

Poniatowska, Elena. *Dear Diego / Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*. Trans. Nathaniel Gardner. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012. Print.

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The set-up is rich, especially for today's reality-obsessed culture. Begin with a collection of letters written to one of Mexico's greatest artistic figures in a mixture of Spanish, French, and Russian from his wife, whom he has abandoned in Paris. Add in a novel, based on a mixture of the original letters and fictional ones, invented by a Parisian-born, Mexican writer, descendant of the last king of Poland. Finally, consider the translation into English of this extraordinary hybrid work. *Dear Diego*, the newest translation of Elena Poniatowska's *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*, further complicates the already complex relationship that the novel has with reality.

The epistolary novel's narrator is Quiela, or Angelina Beloff. Diego Rivera's first wife, she is a Russian artist residing in Paris to study painting. They meet, marry, and have a child, Dieguito. Their son tragically dies of meningitis, exacerbated by their impoverished living conditions. Post-revolutionary Mexico calls and Rivera answers, leaving Quiela in Paris until he is certain he wants to stay in Mexico, when he will send for her. He never does, though, and will go on to become one of Mexico's most famous serial husbands. The letters from his first wife remain, however, and her appeals to him are based as much on her love for him as for her love for an idea she has of Mexico, a country she'll only know years later. These letters serve as the basis for *Dear Diego*, an epistolary novel made up of letters written in Spanish but peppered with French, each of them signed "Quiela."

Though the novel is made up of letters to Diego, we never do hear from Rivera. Quiela's letters are a one-sided appeal to her husband, and to the reader, for sympathy and compassion. The notes have a wide temporal range – she narrates her life as a student in St. Petersburg years before, in an attempt to recreate a portrait of herself as an artist. She retells the story of their son's death, for which Rivera was present. This curious insistence on providing context, even if the intended recipient should already be well aware of it, has its echo in the structure of this bilingual edition of the novel, which doesn't allow the reader to forget the original, Spanish-

language context of the novel. The present publication has a side-by-side, bilingual format with the original Spanish on the verso and the English translation on the recto. This is a constant reminder of the fact that the work in question is a translation, also allowing the reader of Spanish to quickly check the original against Gardner's version.

Since Katherine Silver's 1986 translation of Poniatowska's novel is long out of print, English-speaking audiences will find in Gardner's rendition a faithful translation. A worthy successor to fill out Poniatowska's oeuvre in English, the translation errs on the side of rigid adherence rather than license. This, as the translator himself points out in the introduction, is in part due to the bilingual format, allowing readers to follow along by keeping the translation fairly close to the original.

This insistence on the translated nature of the text is especially appropriate, given the fraught relationship that Poniatowska's *Dear Diego* has with its source material. As Gardner points out in the introduction, the novel was first published in Octavio Paz's journal *Vuelta* along with photographs of the real-life Diego Rivera and Angelina Beloff, the supposed interlocutors. Poniatowska herself would later call the novel apocryphal in an interview and anyone who examines the source letters, recovered from among Rivera's correspondence by his biographer, Bertram Wolfe, will realize that not only are some of the novel's sections entirely fictional, but also that the premise that Quiela/Angelina is writing into the void is false. The historical Rivera was in contact with Beloff, so Poniatowska's decision to write a monologic epistolary novel is evidence of strong artistic license. It isn't hard to draw the connection between the Quiela portrayed in the novel and the novelist herself, who does not receive a direct answer from her readers, but rather writes and publishes, sending her own words into the ether.

Gardner's translation of *Dear Diego* will be of special interest to teachers and students of translation studies, Mexican literature, and the role of the real in contemporary cultural production. For the more casual reader, it is an excellent entrée into Poniatowska's work and its special relationship with the testimonial and documentary genres.