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Linda Ledford-Miller
University of Scranton

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Class Privilege and Social Class Awakening in Paseo de la Reforma

LINDA LEDFORD-MILLER
UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON

Abstract: In this reading of Elena Poniatowska’s Paseo de la Reforma, the plot goes beyond a love story and personal transformation of the protagonist to represent a metaphor in microcosm for Mexico City. Although a shorter work than her more highly recognized novels and testimonies, the tensions between social classes and the unearned privileges of the elite in this novel stand in contrast to the suffering of the masses.

Elena Poniatowska is well known for her particular approaches to interviews and her testimonial writing, where she gives witness from new perspectives to such major historical events as the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath in Hasta no verte, Jesús mío (1969); the terrible 1968 massacre of protesting students immortalized in La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral (1971); and the disastrous 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, commemorated in Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor (1988). Each of these works inscribes the voices of the common people while critiquing, implicitly or explicitly, the action or inaction of those in authority. As a result, Poniatowska is often described as an engaged writer giving voice to the voiceless, and attending to those ignored by the powerful elite of Mexican society. As Beth Jörgensen notes, “in particular, Elena Poniatowska pays careful attention to the silenced voices and the marginalized lives that constitute the disenfranchised majority in the vast human landscape of Mexico.” (The Writing of Elena Poniatowska, xvii) In her fiction, Poniatowska is often concentrated on historical events or personages: Tínisma (1991), a novelized biography of photographer-artist Tina Modotti; La piel del cielo (2001), elucidating the challenges of Mexican astronomy and the work of her husband, Guillermo Haro; El tren pasa primero (2006), based on the railroad workers’ strike of 1957-59, its leader jailed, and the government’s repression of participants and supporters. Both testimonies and historical fictions, these texts required extensive archival research and interviews.

Paseo de la Reforma, in contrast, is a work of fiction that Poniatowska wrote at the request of her publisher over a very short period (months, rather than years). She explains the process:

Paseo de la Reforma es una novela gozosa, frente a libros como La noche de Tlatelolco o Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor, los cuales he escrito como mandas, castigándome, haciendo un poco de penitencia, porque así hice también Tínisma … pero esta novela la escribí con facilidad, en un lapso pequeño, cuatro o cinco meses en los que todas las mañanas me sentaba a escribirla con gran alegría. Desde Lilus Kikus, escrito en 1954, éste es el primer libro con el que de veras me divierto, sin documentarme, porque se trata de una ficción. (Vega, cited in Luiselli, 180)

THE CHARACTERS

Three significant moments impact the protagonist Ashby Egbert’s life: a fall from a horse as a child which leaves his right leg slightly crippled; an accident at age nineteen that sends him to the hospital; and meeting an activist woman. The latter two incidents help him discover stark differences between the social classes.

Ashby Egbert is the main protagonist of Paseo de la Reforma. Much like Poniatowska herself, Ashby’s “social roots are aristocratic and [his] political antecedents are conservative.” (Chevigny, 50) He is a somewhat naïve young man, scion of family fortune originating in his grandfather’s production of tar, “la brea,” from trees in forests he had acquired. Ashby’s father added to the family fortune by investing in lands and horses in partnership with Canadian and North American entrepreneurs. Due to the family’s economic orientation and wealth, Ashby studied at the London School of Economics, but also a fall from a horse at the age of nineteen broadened his
education through extensive reading during his recuperation. (Paseo, 47)

Representing another family of the wealthy elite in Mexico City, Nora Escandón is one of many debutants in search of a husband in her class, and garners Ashby’s attention because she writes poetry: “Eres una nueva Emily Dickinson,” he tells her (Paseo, 37). After they marry, she stops writing poetry. The more domestic Nora becomes, the less interest Ashby has in her, despite their two sons. The female character, Amaya Chacel, a committed intellectual, stands in contrast as outspoken and critical of the very class to which she belongs. She captures everyone around her with her boldness and the passion of her pronouncements. Ashby and Amaya become lovers.

Secondary characters are principally the lower-class internees Ashby meets at the Hospital Obrero during his convalescence: Eulogio Castillo: “Don Lolo,” a tavern cook; Don Eleazar Quintero, a sixty-year old gas delivery man and atheist with deep interests in Moctezuma and ancient Aztec history; “Gansito,” a young man who washes windshields at stoplights; and his girlfriend, “la Carimonstrua,” who visits him at the hospital. Tertiary characters include the writers and intellectuals of weekly literary reunions at Ashby’s house; Ashby’s parents, Richard and Mina Egbert; and his “nana,” Restituta.

### STORY TENSIONS

When Ashby is nineteen, he suffers an accident that changes his life: his nanny Restituta asks for his help reaching for a shirt, and he inadvertently touches a metal bar to electric current and suffers severe burns. Responding to the home, the Red Cross ambulance takes him to the Hospital Inglés, but with no apparent means of support (his parents are in San Francisco), he is quickly transferred to the public Hospital Obrero. There he receives equal treatment to the previous hospital, however, he is placed in a room with ten other patients. He stands out from the usual public hospital patient: “obviamente, Ashby no tenía la docilidad de los demás pacientes, quienes ni por asomo se atrevían a infringir una orden … desde el primer momento Ashby se singularizó por contestatario.” (14, 18)

Here Ashby comes in contact with a world previously unknown to him. To fit in with his companions, he reinvents himself. He is not the wealthy offspring of a powerful family, but rather the stable boy to the “patrón,” or master (in reality himself). Able to interpret himself as a servant to a wealthy man, his companions sympathize with the “santa madrecita” (beloved mother) of the feigned servant’s “patrón.” “Para nada,” says Ashby, who hitherto understands his mother as a woman of privilege:

—Ella, como la mayoría de las ricas, delega sus obligaciones en los demás.
—¿En quiénes?
—En la nana, en la muchacha, en el chófer.
—¿Y entonces ella qué hace?
—Juega baraja con sus amigas, va a misa, asiste a velorios, da pésames, organiza comidas y cenas, dirige la casa. (22)

As he reinvents himself, he sees his parents in a new light, as distant and formal in comparison to the families of his roommates, who freely show their love and affection to each other. He also discovers much about himself. To describe his supposed “patrón,” he calls him a playboy, a preppie, a dandy, and suddenly realizes that he “pertenecía a la estirpe de los que no ven a los meseros, ni a los choferes de taxi, ni a los vendedores ambulantes, todos tienen al cabo un mismo rostro, como los negros, como los chinos, como los indios.” (24)

Ashby’s parents return and whisk him away to a private suite at the Hospital Inglés. Healed and at home, “la Ciudad de México le resultó extraña. Era otro país o nunca la había conocido.” (27) He remains a changed person, more keenly aware of others and of class differences. And yet he follows class patterns: marriage, family, and a life of leisure. His love of intellectual stimulation disappears into the social mileu of his environment until one day he embarks on change: “Tengo que salir de la casa a buscar un interlocutor verdadero” (45), he tells himself, on his way to the University. He audits lectures by the exiled Spanish philosopher José Gaos, where he develops a circle of intellectual friends, including many Spanish exiles. They are invited to weekly soirees at his mansion. Literature, philosophy, and politics are topics of discussion, a forum in which “Ashby pasó de una élite a otra.” (51) Amaya Chacel, a politically engaged intellectual with a magnetic personality, attends one of his social gatherings, and soon Ashby “empezó a vivir de sábado a sábado.” (56) His wife Nora perceives Amaya as “verdaderamente floja y [alguien que la] tiene harta,” while Ashby describes her as “un ser verdaderamente fuera de serie.” (64)
Ashby’s interest in Amaya is far greater than hers in him, but she begins to make requests of him to drive her to her projects: The first trip is to the outskirts of Mexico City, in the state of Morelos, where seven campesinos have been arrested for “invading” their own lands, lands confiscated by the governor’s son to pursue a housing development. Amaya accuses the governor and his party of taking bribes and other acts of corruption, and refuses to leave his office until the seven campesinos are released. En route, as his Mercedes shakes on the dirt road, “por un momento Ashby pensó que su automóvil no había sido hecho para esas brechas proletarias, pero se reconviño por su mezquindad.” (74) It is the first of many more such “brechas proletarias.”

Ashby becomes obsessed with Amaya, who ignores and avoids him until each time she needs help: She summons him to the “delegación Cuauhtémoc,” after she has slept the past three nights in the street with university students, where Ashby pays the bail of three thousand pesos. The movement’s “sesiones los acercaron mucho más que una noche de amor.” (102) Nora asks for a divorce. Impossible, thinks Ashby: “Nora era su mujer, su posesión, la madre de sus hijos, la dueña de la casa, su novia, su copiloto, su social, su compañera útil, práctica, eficaz, la garante del buen funcionamiento del hogar, la que aceitaba los engranajes.” (113)

To avoid a sticky situation in Mexico, Ashby takes Amaya to New York and then Paris, where she spends huge sums of his money staying in five star hotels and shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue: “A usted le gusta mucho hacer caravanas con sombrero ajeno,” he observes. (128) After their return to Mexico, Amaya again ignores him, and Ashby’s routine becomes one of seeing his sons at the equestrian club, and attending lectures at the university. “Era importante volver a su mundo para no perder la cordura, porque Amaya, a pesar de los oasis, era un planeta incendiario … Girar únicamente en torno a ella era caer en una fiebre virulenta cuyo desgaste lo dejaba en los huesos.” (135)

But when he reaches out and tries to call Amaya, he learns that she is dead, shot by the federales as “los tres Méxicos: burgués, letrado y proletario.” (62) amputación,” he sells his Mercedes, gets rid of possessions, and searches for his old friends from the hospital, finding them at Don Lolo’s tavern. Ashby again reinvents his life, shares adventures from a new perspective, and tells his friends of his great love, Amaya, who for him, “reafirmó lo aprendido años atrás en el Hospital Obrero: que era posible tener la vida que creaban las palabras.” (169) Meanwhile the narrator warns the readers: “Ashby tardaría mucho tiempo en descubrir que su salvación tampoco estaba en la colonia Guerrero, ni en la sonrisa desdentada de la Carimonstrua, ni en la comida de Don Lolo bajo su letrero: ‘Hoy no fío, mañana sí.’ Parecía estar oyendo a Amaya reconvenirlo: ‘No seas maniqueo, Ashbito.’” (171)

SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Though initially the novel may appear to be no more than the story of somewhat frivolous people of wealth and privilege, this short novel bridges Poniatowska’s two narrative worlds: the world of the street and the world of the parlor. Against the backdrop of her extensive oeuvre, Paseo de la Reforma may seem a lesser work, but it can also be seen as a composite of her dedication and writing style. As noted by Margaret Sayers Peden, “What literary genre does not appear in Poniatowska’s curriculum? It would be difficult to find one. Novelist, poet, short-story writer … essayist, interviewer, reporter, and biographer … it is clear that Poniatowska is a kind of literary phenomenon.” (97)

The novel takes its name from Mexico City’s prominent avenue, Paseo de la Reforma, lined by historic monuments, from Cristóbal Colón and Cuauhtémoc, to Independence and Revolution heroes. Ashby calls it “la larga, la maravillosa avenida … [que] culminaba en el Castillo de Chapultepec custodiada por los árboles gigantescos. Camino real [de] Maximiliano y … Carlota.” (Paseo, 33) Noé Cárdenas sees it as “la avenida emblemática de la Ciudad de México, el mejor testigo del apogeo urbano de la clase aristocrática” (“La capital ilustrada,” A1), and Irma López sees “un microcosmo de la realidad social de la capital mexicana del tiempo,” (83) and in this novel a review of one hundred and forty years of Mexican history, from Maximilian in the mid-nineteenth century to Ashby’s era. (80) Paseo de la Reforma represents Mexico’s past as well her social classes: the educated, wealthy who live and play there, as well as the poor who travel the avenue to serve them, which Martín Flores describes as “los tres México: burgués, letrado y proletario.” (62)
The prominent “Paseo” may also be interpreted as a “path” or “passage” to reform: a metaphor for Ashby’s metamorphosis from uncaring to thoughtful, from lack of knowledge of the poor. “Los pobres,” Poniatowska states, “son siempre los bufones, los utilizables, los intercambiables, la masa, el pueblo, los que sirven de telón de fondo, los que viven otra vida, los exiliados también; su situación de inferioridad los condena” (Mujer, 313); “that the poorest Mexicans don’t deserve their ruling class is a truth that leaps out at once.” (“A Question Mark,” 108)

During his brief stay at the Hospital Obrero, Ashby becomes acquainted with representatives of a vast segment of Mexican society, ignored by the powerful elite. Afterward he converses with his mother about his discovery:

—Mamá, el sufrimiento es universal.
—Sí, pero no hables de ello. Aquí eso no se usa.
—Pero si todo mundo ha sufrido.
—Sí, pero no lo dice.
—El dolor no es único, es de todos, mamá.
—Todos quieren olvidarlo, Ashby, no insistas. Conserva tu buen gusto, hijo. (29)

He conformed to the expectations of his class and his socio-economic position by marrying Nora, fathering two sons, living in a “palacio,” and off the generous income he inherited. Initially at the Hospital Obrero, and after he meets Amaya, he becomes aware of those who “se mantenían vivos de milagro”; whose lives, in stark contrast to his own, “giraban en torno de un solo fin: la sobrevivencia.” (31)

Amaya functions as “el recurso que entrelaza ... con naturalidad y rigor a la burguesía ilustrada con los estratos más desamparados y sórdidos de la vida en la ciudad de México.” (López, 86) Through her, Ashby confronts the other Mexico, the Mexico of struggling, politically engaged university students, and the Mexico of poor farmers whose land is easily taken from them by wealthy developers. In each case, he sees the collusion of a government that does not serve all people, only the wealthy. After Amaya’s death, he retreats to the companionship of others who live a modest life, rejecting his position in the elite strata, disappearing into “el anonimato.” (López, 89) He becomes “the other.”

CONCLUSION: ETHICAL INTERROGATIONS

Paseo de la Reforma rests on several dichotomies: the Hospital Inglés and the Hospital Obrero; Nora Escandón and Amaya Chacel; class strata—“los” Egbert and “los” Corcuera, “Los Trescientos” (social column in a city newspaper, 30) and the invisible underclass. Some characters live well, while others struggle daily to simply survive. Finally, there are two sacrificial acts: Amaya’s death in protest, and Ashby’s deliberate sacrifice of his privileged position and comfort, exchanging his “palacio” for a rented room, his Mercedes for the metro, and meals prepared by a cook for Don Lolo’s fonda, but for him this “descenso social que por voluntad asume [Ashby] equivale a un asceso moral.” (Cárdenas, A1)

Though a slighter work than Poniatowska’s more famous testimonial writings, Paseo de la Reforma emerges from a similar engagement with Mexican history and politics, touching upon issues which include, significantly for students, questions of how we interact in/with our societies. Primary in Poniatowska’s works is making the popular classes visible, and giving voice to the voiceless. The reader is left to consider whether Ashby undergoes true transformation, what Paulo Freire calls “conciencización” or consciousness-raising, increased awareness of the Other which impacts one’s own life.7

Although unavailable as yet in English translation, Paseo de la Reforma is ideal for classes in Spanish, due to its short form and direct connections to social justice. It would also serve needs for classes that explore contemporary society, even a survey of Latin American Culture and Civilization. Other possible themes include social cartography and urban demographics (who lives where and why), and the roles of gender and class (rich and poor, elite class and servant). A pedagogical pursuit of the narrative threads delineated by Elena Poniatowska in Paseo de la Reforma will incite students to explore and formulate provoking questions related to representational writing, social urban landscapes, fictional spaces, and ethical interrogations, engaging the readers on a solid critical reflection related to representation, documentation, and writing of literary and cultural socio-historical urban landscapes.

ENDNOTES
1 Poniatowska spent as many as ten years researching and writing some of her works. In an interview with Adriana Malvido, Poniatowska says of Paseo de la
1 Maximilian (Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph, July 6, 1832–June 19, 1867) was crowned Emperor of Mexico on 10 April 1864, at the behest of Napoleon III and with the support of monarchist Mexicans, but not of the Mexican people, who were supporting the indigenous liberal reformer, Benito Juárez. Maximilian was executed and Mexico never had another monarch. During his brief reign, he ordered the creation of a broad avenue leading from his home at Chapultepec castle to the center of the city. Originally called the Paseo de la Emperatriz, in honor of Maximilian’s wife, Carlota, it was renamed after the fall of the monarchy.

2 The novel has not yet been published in English translation, though a translation does exist as a master’s thesis by Melanie Joy Johannesen: “Translation of Paseo de la Reforma,” University of Alberta, Canada, 2000, and held as non-lendable microfiche at the National Library of Canada in Ottawa, 2002.

3 *Lilus Kikus* is a child’s story told in vignettes that add up to a novella, written in a simple prose beneath which lies an implicit critique of class and proper behavior as created by the ruling class, including the Catholic Church. First published in 1954 (México: Los Presentes), it was translated to English along with four short stories, and published as *Lilus Kikus and Other Stories* (Tr./Introduction Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2005).

4 Poniatowska has stated that she based Amaya in part on the Mexican writer Elena Garro, married to Octavio Paz 1937-1959, and who was described by the Mexican government as the “intellectual leader” of the student protest movement. In *Las siete cabritas*, Poniatowska’s description is very similar to those of Amaya: “las cóleras de Elena Garro fueron sagradas sobre todo cuando se trató de defender a los campesinos de Morelos, de Ahuatepec, de Atlixco, de Cuernavaca. Amiga del entonces jefe del Departamento Agrario, Norberto Aguirre Palancares, Elena Garro se lo pasó en la Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria de la Ciudad de México, arreglando los asuntos de límites de tierras y escrituras, y como estos tardaban varias semanas, alojó en su casa a los campesinos.” (106)

5 Maximilian (Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph, July 6, 1832–June 19, 1867) was crowned Emperor of Mexico on 10 April 1864, at the behest of Napoleon III and with the support of monarchist Mexicans, but not of the Mexican people, who were supporting the indigenous liberal reformer, Benito Juárez. Maximilian was executed and Mexico never had another monarch. During his brief reign, he ordered the creation of a broad avenue leading from his home at Chapultepec castle to the center of the city. Originally called the Paseo de la Emperatriz, in honor of Maximilian’s wife, Carlota, it was renamed after the fall of the monarchy.

6 We should note here that employment as a certified school teacher would earn a pitifully small salary.

7 Paulo Freire is an influential Brazilian educator known particularly for his 1970 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which juxtaposes the oppressors and the oppressed. Oppressors must rethink their lives and commit to the people, while the people must avoid mimicking their oppressors and use education as a practice of freedom. “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must reexamine themselves constantly,” said Freire. (60)

**WORKS CITED**


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FURTHER READING