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Review of *El tren pasa primero*, by Elena Poniatowska

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In her latest novel, *El tren pasa primero* (2005), Elena Poniatowska fictionalizes the life of the historical figure Demetrio Vallejo (1910-1985), union leader of the Railway Union Workers Movement (Movimiento Sindical Ferrocarrilero) in Mexico. As president of the commission organized to raise the salaries of the railway workers (Gran Comisión Pro Aumento de Salarios), Vallejo planned and ordered the railway strike in 1958 that paralyzed transport and trade. He was later imprisoned for 11 years and repeatedly went on hunger strikes to protest his imprisonment and the repression the Mexican government was exercising on other union members. In this novel, Poniatowska traces Vallejo's life through the character of Trinidad Pineda Chiñas.

The first part of *El tren pasa primero*, representing close to half of the novel, recounts the activities of Trinidad as a union leader. Closer to chronicle than novel, this part tells of the leader's fight to improve conditions for his fellow railway workers through various strikes that he organizes. Ultimately, Trinidad is arrested by secret agents and taken to the "Black Palace" of Lecumberri along with sixty-four other railway workers. In prison, the protagonist realizes that his closest allies in the railway movement did not challenge his imprisonment and they eventually stop visiting him. He explains this to Bárbara, his niece, thus: "Las multitudes son decididas y se la juegan cuando alguien dirige su lucha, pero sin líder cada quien echa a correr donde puede" (207). It is not until Trinidad is released that the movement gains force and clarity again. In the last section of this part, Poniatowska describes a trip that Trinidad takes with Bárbara when she is still a child. Similar to Lorenzo in *La piel del cielo* (2001), Bárbara marvels at the train ride, rivaling her uncle in terms of his love for the machine.

In the second part, the author describes Trinidad's love affairs. While Bárbara, the protagonist's niece, is the central female figure in the first part of the novel, this second part focuses on Rosa and her eventual relationship with Trinidad. If the first part of *El tren pasa primero* is closer to a chronicle, the second part approximates the style and subject matter of a romance novel. During a visit to her brother in prison, Rosa meets Trinidad and they initiate a relationship. Rosa is carefree and self-indulgent, in contrast to Bárbara who is as politically committed as Trinidad. She continues her relationship with the union leader throughout the duration of his imprisonment and lives with him upon his release. Rosa's character also highlights Trinidad's familial irresponsibility; they both leave their children—Rosa with her mother and Trinidad with Sara, his wife. Sara, who had originally been as idealistic and committed as Trinidad, becomes disenchanted with the union movement and with her husband. In fact, Trinidad leaves much to

be desired as a husband and lover, as he considers his work more important than family and expects the women in his life to serve him.

Finally, in the third part, Poniatowska narrates the union leader's childhood, his first jobs on the railway, and his rise to the position of union leader. The first sections of this part comprise the most appealing novelistic elements, describing Trinidad as a child in his native Oaxaca. The author intertwines stories of the protagonist's childhood with Zapotec myths in a "magic realist" style similar to that of García Márquez in *Cien años de soledad*, telling stories of apparitions and headless men. Similarly, there are two episodes in this last part that could just as well have happened in Macondo. A herd of wild pigs descends upon Trinidad's village, Nizanda, and, after the men kill several of the animals, the women prepare them for eating but many forget to remove part of the insides, rendering them inedible. The village burns the leftover parts: "Una neblina putrefacta, un caliche amargo cubrió al pueblo y hasta Ixtepec llegó el hedor abyecto del destripadero" (344-45). With the same overstated tone, Poniatowska narrates the arrival of foreign troops to Nizanda and their effects on the village: "[...]los marines acabaron con el pueblo, la comida, el agua de río, el aire, y la respiración de las muchachas" (345). Poniatowska mirrors the first line of *Cien años de soledad* when she describes Trinidad's father's memory of the event: "Durante muchos años, al atardecer, el compadre Trinidad recordaría a los temerarios del norte" (346). At the end of the third part, Trinidad and Bárbara take a train trip, as in the first part, and confirm any suspicions of incest.

El tren pasa primero takes its place among Poniatowska's other biographical novels such as *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969) and *Tinísima* (1992). Unfortunately, this latest novel is much drier, with the notable exception of the stories about the protagonist's childhood. The first section reads like a newspaper account of the railway movement. On the other hand, the fantastic elements of the third part are an intriguing aside to Poniatowska's usual style of chronicling major events in Mexican history (*La noche de Tlatelolco*, 1971) or narrating the daily lives of Mexicans (*De noche vienen*, 1979). Although rare in her work, this style was explored previously in "Coatlícue," a story from *Tlapalería* (2003) that explores the intertwining of reality and fantasy. Poniatowska is at her strongest as a novelist in this last section of *El tren pasa primero*.