

Tinajero, Araceli. *El Lector: A History of the Cigar Factory Reader*. Trans. Judith E. Grasberg. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Print. 268 pp.

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Araceli Tinajero's *El Lector: A History of the Cigar Factory Reader* focuses on a figure that is unique to Cuban culture. The cigar factory reader emerges, develops and endures as an integral part of the manufacture of the most typical of Cuban products, derived from a native plant (sugar cane is an import). The emblematic quality of cigars is so not only due to the economic importance of the tobacco industry in Cuban history, but to the fact that smoking was first observed by Europeans in Cuba. It was in the Caribbean that the Spanish learned the smoking habit, which they then disseminated throughout the world. Nothing could be more original, in the sense of more of the origin, than Cuban cigars –the plant from which they are made grows and seem to have always grown out of Cuban soil. The reader, the *lector*, came centuries later, but his art is implicated in a custom deeply ingrained in Cuban life because of this historical depth, and also because it is an activity that produces pleasure and, now we know with certainty, also death.

But we didn't have to wait for modern medicine to tell us that death lurks in smoking, we already had the presence of fire, ashes, the visible consumption of the cigar, and the fleetingness signified by smoke itself –incense is also a kind of smoke. These qualities and resonances at once made the reader a kind of priest officiating in a solemn ritual. I know of no other figure so tightly woven into the fabric of Cuban tradition or so distinctive. Explicitly and sometimes implicitly professor Tinajero's book

brings together as in a poetic synthesis these traits, thereby perhaps beginning the long overdue enshrinement of the *lector* as an iconic Cuban cultural figure.

El Lector explores the beginnings of reading out loud to congregations in medieval monasteries and convents, in which appropriately sacred or devotional texts were read while the monks and nuns observed their vow of silence. The practice was and is observed in churches during services of various kinds, as we know. Reading to a group waned after the development of print made the acquisition of books easier and individual readers could each take a copy home to enjoy in private. But reading out loud did not disappear because in the Renaissance books continued to be relatively rare commodities, as we learn from one famous episode in the *Quijote*, mentioned by professor Tinajero, when the priest, fittingly and ironically, reads the novella “El curioso impertinente” to the characters assembled at the inn. I say ironically because this most perverse of stories is heard in the same voice that presumably pronounces sermons and reads from Scripture. The innkeeper informs how at harvest time, at the end of the day, someone always read romances of chivalry to the tired workers, and how much he enjoyed them. Even in the nineteenth century, when book printing, aided by steam power expanded enormously, reading to the family was a custom in bourgeois homes until it was finally displaced by radio and later television in the twentieth century. The convention only survived in churches and synagogues, except for the cigar factories in Cuba, where it acquired a new lease on life, as detailed in professor Tinajero’s *El Lector*.

She traces the appearance and evolution of the *lector* in nineteenth-century Cuban cigar factories, its heyday during the early decades of the republic in the twentieth, and its continuation during the long years of the Castro regime. Professor Tinajero follows the figure as it is exported to Cuban enclaves in Key West and Tampa, as well as to Mexico and the Dominican Republic, where it is adopted and adapted to local conditions. In all of these areas, particularly in Cuba, Key West, and Tampa, the reader had a decisive impact on labor and political movements, as the informed cigar workers became conscious of their plight and fought for their rights. A practice developed to extract more productivity, hence more profits, from workers, unwittingly contributed to their political education, which led in turn to their joining radical parties like the Anarchists and the Communists. This endows the figure of the reader with an unparalleled rich social and political dimension.

Ironically the cigar workers’ boss in Cuba is now a communist regime, which employs the *lector* for the same purpose as before –to enhance productivity—but keenly alert to the potential for indoctrination inherent in the practice of reading out

loud to a group. This was, after all, its original purpose in monasteries and convents. Hence professor Tinajero's study of the *lector* in today's Cuba is a testimony of how the subversive nature of his craft has been turned into an instrument of propaganda, mostly through the selection of the materials read. This part of her book is ethnographic in nature and contains very moving testimonies by aged, veteran readers, who can remember better times.

But professor Tinajero is a literary historian and critic not an ethnographer, and the most valuable parts of her book are those devoted to literature. We already knew of the lector's profound relationship to literature, and had even heard stories about José Martí's involvement with cigar workers and readers in Tampa and Key West. But *El Lector* expands our knowledge of the readers' commitment to literature, mostly through their choice of reading materials, of which, with professor Tinajero's book, we now have lists and detailed discussions. The great nineteenth-century realist novelists, particularly translations of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, but also the Spanish ones, such as Benito Pérez Galdós and Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, were the main fare, to be sure, but also polemical political pamphlets. I remember hearing a heated discussion about the Dreyfus Affair at Café Los Helados in Tampa among a group of retired cigar workers during the sixties. It dawned on me that many years before they had been read Emile Zola's *J'accuse* in the Blasco Blasco Ibáñez translation and were still arguing about it. By patient research, including interviews with old readers, professor Tinajero has given us a glimpse the cigar factories' literary canon. It is fascinating to read statements by those old men about theirs, and their listeners' literary heroes. Henceforth no history of Cuban literature can be written without at least one chapter being devoted to reading in the cigar factories, an activity as relevant as those carried out in more conventional literary circles.

By pure chance, or what José Lezama Lima used to call *el azar concurrente*, "converging fate or fates," as professor Tinajero was writing her book, Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics* appeared to great fanfare. Cruz's play is a kind of dramatization of *El lector*. *Anna in the Tropics*, by the way, is discussed in *El Lector*. This fortuitous counterpoint enriches professor Tinajero's book by endowing it with a currency that it might otherwise lack because, except in Cuba, the reader has disappeared from mechanized cigar factories.

But all of the above is sociology or history and the reading scene at the cigar factory that professor Tinajero's book brings to life evokes issues concerning language and reading that are deeply rooted in Western philosophy and poetics. In the *Confessions*, Augustine left the first testimony of the difference between reading out

loud and reading silently to oneself. He talks about reading without mouthing the words, without giving the letters on the page physical substance in real time, letting them instead be absorbed by consciousness without the mediation of sound. But there is always the implicit mediation of sound. Augustine's reflections, nevertheless, lead to the awareness of reading as duration –*durée*, as Bergson would say-- and of the inherent irreversibility of language, its ineluctable rush towards death. This sense of the temporality of language eventually began to be linked to our conception of history and to the interplay between individual and collective time. Reading out loud, though it continued in monasteries through the Middle Ages, and on through the early modern period, and Modernity itself in schools and private homes, nevertheless became an archaic practice associated with ritual rather than the acquisition of knowledge and aesthetic pleasure. Deep reading became, and remained, silent reading, a soundless communion between reader and writer with the blank page and the black symbols on it as intermediaries.

This is where the uncanny and unexpected connection between reading and smoking inherent in the practice of the *lector* occurs and what makes the reader so alluring to literature in the deepest sense. Because, like thought and like prayers, smoke soars; it is an image of intellectual and spiritual yearning. Like thought and spirit smoke is light, dense yet almost transparent; as it rises it seems to seek the truth, God, or both. Voice, like smoke, is bodiless. It travels unseen through the air. It emerges from the lungs, but it feels as if from our very souls, the same as when we exhale smoke it seems as if it was produced by some internal combustion in our spirit. Hence we associate smoking with contemplation, with reflection, states and activities that are in turn related to reading. Professor Tinajero's book chronicles the one instance in the modern era when tobacco and reading are linked in a collective setting. But, is it collective? Are not the listeners lost in their own reveries as they hear what is being read to them? Are they not a collection of individuals rather than a collective? Reading is very solipsistic; it is a silent conversation with oneself as we become one with the book and its author. After the reading the listeners at the cigar factories no doubt shared opinions and impressions, but as the reader's words floated through the room, each worker was hanging on to them with his or her own inner self. The workers didn't just become educated in politics, they acquired the depth of feeling and understanding that only comes through reading, whether we hear the words or pick them up without eyes from the page. The *lector* was not officiating only in a collective ritual with political implications; he was dramatizing the communion implicit in reading itself.

