

Castillo Gómez, Antonio. *Leer y oír leer: ensayos sobre la lectura en los Siglos de Oro*. Madrid: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2016. Print. 231 pp.

ROBERTO GONZÁLEZ ECHEVARRÍA
YALE UNIVERSITY

The sixteenth century and its legacy are ruled by reading. The period's principal historical event, the Reformation was provoked by disputes over the analysis of texts. It could not have been otherwise. By the early fifteen hundreds, the recent development of print was making books accessible in ways and numbers previously unheard of. Humanists had rediscovered the classics and were making them available to a growing intellectual elite and the Church understood the potential of books and other publications for reaching great numbers of people, some who could read, and many others to whom those works could be read. This burgeoning of reading materials culminated in the publication of the first modern novel, the *Quijote*, whose point of departure is the protagonist's madness caused by the excessive reading of romances of chivalry, one of the main literary genres to profit from advances in printing. Cervantes's book focuses on reading and its impact on society at all levels, echoing questions that had surfaced during that century in which the practice had brought to the fore many problems and conflicts that would determine the rise of modernity in the arts and philosophy. This is the background of Antonio Castillo Gómez's excellent book on the topic, which deals in detail with theoretical and historical debates concerning reading during Spain's Golden Age of literature, which spans the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is a serious scholarly book that should be of interest to many.

Two developments in literary criticism are behind *Leer y oír*. The first is the growing interest in the act of reading and in the reader, which is a logical consequence of the larger topic of the "death of the author." With the author safely dead and the questions about literary creation set aside, it was inevitable that attention would turn to the other partner of the textual pact, the reader. This tendency is very pronounced among critics working in the wake of post-structuralism and deconstruction, and it found an ally in none other than Jorge Luis Borges, who made reading the defining process in textual construction. Meanwhile, reception theory was also at work. The second development is advancements in the study of the book and of reading as a social practice. The main figure in this current has been Roger Chartier and his disciples. Its bibliography is large, and Castillo Gómez is immersed in it, recognizing his considerable debt to it. Corollaries to these two movements, more locally, are, first, interest in the Inquisition and its practices of censorship and expurgation, and, second, attention to the representation of the act of reading in Spanish literary works, memoirs, and pious writings of various kinds. Castillo Gómez is also profoundly aware of these, and he has, in fact, been one of the protagonists in the expansion of the sub-disciplines that have emerged as a result. *Leer y oír*, which is a collection of previously published pieces, is deftly brought together to form a coherent whole, and it is augmented by a comprehensive bibliography that will bring its reader up to date as it and maps the progress of the subject in the scholarly community.

The overarching theoretical question concerning reading from the point of view of literary criticism is its influence on writing. As in much else, the author looming behind this issue is Cervantes, whose presence can be felt throughout *Leer y oír*. Castillo Gómez is well aware of the issue and he deals with it as much as he can. Is the present text the result of those books that its author read? How and in what ways? There is no definitive answer to these questions, of course, but the feeling is that, beyond any Romantic notion of inspiration or originality, reading determines writing. The bandied-

about notion of "intertextuality" presupposes the existence of an array of texts that converge in the one that we read and in which they are simply reproduced in a variety of combinations. This does not solve the problem, however, because there still has to be an agent who assembles the texts to produce the one we are reading. A case in point is that of the romances of chivalry and Cervantes. Castillo Gómez mentions, though not in exhaustive or statistical detail, the popularity of the genre, which almost by itself serves as the prime example of reading for pleasure. But the "use" the author of the *Quijote* makes of *Amadís* and all the others is quite unique and shockingly original. In *Leer y oír* Castillo deals with this impasse by alluding to a "construction of meaning," on one occasion, the "invention of meaning," to account for that undefinable instant in which what is read leads to writing and literary "creation," the taboo word of modern criticism. Borges, for whom reading was presumably a higher level of activity than writing, appears as a relevant figure in all this; this is a positive move on Castillo Gómez's part, because scholarly Spanish criticism has all too often repressed Borges's presence.

Also embedded in this issue is another all-embracing topic in Castillo Gómez's book; the interplay of orality and writing. There are many ways in which this occurs, and the author deals with them thoroughly. One is how preachers prepared for their sermons by reading from a variety of religious texts, ranging from Scripture to contemporary pious literature. Their performances were oral, but mediated by writing, which provided in many cases a series of commonplaces on the topic of the day. The sermons were "oral writing," as it were. Another, much discussed instance --and here Cervantes is again the backdrop, with his "Curioso impertinente"-- is public readings, of which there were many forms in the Golden Age. There were public readings within religious institutions, a tradition that went back to the Middle Ages, and there were also public readings in lay settings, including public plazas and street corners, some organized by civil authorities to publicize rules and regulations, but also impromptu occasions in which somebody read out loud to a group of idlers of all social classes, either for the purpose of entertainment or the disseminations of news and gossip. One need not be a Derridean to note that the oral here is preceded by writing, not the other way around as generally assumed; it is a writerly kind of orality. All these considerations buttress the general thrust of *Leer y oír*, which is to underline the importance of readings in the Golden Age.

A major contribution of the book is to classify and study various "reading communities," as Castillo Gómez calls them. I have mentioned some, but there are others. One that is most significant but easy to overlook is precisely cities, or the City. In addition to those ad hoc reading performances mentioned, cities began to be covered with writings of various kinds to instruct, control, and attract readers who were not only citizens (subjects, I suppose) and parishioners, but also potential customers. Commercial businesses, for example, advertised their trades and goods, for instance. *Leer and oír* deals not only with literary works but also with pamphlets, flyers, posters, and other ephemera, as librarians call these texts. Another is women. Castillo Gómez maintains that while women, particularly nuns, were read to institutionally, they preferred oral communication among themselves to ward off the reach of the dominant patriarchy, which could police writing. Not a few women were devotees of the romances of chivalry, and Castillo Gómez cites Santa Teresa's well known weakness for them. Yet another community of readers to which the author has devoted special attention in a previous book (*Entre la pluma y la pared*) is prisoners, both common criminals and those incarcerated by the Inquisition. We have more information about the latter because of meticulous record keeping by that institution and its special interest in matters concerning reading. To while away the hours, convicts asked for books, particularly pious ones. They also wrote, perhaps as a result, and we can remember here how Cervantes claimed to have begun writing the *Quijote* while in jail in Seville. Finally, there are communities of readers among *moriscos*, who gathered in private homes to read aloud passages from the Koran and other religious texts. Again, due to the vast records of the Inquisition, and its keen interest in these readers, there is ample information about their activities, which defied the controlling

totalitarian religious practices of the Spanish Crown. Some declared that Islamic law was superior to the Christian one.

Leer y oír goes well beyond literature. Castillo Gómez, as I have pointed out, is interested in readers and writers beyond the literary elite. He studies autobiographical writings by soldiers, tradesmen, and other common people in search of allusions to reading and the role the activity played in their lives. I am reminded, again, of Cervantes and his "Casamiento engañoso" and "Coloquio de los perros," in which the writer and the reader are a soldier and a lawyer, respectively. Castillo Gómez makes the implicit point that literature is not produced only within the community of readers and writers devoted to it, following their tastes, background, and prejudices, but among people of diverse occupations, and in texts that are not explicitly literary, but belong to other kinds of discourse, such as the legal, as I have argued elsewhere. I believe that this practice enriches our understanding of literature itself and to the criticism and scholarship devoted to it. In many instances *Leer y oír* can only point to potential areas of study that it necessarily cannot treat with any thoroughness. One is education, in which reading and writing are essential and include both state and religious authorities and the constitutions of canons. Castillo Gómez devotes only passing references, for instance, to the fascinating moment, recounted by some of Castillo's authors, in which he or she learned to read and how. The production of primers and other textbooks is an area that has attracted some scholarly attention, but it deserves more (an example is *El catecismo de Gante*). How reading and writing were taught to natives of the New World precisely during the years covered by *Leer y oír* is a subject that has been studied, but merits further research.

A book that incites more study of the field that it covers is a valuable one, and *Leer y oír* is all that. I wish that Castillo Gómez had considered Quevedo among the front-line writers preoccupied with reading and writing: "Retirado en la paz de estos desiertos/con pocos, pero doctos libros juntos,/ vivo en conversación con los difuntos/y escucho con los ojos a los muertos." But the Golden Age of Spanish literature is so vast and rich that it is impossible to cover even a portion of its major figures.