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THE *NOVELA TESTIMONIAL* IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN LITERATURE

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During the last decade or so, observers of the Mexican literary scene have noted the presence of a hybrid form, variously referred to as the “*novela testimonial*,” “*novela sin ficción*,” “*novela-realidad*,” and “*cronovela*.” The form, which lies in a puzzling position between journalism, the social sciences and fiction, counts among its practitioners such talented writer-journalists as Elena Poniatowska (*Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, 1969; *La noche de Tlatelolco*, 1971) and Vicente Leñero (*Los periodistas*, 1978; *La gota de agua*, 1983). Yet Poniatowska’s presentation of the life and thoughts of Jesusa Palancares, the real-life protagonist of *Hasta no verte*, did not mark the first time in the history of Mexican letters that an author had fashioned eyewitness accounts of real people and events into a form that displayed techniques or elements of the novel. Indeed, since the sixteenth-century *crónicas* of authors such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, many Mexican prose writers have used the tools of the storyteller to record their direct observations of reality, perhaps most memorably in Martín Luis Guzmán’s description of his experiences during the Revolution, *El águila y la serpiente* (1928), and in the anthropologist Ricardo Pozas’ portrayal of Chamula Indian life, *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1948). The most recent testimonial works of Poniatowska and Leñero, however, when joined with those of Luis González de Alba (*Los días y los años*, 1971) and Gabriel Careaga (*Biografía de un joven de la clase media*, 1977), constitute part of a small but unique literary response to rapidly shifting cultural, technological and political forces in contemporary Mexico. No single phenomenon or event can explain this latter-day manifestation of testimonial literature, although certainly the rapid growth of an educated middle class, and the appearance in 1964 of the Spanish version of Oscar Lewis’ *The Children of Sánchez*, as well as the massacre of

Tlatelolco in 1968 of hundreds of Mexican citizens, were of pivotal influence. But before exploring these and other aspects of the *novela testimonial*, let us attempt to define this multifaceted type of writing, which combines elements of journalism, sociology, psychology, politics, history, fiction and the visual arts.

In general terms, a *novela testimonial* or *novela sin ficción* is a work whose author has witnessed directly a historical reality, or who has spoken with a person who has witnessed such a reality, and who then records that real-life event in a form which incorporates elements or techniques traditionally associated with fiction writing. It blends the interview, the data gathering, documentation and on-the-scene observation of the reporter or social scientist with the skills of the novelist who chooses a narrative point of view, edits and structures the materials, provides a cadence and cohesion to the language, creates dialogue, and attempts to sustain reader interest by imparting a sense of drama or adventure. More succinctly stated, the topic of a *novela testimonial* is factual or historical, i.e., the concrete experiences of a living person, but the author’s approach is fictional. By “factual” and “fictional” we do not mean “true” and “false,” as some would interpret these terms. Even though Poniatowska, Leñero, et al. either describe their own direct participation in an event or use the testimony of an informant as the basis of their *novelas testimoniales*, they admit to altering or embellishing the facts, in varying degrees, to achieve a desired artistic effect.¹ Since only the authors themselves know the extent to which they have veered from reality, we as readers can never be certain what is historically accurate and what has been invented. Even if every word were literally “true” (a claim Poniatowska makes for *La noche de Tlatelolco*), by choosing which words to include and which to exclude and by arranging the facts

in a certain order, the authors unavoidably create a narrative world that does not—that cannot—duplicate exactly the actual world. The most binding statement to be made about the “factuality” of a testimonial or nonfiction novel, therefore, is that fundamentally historical materials are used, but once a writer makes wholesale distortions of the facts, to the point where the narrative is only loosely based on real people and events, then the work ceases to be a *novela testimonial* and enters the more fanciful world of the *novela*.

A broader concept of fact and fiction would return us, as Robert Scholes suggests, to the Latin verbs from which these words are derived respectively: *facere*—to make or do, and *ingere*—to make or shape.² If we view fiction writing as a shaping process, i.e., as a writer’s attempt to mold his or her particular response to reality into a particular pattern, then the very selection, editing and structuring of “things done” (the facts) that is implicit in the preparation of a *novela testimonial* reveals an aesthetic purpose that falls clearly within the province of fiction. Rather than concern ourselves with the degree of historicity in a testimonial novel, then, we might more profitably examine the ways in which an author has chosen to tell his or her story as well as the mixture of disciplines that the final product represents.

Since Mexico began its push for industrialization and modernization in the 1940s, a greatly enlarged reading public has emerged, a middle class whose expanding numbers and tastes have affected all areas of culture, including the writing industry. As more Mexicans attended post-primary level schools, publishers responded to increasing demands for information and sophistication with books and newspaper articles embracing literature, science, economy, politics, in short, all aspects of contemporary society. After several decades of unprecedented economic and demographic growth, by the 1960s Mexico had become, in the words of Octavio Paz, “al fin . . . un país moderno.”³

Seeking international recognition of its political stability and economic successes, Mexico requested and was granted the designation of its capital city as the site of XIX Olympic games, to be held in October of 1968. The year 1968 was characterized by other than official optimism and pride, however. In Mexico City, the student movement began in late July, and during the next several months, hundreds of thousands of supporters (mostly students

and other members of the middle class) amassed at rallies. Regardless of whether one believed that the protest was spurred by the desire for a public voice by the now large middle class or by the machinations of international terrorism, no one anticipated the reaction of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz on October 2, 1968. As some five thousand people—students, men, women, children—listened to closing statements at a rally in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas at Tlatelolco, Army helicopters and troops encircled the area and erupted in a crossfire that left untold numbers of dead and wounded, thousands imprisoned, and the nation in a state of profound shock.

For Luis González de Alba, one of the student leaders who spent three years in prison, Tlatelolco was a crushing defeat, aggravated by the fact that

la única versión que se podía leer . . . era la de estos miserables asesinos estudiantes que ni estudiantes son, sino falsos, y que fueron entrenados en Corea y que vinieron a provocar graves conflictos en un país que vivía maravillosamente en paz.⁴

For Elena Poniatowska, it was a repulsive incident whose full dimensions needed to be brought to the public eye. Well known in newspaper circles, she prepared an article on the massacre which was summarily rejected for publication. The media, having received only scraps of information from officials who essentially suppressed the facts, either provided no information at all or presented the distorted version of the government, which pictured armed outside agitators as the initiators of the attack.

One might surmise that a number of extraliterary factors contributed to the appearance of the *novelas testimoniales* which dealt with the subject of Tlatelolco, *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Los días y los años*.⁵ The starting point, of course, was the cataclysmic event itself. The subsequent government clampdown of information created a dearth of knowledge and understanding of the incident, frustrating not only the public at large, but particularly those who were closely involved with the student movement (among them Luis González de Alba) or those who had gathered testimony from participants (Elena Poniatowska).

Motivated by a desire to reveal the truth or to express their outrage, Poniatowska and González de Alba prepared works which were basically factual in nature but which also, by conscious design, conveyed the welter of information in a more palatable form than that to be found in a dry, historical essay. Hampered by the clear intent of the Díaz Ordaz administration to stifle public discussion of Tlatelolco, these writers were unable to communicate their stories until the government changed hands. With the new President Luis Echeverría's (1970-76) call for an "apertura democrática" and his intensive efforts not only to appease student and middle-class discontent but also to encourage media comment on public policies, a more favorable environment developed for the release of works which strongly attacked government actions. In addition, a deliberate decision by Neus Espreate, chief editor of ERA (publisher of *Noche, Días y años*, and Carlos Monsiváis' view of 1968 in *Días de guardar*), to bring to light the previously suppressed realities of Tlatelolco provided a means for Poniatowska and González de Alba to air their version of events.⁶ Moreover, these works had a public, namely the educated middle class which forms the largest group of readers in Mexico. And a public, as we have seen, that not only had grown in numbers but in its sophistication and sensitivity to contemporary social, cultural and political issues. The tragic night of Tlatelolco provoked a heightened political awareness in many Mexicans, so that when books such as *La noche de Tlatelolco* appeared—books which promised the truth behind a crucial political event—it is not surprising that they received widespread attention.

Two earlier literary events were as important as Tlatelolco in affecting the development of testimonial novels in Mexico. When in 1948 the young anthropologist Ricardo Pozas put in writing the fruits of his research on the *tzotzil* or Chamula Indians of the Chiapas region, he chose a form, the first-person narration of his guide, Juan Pérez Jolote, that both departed from the usual scientific monograph and prefigured by many years Oscar Lewis' oral literature of the poor. Pozas met Juan while investigating the genealogy and social organization of the Chamulas, then interviewed the young man at length and accompanied him in his religious and civic duties in the town of Chamula. By choosing Juan as his narrative subject, Pozas breathed life into history and

gave human form to a wealth of anthropological data on the political and social structure of the *tzotziles*, their rituals and customs and their mixture of Christian and animist spiritual observances. Instead of an omniscient author who describes and interprets the crucial moments in his character's life, Juan himself guides the reader through his boyhood years spent wandering from master to master, his participation in the Revolution, his marriage, his father's death, his public service to his village. From an abundance of materials gathered over many years, Pozas fashioned a sparse narrative that reads like a novel, in that he uses an individualized and fully autonomous character as narrator, constructs a time frame of present-past-present, writes with a conscious unpretentiousness and directness, and begins and ends the book on the themes of death and Juan's connection to his past. Regardless of whether *Juan Pérez Jolote* is viewed as literature or social anthropology or both, Pozas' direct immersion into Indian life and his subsequent rendering of Chamula culture from the point of view of an authentic *tzotzil* represent a turning point in the depiction of this and other marginal groups in Mexican society. Twenty years later, in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Elena Poniatowska will develop more fully the type of testimonial literature initiated by Pozas, which features the direct expression of the long-silent voices at the periphery of society.

It was not until the publication in 1964 of *Los hijos de Sánchez*, however, that public and critical attention focused on testimonial writing. Oscar Lewis' work, which registers the tape-recorded voices of a family of slum dwellers in Mexico City, was a runaway bestseller and soon became the subject of far-reaching controversy, after it was charged that the book denigrated Mexico and was "obscene and slanderous." No doubt aided by the extensive publicity accorded the debate, *Hijos* was, in the words of its publisher, Joaquín Díez Canedo of Joaquín Mortiz, "un éxito inmediato y tremendo . . . tuvo un impacto enorme."⁷ Lewis introduced the legitimized use of the tape recorded for future authors of both fact (Poniatowska, Careaga) and fiction (Gustavo Sáinz, Jose Agustín, Fernando del Paso), and the phenomenal commercial success of his literal documentation of reality expanded the horizons of the writing industry.⁸ Even though *Hijos* was preceded by *Juan Pérez Jolote* (Pozas claims that Lewis "se inspiró en *Jolote*"⁹, Lewis's work had a more immediate

and profound impact. Both his and Pozas' concern with utilizing actual events as described by real people to present aspects of contemporary Mexican life would be continued in the more recent *novelas testimoniales*.

The testimonial novel in Mexico can be divided into two main categories: 1) those works that offer the life stories of poor, forgotten individuals who have lived through vital periods in Mexican history (*Juan Pérez Jolote* and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*) or of individuals who, although not ignored, are not thoroughly known (*Biografía de un joven de la clase media*, which recounts the rock and drug adventures of a 1960s youth) and 2) those which present eyewitness testimony to momentous public events that were, by virtue of government manipulation of the news, inadequately covered by the mass media (*La noche de Tlatelolco*, *Los días y los años*, and *Los periodistas*, which chronicles the ouster of Julio Scherer from the directorship of the newspaper *Excelsior*). As mentioned earlier, the *novela testimonial* represents a fusion (or confusion, its detractors would say) of the crafts of fiction, journalism, sociology and a number of other disciplines. No other author more ably demonstrates the diversity of testimonial literature than Elena Poniatowska, whose works embrace both currents of the *novela testimonial*.

Long considered one of Mexico's leading journalists (known primarily for her interviews), Poniatowska used to advantage her mastery of the question and answer technique in her first venture into the novel, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. After a chance encounter with Jesusa Palancares, the writer interviewed her subject over a period of several years, then parlayed their talks into a book that details the adventures of its feisty first-person narrator. We follow Jesusa from her impoverished, motherless childhood in Oaxaca during the first decade of this century, through her adolescent years as a *soldadera* in the Revolution, then on to Mexico City, where, much in the manner of a *piçara*, she must use her wits to keep body and soul together in the harsh and unpredictable world of the poor.

Although written by a journalist who spent many years researching her subject, *Hasta no verte* nevertheless clearly reveals the shaping presence of the fiction writer. Interestingly, Poniatowska herself has referred to her book both as a long interview, or a form of journalism, and as a type of literature, specifically,

a *novela testimonial*. She cites two techniques of the journalist, the interview with an informant and the use of dialogue, as tools that she has transferred to her literature. One might add that were it not for her long-standing habit as a reporter of scanning her surroundings in search of a story, she might never have stumbled upon an indignant Jesusa in a laundry room in a low-class section of Mexico City.

During her weekly interviews with her informant, Poniatowska took copious notes (after abandoning an ill-performing tape recorder), then later reconstructed their conversations. She also visited the places the old woman talked about: the stables, the neighborhood butcher shop, the Obra Espiritual (a religious sect), and Jesusa's homeland of Oaxaca. She even followed the elderly woman's diet for a while. Poniatowska took these steps in order to feel within herself the circumstances of her subject's life and in obedience of her reporter's conscience, which dictated that she always be at the scene of the events she described.

Once Poniatowska had exercised her considerable skills as a journalist in first obtaining and then documenting the facts of Jesusa's life, she began the lengthy process of assembling the materials. She took considerable liberties with the testimony: "Maté a los personajes que me sobran . . . elaboré donde me pareció necesario, podé, cosí, remendé, inventé."¹⁰ Although we do not know just what the author added to or subtracted from the actual circumstances of her informant's life and personality, we can detect with absolute certainty Poniatowska's controlling presence in the narrative. In the early sections of the book, for example, the writer establishes certain themes and narrative patterns that will recur in the remainder of the work. In Chapter I we learn that Jesusa is completely alone in her old age, having survived her husband, parents, brothers, and sisters. Throughout the rest of the book's twenty-nine sections, the themes of death/abandonment and solitude are reinforced, as one by one people (even animals) who are close to Jesusa die or disappear from her life for unexplained reasons.

Also established in the beginning sections is the theme of wanderlust. Each of the early chapters ends with either the young child Jesusa or her father on the move again, usually in search of work. Once she joins the Revolution as an adolescent, this pattern intensifies, and after settling in Mexico City as a young adult, she remains fond of roving for the rest

of her life. As Poniatowska closes each of the initial sections with a change in locale, she opens the next chapter with the motherless Jesusa under the watch of a new caretaker. Once in Mexico City, she is no longer supervised by others, but the author replaces the changing locales and mistresses of the previous sections with a series of new jobs undertaken by Jesusa at the opening of most of the remaining chapters of the book.

Jesusa's wide range of experiences (she is, among other things, a factory worker, maid, hog slaughterer and soldier) plus the important social and political movements that occur during her long life provide her with an unlimited number of targets to criticize. Some of her strongest salvos are directed at the Revolution, which changed nothing for Jesusa and others like her. The poor only got poorer and the abuses more severe: "Todo el que viene nos muerde, nos deja mancos, chimuelos, cojos y con nuestros pedazos hace su casa."¹¹ Unlike Demetrio Macías, of *Los de abajo*, and other fictional characters, Jesusa is unique, for she is living testimony to the betrayal of the Revolution. By recording the life and opinions of an actual person who participated in the fighting and was a victim of the government's subsequent failure to improve the lot of the poor, Poniatowska brings authenticity and credibility to the message of futility that she shares with Mariano Azuela and other novelists of the Revolution.

Perhaps the object of Jesusa's most pointed comments is men. Early in the book the author develops the image of a rebellious, fiercely independent child who does not conform to society's expectations of how a little girl should act. If she was a "muy hombrada" child, she evolved into a woman who was "muy perra, pegalona y borracha."¹² She chose consciously not to lead the life of most women of her day—marriage, children, resignation—because men not only tried to dominate her but were singularly obsessed with sex.

Although much more remains to be said about *Hasta no verte*, we can see at this point that Jesusa is portrayed as a poor and forgotten member of society whose intelligence, courage and fierce pride enabled her to survive hardship and adversity. In each chapter the author has placed Jesusa in a series of picaresque-like adventures that underscore her vitality and her will to live. The pace is bustling and the structure loose and episodic for, as Poniatowska explains, "Mi idea era la ané-

cdota y las aventuras. Yo quería que en cada capítulo sucediera algo."¹³ As a practicing journalist, she had come across a subject whose life story, she judged, could not be transmitted effectively in the customary manner of her profession, the newspaper article. She wished to rescue from oblivion the authentic voice of one of society's marginal members, and to do so she chose a form that combined the tools of her profession—the fact gathering, documentation, the interview—with the fashioning and shaping skills of the novelist.

Poniatowska's other testimonial novel, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, also records the voices of those who have previously had no opportunity to speak. Frustrated by the media response to the night of October 2, the writer gathered testimony from hundreds of participants in the student movement and Tlatelolco, including imprisoned intellectuals and student leaders, as well as farmers, beauticians, factory workers and housewives. Although interview statements predominate in *Noche*, the author strategically inserts slogans borrowed from banners and posters, choral chants heard during the demonstrations, transcripts from television programs, formal declarations by government officials, *corridos* (popular songs), cartoon captions, and literary passages.

If her skills as a journalist are displayed in her relentless pursuit of oral testimony and in the variety of source materials, her artistic talents are revealed in the impressive mosaic she created with the many fragments of information. Given that she was dealing with a well-known event, she chose to create maximum dramatic impact by making only spot references to the night of Tlatelolco until more than halfway through the narrative, that is, in the second part of the book, "La noche de Tlatelolco." In the first part, "Ganar la calle," she carefully sets the stage with a slow buildup of events in the months preceding October. Her verbal camera pokes into classrooms and meeting places to register complaints of students and teachers, shifts out to the streets to hear the chanting demonstrators, eavesdrops inside the homes of arguing parents and children, follows student brigades into factories and buses, and circles over the hundreds of thousands gathered at the demonstrations. Her camera moves quickly and covers considerable ground, imparting a bumpy, irregular rhythm to the text that matches the vitality and spontaneity of the student movement itself.

As she leads the reader through a series of

rallies and confrontations between the government and students, Poniatowska utilizes several techniques that will appear consistently throughout the book: 1) the brief mention of a word or idea in one testimony which serves as a connecting link either to a new topic in the next testimony or to a fuller treatment of the same topic; 2) the use of counterpoint, that is, a statement or series of statements affirming an opinion or fact followed by one(s) that refute it and 3) the arrangement of the opposing testimony such that the final one on a given topic is usually favorable to the students. The majority of the declarations are brief, but the author assures continued reader involvement in several longer passages by breaking off the testimony at appropriately dramatic junctures, inserting related statements, then retrieving the thread of the original story a page or two later.

Whereas in Part I Poniatowska's focus is diffuse, covering a several month period and moving throughout Mexico City, in Part II she fixes her gaze on a small plaza that for a few hours was the scene of unrelenting terror. The testimony ricochets from site to site, as if following the crazy path of the bullets that descended upon the panicked crowd: from the speakers' platform down into the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, inside the apartments and shops where many took refuge, into the recessed pre-Hispanic ruins where hundreds jumped, to the doors of the Santiago de Tlatelolco Church. In one instance, we follow a young woman for ten pages, each fragment of her testimony describing a step in the agonizing death of her younger brother. One could go on forever describing the images of horror and suffering that explode off the pages with the staccato rhythm of machine gun blasts. Such is the author's ability to re-create the scene that the testimony jumps from its fixed position on the printed page onto a large stage, and we, more spectators than readers now, view the terrible drama that opens up before us. It is difficult to describe this part, or any part, of *Noche* without referring to the senses, for we not only see but also hear the guns and screams, and feel the crunch of bodies jammed against each other in flight.

References to Poniatowska's camera, to fade-ins and dissolves, are not arbitrary, for the construction of *Noche* approximates the style of film editing known as montage. In lieu of photographs, however, she has combined many different oral statements so that they often blend with or into each other to produce

a composite representation of the events leading to the night of Tlatelolco. She does not analyze or explain, but instead creates an impressionistic sequence of verbal images linked by fragments of ideas, at times contrasting, at times continuous. One must also resort to the art term of collage to describe the author's techniques, for she pastes together chants, graffiti, poems, newspaper items, as well as oral testimony, to form a vast picture of the student movement from its earliest days onward. Poniatowska did not intend a piece of investigative journalism that would reveal behind-the-scenes maneuvers. Rather, she attempted to recapture the events of 1968, to bring them alive through the voices of those who experienced them, and to preserve for the reader the sights, sounds and feelings of those unforgettable months.

Two other works, *Biografía de un joven de la clase media* and *Los periodistas*, also reveal the richness of the *novela testimonial*, but some of its flaws as well. In the prologue to *Biografía*, Gabriel Careaga acknowledges his debt to Oscar Lewis and to his professor Ricardo Pozas, whose works served as models for his study of middle-class youth. The sociologist chose as his subject one of his students, Omar Martínez, because the young man typified, as the author explains in the introduction, the confused, alienated adolescent of the 1960s who dreamed of grandeur but faced a bleak and ordinary daily existence. Careaga wished to avoid the statistics-laden, jargon-filled sociological tracts so common to his field, and thus sought to organize his data into a fluid form that traced with the continuity of a novel the personal development of his informant.

Yet instead of the sensitive youth described in the prologue, who rescues himself from a meaningless existence, Omar emerges within the text as an ultimately uninteresting teenager subsumed in orgies of marijuana, sex and rock music. The bulk of the narrative concentrates on these experiences during Omar's prep school years, with his post-university existence and supposed personal salvation glossed over in the final few pages. Despite the sameness of Omar's forays into sensual pleasure, Careaga repeats verbatim portions of the tape recordings. Moreover, on one occasion Omar refers to a younger brother of his, then a few pages later states that he has two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister. Unfortunately, in transforming his data into a first-person narration, Careaga fell victim to one of

the dangers inherent in the *novela testimonial*, namely, a less than careful selection, editing and organization of the materials.

Careaga's contributions to the testimonial novel lie in the variety of techniques he used to gather testimony from Omar. Whereas Pozas and Poniatowska relied principally on the question-answer interview format, the sociologist often used psychoanalytical methods, such as free association, psychodrama, dreams, fantasies and Gestalt therapy, to facilitate his informant's revelations. In addition, he encouraged Omar to compose poems and often edited long written sections which the youth submitted to him. Although he did not fashion a memorable narrative from the accumulated data, Careaga nevertheless expanded the ways in which the author of a *novela testimonial* approaches his subject.

Of the writers under discussion, Vicente Leñero brought the *novela testimonial* the most well-established literary career, having published five novels (including the prize-winning *Los albañiles*) and several plays prior to *Los periodistas*. Disturbed by the media silence which followed the takeover of *Excelsior* in 1976, he prepared a work that is technically sophisticated but which also displays one of the potential weaknesses of the testimonial novel, the overuse of factual material.

As a member of the editorial board of *Excelsior*, Leñero provides an insider's perspective of the dramatic chain of events that led to the demise of director Julio Scherer. In the author's view, so unrelenting were *Excelsior's* attacks on the Echeverría administration that the President capitalized on internal dissension within the newspaper to install a more docile director. Two incidents forced the tensions to a peak. First, *Excelsior*-owned land was invaded by peasants who claimed they were not properly indemnified when the property was purchased by the newspaper. Government orders to remove the peasants were mysteriously never implemented. Second, anti-Scherer forces within the newspaper's cooperative rallied behind Regino Díaz Redondo, who, in a climactic meeting patrolled by hired thugs, was elected to replace Scherer.

Armed with volumes of documents (newspaper articles, letters, inter-office memoranda, minutes from meetings, excerpts from speeches), Leñero proposed to chronicle these events in a literarily creative manner:

Siempre he tenido la idea de que la

novela es el gran marco, un gran mural donde pueden intervenir todas las técnicas. *En Los periodistas* . . . tenía un tema tan rico que me daba para todos los géneros . . . podía jugar literariamente con él.¹⁴

Among the "géneros" which the writer includes are an extended interior monologue, a one-act theatrical farce to depict the post-Scherer *Excelsior*, an interview, a film script replete with flashes ahead, cuts and dissolves, plus elements of a diary, personal memoirs and a journalistic chronicle. One certainly cannot complain of sameness of form or technique, for Leñero combines monologue with dialogue, questions with answers, imagined episodes with carefully documented, factual ones. He moves easily between objectivity and subjectivity, mixes small printing type with oversized letters, and glides from three-page long sentences to words that are cut off at mid-syllable.

Although clearly the most technically innovative of the *novela testimoniales*, *Los periodistas* suffers from an overabundance of facts. The author does not exercise sufficient control when reproducing page after page of official documents, filled with undeciphered acronyms, numbers and dozens of names. Leñero often chose to make these documents function as part of the narrative (ten of twelve pages of Chapter II, Part II, for example, are devoted to reproducing a secretary's meeting notes). This decision frequently places the reader at the edge of an impenetrable thicket, and as the documents accumulate, one thrashes forward with increasing reluctance. Yet despite these faults, *Los periodistas* presents a fascinating eyewitness view of the struggle for an independent, free press in Mexico and raises the *novela testimonial* to new peaks of formal experimentation.

The testimonial novel in Mexico is a special type of literature that by default has created a place of its own, even though it borrows liberally from other disciplines. It features the dynamism, on-the-scene immediacy and detailed documentation of journalism, but brings to the public eye stories either untouched or severely distorted by the Mexican press. Without the works of Poniatowska, González de Alba and Pozas, for example, the facts behind the Tlatelolco massacre might never have emerged, and forgotten individuals such as Juan Pérez Jolote and Jesusa Palancares

would have remained invisible.

With respect to history, the *novela testimonial* provides, as do historical studies, a chronological record or account of events as they affect a group of individuals or a culture. But, as Angel Luis Fernández Guerra notes, the reader of history hears only one voice, that of the historian.¹⁵ In many of the *novelas testimoniales*, in contrast, two (or more) voices speak: the initially isolated monologue of the informant blends into a dialogue with the author. Even in those works which feature the single voice of the author-participant, we listen to the experiences of one who has lived directly the circumstances described. Rarely is the point of view of the participant represented in official histories, particularly if that individual is of marginal influence in society.

The world of the disenfranchised has not been ignored in Mexican literature, as attested by the novels of J. J. Fernández de Lizardi (Mexico's original journalist-turned-novelist, Juan Rulfo and Rosario Castellanos, to name a few. The special contribution of the *novela testimonial*, however, is that its authors, unlike the writers of fiction just mentioned, do not speak *for* the poor through imaginary characters but directly *with* actual individuals whose life experiences and colloquial language are then preserved in a first-person narrative. Those testimonial novels which present the eyewitness testimony to a momentous event have also extended the scope of the novel. Poniatowska, González de Alba and Leñero have lent artistry to the facts of Tlatelolco and the *Excelsior* case and have revealed a wealth of information available only to the participant. Following in the footsteps of Martín Luis Guzmán ("nuestro antecedente," states Leñero¹⁶, the authors of the contemporary *novela testimonial* have shown once again that the artfully presented, dramatic voice of the witness to history's peak moments is not easily forgotten.

NOTES

¹Personal interviews with Luiz González de Alba, Elena Poniatowska, Gabriel Careaga and Vicente Leñero, 2, 4, 8, 20 August 1979, respectively. Unless otherwise indicated, statements about these writers (and those of others interviewed) beliefs, feelings and intentions can be assumed to have originated from the interviews. Except in the case of a direct quotation, this source will not be repeatedly noted.

²*Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-2.

³*Posdata*, 12th ed. (México, D.F.: Siglo XXI, 1979), p. 70.

⁴Personal interview with González de Alba, August, 1979.

⁵In addition to these two predominantly factual works, a series of Tlatelolco novels evolved, featuring fictional characters and situations. Among these books are: José Revueltas, *El apando* (1969); René Avilés Fabila, *El gran solitario de palacio* (1971); Juan Miguel de Mora, *T-68* (1973); David Martín del Campo, *Las rojas son las carreteras* (1976); Gonzalo Martré, *Los símbolos transparentes* (1977); Luis Spota, *La Plaza* (1977); Jorge Aguilar Mora, *Si muero lejos de ti* (1979).

⁶Personal interview with Neus Espresate, 14 August, 1979. Espresate adds that ERA is committed to publishing works that describe leftist and Marxist political movements.

⁷Personal interview with Joaquín Díez Canedo, 15 August, 1979. *Los hijos de Sánchez* has sold well over 200,000 copies. Díez Canedo considers a book that sells 25,000 to be extremely successful.

⁸Both Poniatowska and Leñero aided Lewis in the preparation of *Pedro Martínez* (1966). Poniatowska notes that "Me ayudó a ver la riqueza y la importancia de lo que es el habla popular, la literatura oral," and that her experience with editing and using a tape recorder helped her in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Leñero stated that Lewis' influence in his work was "muy poderosa, muy decisiva." Careaga modeled his *Biografía de un joven de la clase media* on Lewis' studies. Personal interviews with Poniatowska, Leñero, Careaga, August, 1979.

⁹Personal interview with Ricardo Pozas, 20 July, 1981.

¹⁰Elena Poniatowska, "Haste no verte Jesús mío," *Vuelta*, 2 (November, 1978), 10.

¹¹Elena Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (México, D.F.: ERA, 1969), p. 78.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³Personal interview with Poniatowska, August, 1979.

¹⁴Personal interview with Leñero, August, 1979.

¹⁵"*Cimarrón y Rachel*, un continuum," *Unión*, 9, No. 4 (1970), 166.

¹⁶Personal interview with Leñero, August, 1979.