of the source text’s inherent ambiguity — an ambiguity which the poem’s conventional interpretation has mostly chosen to ignore. While the Canto generally has been read as a detailed account of Teresa’s downfall from angelic purity to a state of corruption, it is in fact far more ambivalent than this standard reading has wanted to admit. It can be argued that in the poem Espronceda’s feelings for Teresa do not just express disgust at his lover’s blemished purity but that there is also a good amount of compassion for her lot. As Chacel herself later explained, rather than taking the whole the poem as her starting point she decided to focus on one specific stanza which she thought especially revealing: “I found three verses which spoke in a reliable way of the true Teresa, of

her nature and the projection of that nature on exterior reality" (11-12).<sup>3</sup> While in the rest of the Canto Teresa is reduced to a silent object of egocentric Romantic male love, in these verses she actually appears as a desiring subject:

Untamable spirit, violent soul,  
she lunges wildly, oh petty society,  
to rip down your barriers. (Espronceda 235)<sup>4</sup>

In order to get to this "real Teresa," however, Chacel had to dig through more than a century worth of literary gossip surrounding the scandalous love-affair. The prevailing accounts of the relationship had favored Espronceda's side of the story. The poet's biographer, José Cascales y Muñoz, had gone so far as to paint Espronceda as the naive, innocent victim of a calculating and egotistical Teresa.<sup>5</sup> Cascales had furthermore denounced Teresa as an incorrigibly bad mother who left Espronceda and their baby only a few months after giving birth, in the same way that she had left her first husband and son when fleeing with Espronceda a couple of years earlier (25). While Chacel actually talked to Cascales in her attempt to gather information on her subject, she chose to ignore his "endless gossip" — a decision entirely in accordance with her general strategy of reading sources against the grain, incorporating the facts they provided but ignoring or inverting their interpretation.

Chacel's Teresa is indeed a rebel. At the beginning of the novel we find her in Paris, caught in a loveless marriage from which she decides to flee after a chance meeting with Espronceda, the love of her youth. Following a brief, joyous time in Paris, the couple travels back to Spain. Although Teresa had looked forward to life in Madrid, she finds nothing but disappointment. The first days after their return Espronceda leaves her guessing at their public image, failing to indicate whether their relationship is going to be secret or whether, on the contrary, they will defy public morality by coming out into the open. Soon, however, the poet confesses that he cannot afford to offend his family with an amorous scandal of this kind. It is therefore decided that Teresa will live by herself in a house next-door to that of Espronceda's mother, where he can visit her when he wants to. Naturally, Teresa is hurt by Espronceda's lack of courage and commitment, but she chooses to hide her emotions:

And she agreed to everything, and behaved in such a reasonable way that she seemed an accomplice to that injustice committed in broad daylight, against a heart so full of love and devotion, a heart committed and hopeful. She clearly saw that she was weak, that her situation was without possible defense, and she did not want to humiliate herself by asking for compassion; she preferred to participate in the boldness, actively contributing to the cruelty. (98)<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this passage provides us with some interesting indications about the novel's take on the relationship. First, it is immediately clear that the narrator sides with Teresa. Despite the ambiguity inherent in Chacel's use of free indirect discourse, characterizations like "injustice" and "cruelty" are too explicit to attribute exclusively to the protagonist. Secondly, Teresa resigns herself to her situation only because she has no other options; she entirely depends on Espronceda's support. Third, Chacel shrewdly reveals the social conformism of the very poet who, in his literature, had become famous as a Romantic champion of social rebellion. As it turns out, Teresa is the only true rebel.

For now, however, she limits herself to silent resistance. As Espronceda's secret mistress, she tries to withstand the countless lascivious and judging gazes that assail her everywhere:

She felt a hundred gazes upon her which she would have to get to know day after day, even though she did not want to. She felt the gazes were ferocious, that they had joined forces to receive her, and when she avoided eye contact they defied her from the very moment of her entry into that orbit.... The people in town looked at her with surprise and ridicule, as if looking at a strange bird or a useless insect. The men in suits gave her insolent, impudent looks. (99, 106)<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this rejection by the "decent" members of Madrid society, Teresa also feels excluded from Espronceda's circle of male friends, whose visual assaults are no less offensive: "when looking at her they passed their eyes over her entire body as if it were their own territory" (121).<sup>8</sup> And as she becomes gradually aware, Espronceda himself is no exception. This impression is painfully confirmed when Teresa, while rummaging through an old trunk, finds a bundle of pornographic poems written in Espronceda's hand.<sup>9</sup> Reading them finally leads her to understand that her lover's view of women is ultimately just as vilifying as that of his companions:

Certainty at last! The truth, with its unredeemable appearance.... What was written on those papers did not reveal a betrayal, did not uncover a misstep; in face of this, her love ... was destroyed, smashed until its very roots. Even worse: it was denied, annulled. The kind of love that she had thought she had been experiencing could not have coexisted with that mire. (152)<sup>10</sup>

But however shocked and indignant Teresa is at the verses' evident misogyny, the discovery is an eye-opening experience insofar as it offers her a revealing peek into the dark caverns of the masculine ego:

The revealing clue, that sesame unexpectedly opened, disclosed the road to the deepest level of the male heart and there she found the most valuable qualities of women stepped upon, blackened, discarded with disdain.... (153)<sup>11</sup>

This passage is crucial. With mastery, Chacel completely inverts the Canto and, along with it, the entire ideology of Romanticism. In Espronceda's Romantic love poetry, women had been angelical creatures who, once touched, had turned into dirt and decay; as said before, the Canto itself has Teresa end up as "a pond of contaminated waters / stagnant in fetid mire."<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the poem is present throughout the novel; Chacel constantly alludes to it and sometimes even incorporates literal phrases. But in doing so she always manages to modify their original meaning. In this specific passage, for example, Teresa's reaction to Espronceda's poetic pornography not only echoes a key adjective from the Canto ["a *fetid* and unbreathable wave emanated from there" (153, my emphasis)],<sup>13</sup> but the narrator's observation that the discovery makes Teresa's "blindfold fall from her eyes" is an obvious allusion to the Canto's twenty-first stanza:

Who would have ever thought the day would come  
when, the heavenly enchantment lost  
and the blindfold fallen from the eyes,  
all that once gave pleasure would now stir our rage? (229)<sup>14</sup>

The essential difference is, of course, that the Canto's standard interpretation assumes that Espronceda, not Teresa, is the one who discovers the truth and sees his lover fall from her pedestal.

In Chacel's novel, Teresa lives three important moments of rebellion. Leaving her husband for Espronceda was a first act of protest against her family, her marriage, and society as a whole. Her third and final rebellious deed is her decision to leave Espronceda, which marks the beginning of Teresa's downfall ending in poverty and death. The second moment of resistance occurs in between, in Madrid. Exasperated by the silent condemnation of Madrid society, Teresa finally decides to face it with dignity by going to the theater in an impressive dress she made from old garments dyed in a fine red.

What she wanted to accomplish with her effort was not a perfect combination.... She wanted to create something that would have its own voice, something like a word which would captivate the listener with its decisive power, like a beauty of overwhelming strength which nobody would dare to resist. Above all, she wanted the man at her side to feel lifted up by her, signaled as the possessor of a sublime good. (125)<sup>15</sup>

As we see, Teresa has no other arms at her disposal than her physical appearance, and her wish to face up to society is closely linked to her desire that Espronceda be proud of her. But while she does, indeed, manage to stir up some admiration upon entering the theater that night, Espronceda himself is hardly impressed. Puzzled by his lack of enthusiasm, Teresa finally realizes that she has herself to

blame. She had revealed the humble history of the dress to him, thus destroying its “mystery” and, with it, all interest on her lover’s part (131). The episode helps her understand that she, as a woman, can be interesting to the men of her time only as long as she manages to veil herself in a similar cloud of mystery — an idea which Teresa refuses to accept:

She had never been able completely to convince herself of the fact that she would never triumph if she did not associate herself with mystery — the mystery she hated so! — but, even though she knew this, she destroyed mystery whenever she could. (131)<sup>16</sup>

Naturally, the Romantic ideal of the mysterious woman is not precisely conducive to communication across gender lines. Indeed, Teresa hardly ever reveals her true feelings to her lover:

[W]hatever the situation, never, never would she drop the weight of her worries on his momentum; she would carry them alone, serenely. Of course, if he knew of her decision never to ask him for help it would hurt him, but he did not need to know. Without understanding why, and even though he was some years older than she, it seemed to her that he was so young, that he knew so little about life. (92)<sup>17</sup>

If Teresa decides to keep her feelings inside, it is because she does not want to inhibit Espronceda’s *momentum*, that is, his artistic drive. She does not want to disturb his work. But the passage quoted above also suggests that Teresa’s subservient attitude originates in a sense of superiority on her part: she feels more mature than Espronceda even though he is older. Again, the fact that Chacel has us adopt Teresa’s perspective subtly reverses the account Espronceda gives us in the Canto. There it is the poet who claims the authority of life experience:

That I, like a flower which in the morning  
Opens its calyx to the dawning day,  
Ay! opened your young soul to love  
and exalted your innocent fantasy. (236)<sup>18</sup>

The strategy of ideological reversal employed in the fragments quoted above is active on the level of the text as a whole. To be sure, the novel maintains the binarism of purity and impurity which sustains the “Canto a Teresa”; but whereas the Canto has Teresa drop from heaven into the lowest mud, the novel allows her to stay pure while Espronceda, men, and society in general reveal themselves in all their baseness.<sup>19</sup> Chacel, then, successfully subverts the masculinist ideology of Romanticism — and, as we shall see below, that of her own time — by fighting it with its own discursive weapons. Some forty years later, Poniatowska would do the same.

*Querido Diego*

"I have tried to keep a distance from the man with whom I had so long an intimacy," Bertram Wolfe declares in the introduction to his Rivera biography (4-5). Despite these laudable intentions, however, Wolfe shows a clear sympathy for the muralist in the chapter in which he recounts the ending of Rivera's ten-year relationship with Polish painter Angelina Beloff (the chapter which contains the letter fragments that Poniatowska would later use as the basis for her text). It opens in 1921, just after Diego has left Angelina in Paris with the promise to send for her soon — a promise he was not planning to keep. Wolfe understands the tragedy of the situation — "Angelina," he writes, "was completely devoted to her lover" — but then goes on to blame Angelina for her own suffering:

Poor Angelina! Love cannot be compelled by pity. After years of intimate life with Diego, did she not know him well enough to perceive that all was over? ... Had he not let her know that his passion had long yielded to a feeling akin to fraternal? Had he not even brought to her, as to an unusually knowing friend and confidante, tales of his new passions for other women? ... His silences were eloquent. The cool spaces that lay between the lines of his dispatches of money should have told her. Did she not know him enough to understand how hard it would be for him to say directly, "I do not love you"? (128)

Wolfe unsubtly absolves Rivera. Appealing to what he considers common sense, he suggests Angelina should have known better than to hang on to a Rivera who had since long grown indifferent to her. In an even more suspicious move, Wolfe further attempts to justify Rivera's behavior by taking recourse to cultural stereotypes:

Perhaps the Russian way is for lovers to torture each other by lengthy analyses of their altered feelings, but the Latin hints more gracefully when he loves and with more subtlety when he grows indifferent. (128)

These passages are representative of Wolfe's overall discourse, and his depiction of Angelina tends, on the whole, to be negative.<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, Poniatowska's Angelina Beloff is very different from the one presented by Wolfe. Poniatowska, like Chacel, takes the woman's side. To be sure, "Quiela" is not at all like Teresa. If Teresa is a rebel, Quiela is submissive. Teresa accepts her lover's authority because society offers no alternatives, while Quiela does so out of her own free will, giving up her economic freedom.<sup>21</sup> Having studied at the Academy, Quiela has her art to express herself creatively where Teresa had to recur to sewing dresses. Still, Quiela sacrifices all these achievements by completely surrendering to Diego Rivera and embarking on a relationship which, as the reader has no trouble concluding, leaves her worse off than she started.



Indeed, Poniatowska's text makes it very clear that Diego and Quiela's relationship had been an extremely unequal one. While he completely submerged himself in his work, leaving his canvas only to fetch coals when the extreme winter cold made painting impossible, Quiela took care of all the rest and simply put herself at Diego's service: "I was sure that without me you wouldn't stop working even to eat" (5-6).<sup>22</sup> Quiela tries to justify her sacrifice by convincing herself that she is worth less than Rivera. As she writes in her next to last letter: "I always tried to make your life easier so that you could paint in spite of our poverty. Even now I would be satisfied to mix your colors, clean your palette, keep your brushes in perfect condition" (78-79).<sup>23</sup> "Quiela, you have been a good woman for me," she recalls Diego once saying. "By your side I can work as if I were alone. You never interfered" (79).<sup>24</sup> Quiela, correspondingly, bases all her sense of worth on her relationship with Rivera: "without you, I am insignificant, my worth is determined by your love for me and I exist for others to the degree that you love me" (12).<sup>25</sup>

Not until the fourth letter are there signals that Angelina is beginning to recover from Rivera's absence. At the same time it starts to become clear that Diego's departure might have been a blessing in disguise.<sup>26</sup>

"Yesterday," the letter opens,

I spent the morning at the Louvre, ... and I am dazzled. When I used to go with you, Diego, I listened to you with admiration, I shared your fervor because everything from you inspires me with such enthusiasm, but yesterday it was different. I felt, Diego, and it made me so happy. (16)<sup>27</sup>

Apparently, Diego's presence impeded Quiela's aesthetic experience. Now that this ability has returned, she also recuperates her inspiration. Coming home after the museum visit she takes Diego's canvas off the easel and starts painting.<sup>28</sup> The next letter, dated two weeks later, recounts the creative eruption which follows this break and which ends with Angelina's catching a serious cold.

In the same letter, Angelina tells us about her first years as a painter. She remembers being considered a promising artist; "I thought," she confesses, "I really possessed something wonderful.... Now I know that something else is needed" (22-23).<sup>29</sup> This is a strange observation on Angelina's part, which suggests various different interpretations. At first sight, she appears to be talking about talent, or more precisely the lack of talent which would explain why she failed to become as great an artist as Rivera. Her own life story, however, does not seem to indicate any such lack — on the contrary. What, then, did she miss? She certainly did not lack tenacity, for she proves to be an extremely driven painter. Indeed, before meeting Diego, she used to paint nine hours a day and was, as she writes, so "possessed" with art that painting gave her "intense pleasure" (36). Maybe all she lacked

to become a great painter — the text suggests in not so many words — was masculinity or, rather, the privileges that come with being male. This interpretation is supported by the rest of the letter. “Realizing this,” it goes on,

has wounded me so much, Diego, I can't even think about it without deepening the pain. Of course, I am promising, promising, but for how long have I been promising? I am still a promise.... I know that you are already a great painter and you will become an extraordinary one, and I am painfully aware of the fact that I will not advance much beyond what I am now. (23)<sup>30</sup>

But what stops her from advancing?

I would need so much freedom of spirit, so much tranquillity in order to begin my masterpiece, and I am paralyzed by your memory besides all the problems you know by heart and I won't enumerate so as not to bore you; our poverty, the cold, the solitude.... [T]hese days I have been tossing and turning in my bed tortured by the memory of our child (and not engulfed like you by the flames of the sacred fire). I know that you no longer think about little Diego, you appropriately cut yourself off.... (23-24)<sup>31</sup>

If, in other words, Angelina had the kind of freedom and tranquillity that she, as a woman, used to provide Diego with, she would have been able to work as hard as he did. In addition she was burdened by the memory of a child whose death Rivera has long forgotten. Angelina's artistic drive, then, suffered because she carried the emotional and practical weight of two other human beings. On top of the time and energy consumed by taking care of Diego, her desire to create art — a desire which in Diego's psyche wielded absolute hegemony — had to compete with her maternal instincts.

But whereas Angelina does all she can to give Diego the opportunity to pursue his ambitions, he, on his part, refuses to accommodate *her* desires. Only now does Quiela confess that after the death of their first and only child, “I always wanted to have another one, but you refused.... It is very painful for me that you denied me a child” (15).<sup>32</sup> Diego is a jealous man; when Quiela told him she was pregnant he exploded: “If that child bothers me, I am going to throw him out this window.”<sup>33</sup> It is significant that Angelina reveals her anger only now, in the monologue of her letters; like Teresa, she never talked about her feelings so as not to disturb her lover's artistic work. Ironically, it is Diego who is silent now that Quiela finally opens up her heart.<sup>34</sup>

If Angelina is mostly unconscious of her own liberation, the same is true of her only act of rebellion. One morning she awakes to find a couple of sheets of drawing paper with phrases written on them “in a handwriting I don't even recognize” (45). In fact they are the result of an unconscious episode of something similar to

automatic writing, in which Angelina finally recognizes the truth about herself and Rivera:

Today I do not want to be sweet, calm, decent, submissive, understanding, and resigned — all those qualities of mine my friends always praise. I do not want to be maternal, either; Diego is not just a grown-up child, Diego is a man who does not want to write because he does not love me any more and has completely forgotten me. (46)<sup>35</sup>

At the level of consciousness, however, Quiela still believes that Diego taught her to express herself. “I learned from you,” she says, “to take notes, to express myself instead of brooding in silence ... to ... speak instead of meditate” (31).<sup>36</sup> As readers we have long concluded the opposite.<sup>37</sup> While Angelina maintains that Diego’s absence has left her paralyzed, we see her liberated, indeed reborn.<sup>38</sup> Poniatowska uses the discourse of her sources to lead us, through a subtle and natural inversion very similar to that accomplished by Chacel, to conclusions which are diametrically opposed to those of the original texts.<sup>39</sup>

The last letter is preceded by five months of silence. Angelina is determined to continue pursuing a painting career, in spite of “poverty, grief, and your Mexican pesos” (85).<sup>40</sup> The mourning process has finally ended and Quiela, cut loose from Diego, chooses in favor of self-realization. She regains the independence she gave up during the ten years of living with Rivera — ten years which, in spite of it all, she still believes were the “best ... of my life” (82).

### *Chacel and Ortega*

In 1983, Chacel published an essay in which she attempted to clarify her ambivalent relationship with José Ortega y Gasset. The ideas of the influential philosopher had inspired most of her celebrated first novel, *Estación: Ida y Vuelta* (1930); but when she had presented it to her literary tutor, his reaction had been painfully indifferent. Ever since then, their relation developed on two separated planes. At a human and personal level, Ortega was a good friend always ready to give advice; in matters of art and literature, however, he never seemed to take her seriously. At least he never commented on her work (83).

According to Teresa Bordons and Susan Kirkpatrick, Teresa’s attitude towards Ortega is one of “[a]dmiration and anger, respect and rebelliousness” (286). Ortega was for Chacel, as she herself describes it, an “authority”; but that did not mean she could not disagree with her tutor. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, for instance, Chacel paid a visit to Ortega during which she reproached him for his lack of political commitment: “I defended the youthful intemperance that Ortega criticized ... and I reproached him because he had, in some way, distanced

himself from it" (93).<sup>41</sup> Ortega reacts violently. As Chacel prepares to get up and leave, he grabs her arm and sits her back down. "I saw that he wanted to strangle me," Chacel later wrote, "but he contained himself" (93).<sup>42</sup>

With respect to the philosopher's celebrated circle of literary and academic talent regarding his *Revista de Occidente*, Chacel's position was ambiguous as well. She herself certainly did not feel included (81). According to Bordons and Kirkpatrick, *Teresa* should be read as a response to the dominant discourses on femininity defended in the *Revista*; the different articles on gender differences which Ortega published and accompanied by praising words, they argue, "preserved a traditional justification of feminine subordination while dressing it in new metaphysical and scientific language" (288). Put in this discursive context *Teresa* refutes the prevailing opinions in Ortega's circle; in a sense, then, the novel is as biographical as it is autobiographical.

#### *Poniatowska and Rivera*

Something very similar can be said of *Querido Diego* and Poniatowska's relation to the male-dominated Mexican cultural milieu of which Diego Rivera was an important representative. Their first encounter occurred long before the publication of the epistolary novella. Poniatowska, still working as a journalist, interviewed the painter twice in 1956. She published these conversations three years later — two years after Rivera's death — combined with interviews with Rivera's first wife, his two daughters and the Mexican painter Doctor Atl. The long article, entitled "Añil y carne humana" and incorporated into *Palabras cruzadas* (1961), not only confirms Poniatowska's lasting fascination with Rivera but also highlights her ambivalent attitude towards him. In addition, the interview provides an early sample of Poniatowska's editing techniques, which allow her subtly to undermine the patriarchal discourse of her interviewee.

Beth Jörgensen points to this aspect of Poniatowska's interviews with Rivera but fails to show the complete extent to which the journalist manages to subvert and neutralize Rivera's openly patronizing stance. One of Jörgensen's main arguments is that Poniatowska's early interviews "include heterogeneous voices which exceed the absolute control of the writer" (7-8). For Jörgensen, the edited texts represent not only the dialogue between the journalist and her interviewees, but are also a reflection of the power relations inherent to that dialogue. In Poniatowska's case, those relations were generally quite unequal, given the fact that the journalist was young, foreign, and female and thus always in a position inferior to the "great men" she interviewed. According to Jörgensen, the Rivera interview confirms that

a face-to-face encounter can easily construct itself as an unequal debate in which the less privileged speaker [in this case Poniatowska] is severely constrained in his or her access to meaning making and intentionality through language. (13)<sup>43</sup>

However, this interpretation underestimates Poniatowska's power as final editor of the text — a power which, curiously enough, Jörgensen does choose to underscore in later works such as *La noche de Tlatelolco*.<sup>44</sup>

Poniatowska's editorial power instead allows her to produce a text which in fact *inverts* the power relations of the real-life conversation. In "Añil y carne humana" Poniatowska does this in various ways. First, she describes the interviewee in terms which, while seemingly sympathetic, steadily undermine his credibility. Rivera not only has "watery eyes" and milk teeth (41); he also is "a soft and submissive lamb, a pluche elephant, Dumbo's daddy, obedient and dozing" (46), and a "jovial giant, very similar to Santa Claus" (57). Secondly, Poniatowska violates an ethical rule of journalism by having "preserved *Dieguito's* way of speaking, however 'twisted' it was," thus shamelessly exposing Rivera's linguistic flaws (45).<sup>45</sup> Third, she intersects parentheses which ridicule the statements made by Rivera and other people present. In one specific passage Rivera explains his great admiration for women in general, stating that "We men are an animal subspecies, we are almost stupid, ... and have been created by woman to be placed at the service of the intelligent and sensitive beings that women are" (44).<sup>46</sup> As Jörgensen rightly points out, this assertion stands in ironic contrast to Rivera's obviously patronizing attitude towards his female interviewer. But in addition, the text itself pokes fun at the painter's pomposities. It does so by juxtaposing Rivera's idealization of women with the behavior of one of his female admirers present during the interview:

[Rivera: Man is] a semi-intelligent being which needs the direction of women to perform the tasks necessary — without exception, that is, man is to woman what horse is to man, and that is all.

(The little lady laughs. Hi! Hi! Hi! She looks at Diego and squirms a bit. Affectionately, she asks him:)

"Don't you mind being the horse, Dieguito?"

"I'll be a donkey, as long as I get to wear a saddle!"<sup>47</sup>

While Rivera declares himself to be an ignorant horse, Poniatowska transfers this image to the woman by having her neigh like one.

During the second interview, the pleasant chit-chat gives way to a heated discussion. Poniatowska and Rivera meet several days after the Soviet invasion of Budapest and an indignant Poniatowska expects Rivera to share her outrage. Rivera, of course, does not. "So," she asks him, "you agree with the killings in Hungary?" to which Diego answers affirmatively.<sup>48</sup> While representing Rivera as

an authoritarian dogmatist, the journalist's image of herself is, by contrast, one of humanitarianism and common sense. In fact, by placing herself in the role of the underdog and by posing as a young girl almost too timid to address the great painter, she invites the reader to sympathize with her from the outset. This effect is only intensified when, in this violent argument over Hungary, Rivera's attitude towards "Elenita" becomes downright mean. First, he denies Poniatowska her very Polish identity: "The real Polish people are the ones in Poland, . . . not those who are here in Mexico, doing little interviews" (59).<sup>49</sup> Next, he denies her the right to discuss politics altogether: "Elena, you are not well informed, and someone of your age cannot talk about politics at your age" (62).<sup>50</sup> However, after Diego declares himself to be satisfied with the victims in Budapest and Elena tells him he is speaking like "an assassin, a sadist," Poniatowska takes advantage of her power as final editor of the text and addresses the reader in a secretive aside:

(But Diego is angry and does not even bother to listen to me. I think of all those people whose only desire is to leave that Communist hell where one does not live, but just "survives.") (60)<sup>51</sup>

Whether or not Rivera really behaved this badly is less important here than the fact that Poniatowska's editing casts him in this negative role. To be sure, the text of "Añil y carne humana" is, as Jørgensen points out, the result of a dialogical process — it is, after all, an interview. At the same time, however, it highlights the importance and power of the editor. In this case Poniatowska's authority is only increased by the fact that she published the text after the death of her interviewee, who was thus left without the opportunity to retort.

The third part of the article, which consists of interviews with Lupe Marín, Dr. Atl, as well as Lupita and Ruth Rivera, can in various respects be seen as a pretext to *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*. In "Añil y carne humana," for instance, Poniatowska adopts for a moment the posthumous voice of Frida Kahlo in much the same way as she would later ventriloquize that of Angelina Beloff:

Frida must have been saying to him: "Yes, Diego, your heart was so big that it could only be carried by many women like us brought together in the fraternity of your love. Yes, we were many, but I was the first of all of them, and I am the first one to receive you in your death." (65)<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, the three women interviewed reveal personal details about the painter which would later reappear in Quiela's letters: Rivera's violent outbursts, his jealousy of children, and the generally infantile traits of his character. Third, this early text is already an attempt on Poniatowska's part at understanding how a man such as Rivera can inspire a woman to complete submission, even resigning herself to sharing her lover not only with art but with several other women as well (67, 70).<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

*Teresa* and *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*, though presented as fictional (auto)biographies, can be read as discursive acts of female solidarity which, as such, have a certain autobiographical dimension. To be sure, neither *Teresa* nor *Querido Diego* are monolithic texts. Espronceda and Rivera are not simply denounced as oppressors of their female muses; neither do Chacel and Poniatowska hide their admiration for them as artists. *Teresa*, more than simply attacking Espronceda, takes issue with the hypocrisy of a Spanish society that structurally limits Teresa's freedom. In the same way, *Querido Diego* is as critical of Angelina's willingness to give up her independence as it is of Rivera's irresponsible behavior.<sup>54</sup> Lastly, Chacel and Poniatowska, writing almost forty years apart, deploy very similar dialogic strategies. They manage to undermine patriarchal authority by appropriating its oppressive discourse and using it for opposite, emancipatory ends. Discourse is to them what fabric was to Teresa: they cut it up, dye it, and sew back together.<sup>55</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Spanish quotations from *Querido Diego* are from the Era edition; English ones are taken from Katherine Silver's translation, *Dear Diego*. The Mondadori edition supplies references to *Teresa* (Madrid: 1991). Since this novel was never translated to English, all translations from it and Chacel's prologue are mine.

<sup>2</sup> "[L]a verdad poética, esto es, *la verdad*: que Teresa, sin hacer nada, quedó en la poesía española biografiada, porque su vida escrita es el 'Canto a Teresa.'"

<sup>3</sup> "[E]ncontré tres versos que hablaban fehacientemente de la verdadera Teresa, de su fondo y de la proyección de ese fondo sobre la realidad exterior."

<sup>4</sup> "Espíritu indomable, alma violenta, / en ti, mezquina sociedad, lanzada / a romper tus barreras, turbulenta." All translations from the "Canto a Teresa" are mine.

<sup>5</sup> "Teresa drove him mad," Cascales writes. "She had caught him in his first flight, had made false promises of love to him which she was unable to keep, played with his heart as she pleased, and he, innocent, believed her blindly and adored her like a divine creature, and at the moment his expectations were highest, the divine creature turned into the devil" (26, my translation). "Teresa llegó a volverle el juicio. Ella lo había cogido en su primer vuelo, le había mentado un amor que no supo o no pudo cumplirle, jugó con su corazón como le plugo, y él, inocente, le prestó una fe ciega y la adoró como a un ser divino, y cuando más ilusiones concebía, el ser divino se transformó en Luzbel."

<sup>6</sup> "Y asentía a todo, se conducía de un modo tan razonable que parecía cómplice de aquella iniquidad que se cometía, a la luz del sol, contra el corazón más lleno de amor y

devoción, más entregado y nutrido de esperanza. Vio claramente que era débil, que su situación no tenía defensa posible y no quiso llegar a la vileza de pedir piedad; prefirió envolverse en aquel arrojó, contribuyendo con su actividad al hecho cruento.”

7. “[S]intió sobre sí cien miradas arteras que, día tras día, tendría que ir conociendo aunque no quisiera. Las sentía feroces, congregadas para recibirla y, al no querer cruzar la suya con ellas, la retaban desde el mismo momento de su ingreso en aquella órbita... . La gente del pueblo la miraba con cara asombrada y burlona, como a un pájaro raro, como a un bicho inútil. Los hombres de levita y chistera, con descaro, con procacidad.”

8 “[A] mirarla, se paseaban por toda ella como por terreno propio.”

9 These poems actually exist, although their authorship is controversial. Cascales y Muñoz considers them apocryphal (see his *El auténtico Espronceda pornográfico y el apócrifo en general* [1932]).

10 “¡Al fin la certeza! La verdad, con su fisionomía incanjeable.... Lo que había en aquellos papeles no delataba una traición, no descubría un desliz; su amor, ante aquello ... quedaba derruido, demolido desde su raíz. Más aún: quedaba desmentido, negado. El amor, tal como ella había creído vivirlo, no podía haber coexistido con aquel cieno.”

11 “La clave reveladora, el sésamo inesperadamente abierto, descubría el camino al último fondo del corazón del hombre y allí las prendas más valiosas de la mujer aparecían holladas, ennegrecidas, arrojadas con menosprecio.”

12 “[E]stanque en fin de aguas corrompidas, / entre fétido fango detenidas.”

13 “Una onda fétida e irrespirable emanaba de allí.”

14 “Quién pensara jamás llegase un día / en que perdido el celestial encanto / y caída la venda de los ojos, / cuanto diera placer causara enojos?”

15 “Lo que quería lograr con su esfuerzo no era una combinación acertada.... Quería crear algo que tuviera voz propia, algo como una palabra que cautivase con poder decisivo, como una belleza de fuerza avasalladora, que nadie se atrevería a combatir y, sobre todo, que el hombre a su lado se sintiera elevado por ella, señalado como un poseedor de un bien excelso.”

16 “Nunca acababa de convencerse de que mientras no se asociase con el misterio, ¡tan odiado!, no triunfaría jamás, y ella, aún sabiéndolo, lo destruía en cuanto encontraba ocasión.”

17 “[F]uere lo que fuere, nunca, nunca dejaría caer el peso de sus tribulaciones sobre el impulso de él: las llevaría sola, con serenidad. Claro que si él supiera su decisión de no pedirle nunca ayuda, se sentiría herido, pero no tenía por qué saberla. Sin comprender la razón, aunque tenía algunos años más que ella, le parecía que él era tan joven, que sabía tan poco de la vida.”



<sup>18</sup> “Que yo como una flor que en la mañana / abre su cáliz al naciente día, / ¡ay! al amor abrí tu alma temprana, / y exalté tu inocente fantasía.”

<sup>19</sup> Teresa characterizes the world in which she lives as “social mire,” pervaded with an atmosphere of “hypocrisy and pettiness” (134). In her visual struggle with the people in the street Teresa stays “serene,” whereas the men observing her “were not able to respond to such values.... They were incapable of respecting anything else than vain, immovable virtue.... In them there was nothing but a will to violence, that would not even surrender to light. On the contrary, in the face of light, in the face of purity, they felt disturbed; they refused to recognize it as purity and could not adapt it to what they considered to be impurity” (121).

<sup>20</sup> Thus, even though Angelina was a painter too, the biographer minimizes her artistic vocation. According to Wolfe, Rivera simply was to Beloff what painting was to Rivera: “[S]he had built her life with him as its armature.... Her life was not centered in painting as his was, with all else subordinate.... Years later, Mexican friends found her in Paris ... still struggling with her unimportant painting” (128-9). According to Bruce-Novoa, Wolfe’s explanation is “a chauvinistically stereotypical view of sex roles in which man is his work, while woman is her relationship with a man” (121).

<sup>21</sup> “The greatest source of satisfaction in my life,” she writes at one point, “has been the fact that I have achieved economic independence, and I am proud of being one of the more advanced women of my time” (80); “El lograr mi independencia económica ha sido una de las fuentes de mayor satisfacción y me enorgullece haber sido una de las mujeres avanzadas de mi tiempo” (66).

<sup>22</sup> “Estaba segura que sin mí ni siquiera interrumpirías tu trabajo para comer” (11).

<sup>23</sup> “[S]iempre traté de facilitar tu vida para que pintaras a pesar de la pobreza. Incluso ahora me conformaría con mezclar tus colores, limpiar tu paleta, tener los pinceles en perfecto estado” (65).

<sup>24</sup> “Quiela has sido una buena mujer para mí. A tu lado pude trabajar como si estuviera solo. Nunca me estorbaste” (65). “Under Rivera’s influence, Beloff’s function ... is reduced ... to that of servant of the producer. In a word, she is colonized” (Bruce-Novoa 124). According to Castellvi Demoor, “Quiela muestra rasgos marcadamente estereotípicos al amoldarse a los cánones vigentes que conceden indiscutible superioridad al hombre” (266).

<sup>25</sup> “[S]in ti, soy bien poca cosa, mi valor lo determina el amor que me tengas y existo para los demás en la medida en que tú me quieras” (16-7).

<sup>26</sup> Poniatowska employs the same strategy in her autobiographical work *Lilus Kikus*. “When Poniatowska shifts to first-person narratives in which women speak directly ... one must distinguish between the apparently sincere text of the narrator, who to some extent incarnates the ideology of the dominant culture, and the ironic subtext of the

feminist author, who infiltrates the character's monologue to subvert it and, in the end, transform it into a dialogical space" (Bruce-Novoa 118).

<sup>27</sup> "Ayer pasó la mañana en el Louvre, ... y estoy deslumbrada. Cuando iba antes contigo, Diego, te escuchaba admirativamente, compartía tu apasionamiento porque todo lo que viene de ti suscita mi entusiasmo, pero ayer fue distinto, *sentí* Diego y esto me dio una gran felicidad" (20).

<sup>28</sup> Oddly enough, Beloff camouflages this first step in the process of detachment: Rivera turns into her muse and into an allegory of painting: "For the first time in four long years I feel that you are not far away, I am so full of you — that is, of painting... I feel as if I have been reborn" (18); "Por primera vez a lo largo de estos cuatro largos años siento que no estás lejos, estoy llena de ti, es decir de pintura... Siento que he vuelto a nacer" (21). As readers we understand that Rivera's leaving is the cause of Beloff's renewed inspiration, but Beloff herself explains it, on the contrary, as a return of the painter.

<sup>29</sup> "[P]ensé que yo tenía en mí algo maravilloso... Ahora sé que se necesita otra cosa."

<sup>30</sup> "Darme cuenta de ello, Diego, ha sido un mazazo en la cabeza y no puedo tocarlo con el pensamiento sin que me duela terriblemente. Claro, prometo, prometo, pero ¿prometo desde hace cuánto? ... [S]é que tú eres ya un gran pintor y llegarás a serlo extraordinario, y yo tengo la absoluta conciencia de que no llegaré mucho más lejos de lo que soy" (24-5).

<sup>31</sup> "Necesitaría mucha libertad de espíritu, mucha tranquilidad para iniciar la obra maestra, y tu recuerdo me atenaza constantemente además de los problemas que te sabes de memoria y no enumero para no aburrirte; nuestra pobreza, el frío, la soledad... . [E]n estos días me he removido en mi cama torturada por el recuerdo de la muerte de mi hijo (y no envuelta como tú por las llamaradas del fuego sagrado). Sé que tú no piensas ya en Dieguito; cortaste sanamente" (25).

<sup>32</sup> "Siempre quise tener otro, tú fuiste el que me lo negaste... [M]e duele mucho Diego que te hayas negado a darme un hijo" (18).

<sup>33</sup> "¿Si este niño me molesta, lo arrojaré por la ventana!" According to Cynthia Steele, "Everything indicates that Diego's fears originate in a castration complex" (23, my translation).

<sup>34</sup> Angelina's habit of suffering in silence is so ingrained in her that it persists even in the letters. In the one dated December 22, she confesses: "I had pneumonia, Chatito — I didn't want to tell you so as not to worry you" (27); "fue pulmonía la que tuve, chatito, no quise decírtelo para no preocuparte." In the same way, she continues to feel responsibility for Diego's well-being ["I ask myself if you are eating well, who takes care of you" (32); "me pregunto si comerás bien, quién te atiende"], although this preoccup-

pation is linked to a different one: "I wonder if ... you love a new woman" (32): "me pregunto ... si amas a una nueva mujer."

<sup>35</sup> "[H]oy no quiero ser dulce, tranquila, decente, sumisa, comprensiva, resignada, las cualidades que siempre ponderan los amigos. Tampoco quiero ser maternal; Diego no es un niño grande, Diego sólo es un hombre que no escribe porque no me quiere y me ha olvidado por completo" (41-2).

<sup>36</sup> "[D]e ti he aprendido a tomar notas, a expresarme en vez de rumiar en secreto ... a decir en vez de meditar."

<sup>37</sup> Still, as Steele is right to point out, "the letters serve as her first vehicle of self-expression" (26, my translation). At the end of this letter we find another such contradiction. While Beloff writes: "as long as I don't hear from you I am paralyzed" (33) ("mientras no tenga noticias tuyas estoy paralizada"), a large part of the letter tells about her return to drawing. She says she feels "strong from this abundant activity, this sense of expansion and plenitude" (31) ("fuerte por esta abundancia de actividad, este sentimiento de expansión y plenitud"), and that she is drawing faces which she feels to be "strangely alive" (31). Once again the reader is obliged to arrive at conclusions different from those drawn by Beloff herself.

<sup>38</sup> According to Bruce-Novoa, "the letters are part of an encountering of her objectified self for the first time, and thus can function in a healing mode" (127).

<sup>39</sup> "Poniatowska's strategy," Bruce-Novoa writes, "is to create a text and simultaneously undermine it with contradictions that her character Beloff lives ... but does not consciously confront" (122).

<sup>40</sup> "[L]a pobreza, las aflicciones y tus pesos mexicanos" (70).

<sup>41</sup> "[S]alí a la defensa de la intemperancia juvenil que Ortega censuraba y ... le reproché el cierto distanciamiento."

<sup>42</sup> "[V]i que tenía ganas de torcerme el pescuezo, pero se contuvo."

<sup>43</sup> In the conversation with Rivera, this inequality is already manifest in the fact that Poniatowska addresses the painter as "maestro," while he calls her "Elenita." These power relations change, however, as soon as Poniatowska assumes the role of editor: in the editorial asides, she refers to Rivera with the much more familiar "Diego."

<sup>44</sup> About this last work, Jørgensen writes that "the editorial function is neither neutral nor transparent but charged with meaning and with the making of meaning" (82).

<sup>45</sup> "[C]onservado el modo de hablar de 'Dieguito', por 'alrevesado' que éste sea." At a later moment in the text she writes again: "I have tried to preserve as much as I could the master's oral syntax, so that his words ... give an idea of his way of speaking and

explaining things” (54); “He procurado conservar en lo posible la sintaxis oral del maestro, para que sus palabras ... den una idea de cómo habla y explica sus cosas.”

<sup>46</sup> “Los hombres somos una subespecie de animales, casi estúpidos, ... creados por la mujer para ponerse al servicio del ser inteligente y sensitivo que ellas representan.”

<sup>47</sup> “[Rivera: El hombre es] un animal semiinteligente que ejecuta las tareas necesarias mediante la dirección de las mujeres, es decir, que sin excepción, el hombre es a la mujer lo que el caballo es al hombre y nada más.

(La señorita se ríe. ¡Hi! ¡Hi! ¡Hi! Mira a Diego y se retuerce un poco. Le dice, mimosa:)

—¿No te importa ser caballo, Dieguito?

—¡Burro, con tal de que me ensillen!”

<sup>48</sup> “Entonces ¿está usted de acuerdo con la matanza que se ha llevado a cabo en Hungría?”

<sup>49</sup> “Los verdaderos polacos son los que están en Polonia, ... no los que están aquí en México haciendo entrevistitas.”

<sup>50</sup> “Elena, usted no está bien enterada ni puede hablar de política a su edad.”

<sup>51</sup> “(Pero Diego está enojado y ni siquiera se toma la molestia de escucharme. Pienso en todas aquellas gentes cuyo único deseo es salir del infierno comunista en donde no se vive; se ‘subsiste.’)”

<sup>52</sup> “Frida ha de estarle diciendo: ‘Sí, Diego, tu corazón era tan grande que sólo pudimos sostenerlo entre muchas mujeres que estamos unidas en la fraternidad de tu amor. Sí, fuimos muchas, pero yo me adelanté a todas, y soy la primera que te recibe en tu muerte.’”

<sup>53</sup> At certain points in the text Poniatowska voices her personal opinion. When talking about Rivera’s two daughters, for instance, she does not hide her admiration for them: “both have children who have taught them to be mothers at the same time as having a profession. These are women out-and-out, women who think and work, who love and protect their families” (76); “las dos tienen hijos que les han enseñado a ser madres además de profesionistas. Mujeres de cuerpo entero que piensan y trabajan, que aman y protegen a su familia.”

<sup>54</sup> “Poniatowska’s text is not an angry, dogmatic expression of how women are subjugated by men, but rather a representation of a woman’s ambivalence and feeling of conflict as she deals with her love for a powerful man” (Berry 52).

<sup>55</sup> “Discourses,” says Nancy Glazener in her interpretation of Bakhtin, “cannot be tailored semantically to the expressive intentions of an individual without betraying the social fabric from which they have been cut” (109).

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