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ABOUT READING AND LISTENING

Photo by Ximena Bedregal

Have people in the world always read the way we do today, silently, with the eyes only? We really should ask ourselves this question. The fact is that in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, written works were mostly transmitted in an oral —or rather, oral/aural— way. Texts were read aloud or recited from memory to groups of listeners; that is, they appealed more to the ear than to the eye. Actually, "reading" constituted a global phenomenon that exceeded the text. It involved the listeners' physical perceptions —auditory and visual— of the reader or reciter and of the other listeners; it involved a kind of performance by the person who read or recited, while the audience participated in the performance by means of their reactions during and after the reading. The situation was similar to that of the theater.

Meanwhile, men of letters and scholars did read alone, but not necessarily in silence. They too would pronounce what they were reading, perhaps in a low voice and without physical expressions, but, anyhow, listening, absorbing the words through the hearing faculty as well as by their eyesight. People who read as we do today were very few. Saint Ambrose, in the 4th century, caused great astonishment because he used to read only with his eyes, without even moving his lips.

A long time was to pass before reading in silence became a general habit. In spite of what is generally believed, this habit developed quite a long time after the invention of the printing press. Even Marshall McLuhan, great defender of the theory of a "new visual culture" established during the Renaissance, had to admit that poetry, and also some prose, continued to be oral, more than visual, during several centuries after Gutenberg. How many centuries? According to Gérard Genette, "the continuous weakening of auditory habits of literary consumption" did not begin until the 19th century...

These things have been *said*, but only recently have scholars begun to document them and to explore their many and fascinating implications. Twelve years ago, the critic William Nelson published a very interesting article entitled "From 'Listen, Lord ings', to 'Dear Reader'", where, speaking about the Renaissance, he commented:

> Since customary activities are not usually recorded, evidence concerning reading habits is scattered, various, and sometimes ambiguous. Nevertheless, enough does exist to show that books of every conceivable kind, whether in prose or in verse, were commonly read aloud (...), the audiences ranging from the princely and sophisticated to the rustic illiterate.

Spain was not included in Nelson's study, concerned only with England, France and Italy, but another scholar, Stephen Gilman, had previously written about the oral characteristics of literature and of university teaching in

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Spain at the end of the 15 th century:

> Reading was still thought of as reading aloud to oneself or to somebody else (...). The printing press, in other words, had not yet created a public of silent readers; it had merely multiplied the number of texts available for reading aloud.

In my own research, I have collected evidence from the 16 th and 17 th centuries to show how much the idea and practice of reading were still predominantly oral/aural in Spain and Spanish America during this period. What follows are some of the results of this research.

Poetry, we are told, "should be soft and sweet to the ear". The sonnets of a certain poet "were read and recited by him many times". Another author read his epic poem to two friends, and in turn listened to the reading of a long poem by another writer. Those who theorize about prose fiction advise that narrative works should be able to "please every listener". The same thing was expected for all sorts of scholarly writings. In Spain, Erasmus' *Enchiridion* was often read "in public spaces and gatherings". Bartolomé de las Casas says about his *History of the Indies*: "this chronicle will produce (...) greater appetite if it is followed by its listeners". Antonio de Guevara is thinking about oral readers, even of his Epistles, when he says: "it could be that some day you will read them in front of people who are not very wise", and when he explains: "I have wanted to tell these old stories so that all those present know about them".

Thus, we see that, indeed, works "of every conceivable kind" were designed for reading out loud. And they were meant for the most varied kinds of listeners. Guevara's audience was associated with the courtly environment; there, in the court, in the palaces, in the gatherings of nobles and clergy, the practice of reading aloud was especially frequent. That is to say, the oral diffusion of the written word was not the result of the generalized illiteracy; rather, it was due to the persistence of an age old habit.

On the other hand, social transformations of the 16th century —especially, the growth of the cities— in addition to the rise of the printing press, contributed to the growth of the listening public among the illiterate population. There were individuals who knew how to read even among the poor, and if there were just one in a family, hamlet, street, or guild of craftsmen, this would be sufficient to enable one single copy of a text to reach many people.

The Sisters (1900) by Ralph Peacock. Photo by Alejandra Novoa

It is easy to believe the scene from *Don Quixote* (1:32) in which the innkeeper relates that

> at harvest time a lot of reapers come in here in the mid-day heat. There's always one of them who can read, and he takes up one of those books. Then as many as thirty of us sit round him, and we enjoy listening so much that it saves us countless grey hairs.

Thanks to the practice of reading out loud, those who had access to "literature" —understood in its widest sense— were much more numerous than is usually imagined.

With the growth of this listening public, the "reader" who knew how to read aloud acquired great social importance. And schoolteachers were most concerned about teaching how to read aloud for others. This explains why the orthography manuals of the 16th and 17th centuries are principally pronunciation manuals: they ilustrate the letters of the alphabet one by one, explaining how each should be pronounced. As in the time of Quintilian, grammarians and orthographers considered a letter as a receptacle of sound to be reproduced intact by the reader in the moment of

reading. The famous Antonio de Nebrija said, in 1517, that "the writing of letters has no other use than to represent those sounds we deposit in them, such that they (the letters) return to us no more and no less than what we entrusted to them". A century later, another scholar compared writing to a musical score, whose reader recognized the sounds "as if the same person who wrote them were singing them."

Linguists of the Spanish "Golden Age" left us other precious evidence. For example, the humanist Ambrosio de Morales scribbled in the margin of a letter he received from a poet in 1570: "one writes so that what is written can be pronounced". In other words, anyone who writes, about anything, does so in order that it be, sometime or other, said out loud. In 1611, Sebastián de Covarrubias, the great lexicographer, defined the verb *leer* in these very simple terms: to read is "to pronounce with words what is written with letters". And in 1631, an orthographer dealing with the proper punctuation of texts said that the reader must "walk" his listener through the clause —"as the master of his comprehension"— "at times quickly, at times slowly, first stopping for a while (...), then asking, showing surprise, raising his voice..."

This last quotation shows us how much the reader had to master an almost theatrical art. This is confirmed by other evidence; for example, there are indications about how the tone of voice should be varied, together with the use of facial expressions and body movements, according to the content and the spirit of what was being read, and taking into consideration the effect the reader wanted to cause in his audience. During this period, the *reader* functioned as a medium for the text, as a bridge to the listening public, which was the main addressee of much that was written in these centuries. A reader was not, basically, a person sitting in an armchair silently perusing a book for his own pleasure.

The listening public, although cleverly manged by the verbal skills of so many readers —and of so many writers!— was far from assuming a passive stance. Everything seems to indicate that, just as in the Middle Ages, listeners continued to participate actively in the performance of text. Friendly or adverse interruptions of the reader and heated discussion were another important dimension of what McLuhan has called "publication as performance". Fernando de Rojas left us evidence about the reactions which followed the oral reading of his *Celestina:* "some would say it was too long and tedious, others, too short, others, that it was agreeable..." for "when ten people get together to hear this comedy, who can doubt that there will be a discussion." Years later, the friends of Juan de Valdés met to read the letters that he had sent to them: "we had plenty to laugh about and to amuse ourselves (...), we had something to talk about and to dispute (...). Often we had big arguments."

The writer of those times could foresee the reactions of his flesh and blood audience, so different from the abstract reader of today. The possible presence of a group of listeners would, no doubt, determine important aspects of the writing. Anticipating a probable and prompt conversion of their letters into voice, authors would listen to the sound effects of their words as they wrote, giving their text movement and organization according to what they imagined a listening public would understand and enjoy. They would imprint in their works, whether in prose or verse, a dynamic —often episodic— structure, apt for a linear reception (with no return); they would present their audience with a great variety of topics, events, styles; they would look for special effects aimed at keeping their listeners in a constant state of alert.

In addition to the generalized custom of reading out loud, there also existed the extensive practice of recitation of texts learned by memory. The great capacity of many people to remember even long texts astounds us.

Reading Aloud by Albert Moore (1841-1893). Photo by Alejandra Novoa

"I used to know many verses by heart", says Juan de Valdés, "and even now I marvel about how some of them remain in my memory." Prose texts were also learned by heart. We have evidence that stories and novellas were commonly memorized, and sometimes very long novels as well. We read about the youths who would go around "burdened with Celestinas" which they used to read until they knew them by heart. Don Quijote replied to his neighbour, the farmer, "in the very words and phrases in which the captive Abencerraje answered Rodrigo de Narváez, as he had read the story" (1:5). The *morisco* Román Ramírez was tried by the Inquisition towards the end of the 15 th century because it was said that he had signed a pact with the devil, who would let him learn by heart the enormous novels of chivalry and recite them to the ladies and gentlemen in their evening parties. In the 17 th century we are told about a person who was able to recite letters from memory as if this were the most normal thing to do.

Now, what kind of memorization was involved? It seems that the literal reproduction of texts was not usual, nor was it considered necessary. Those who recited the texts seem to have taken all kinds of liberties that today would be inconceivable. Román Ramírez, who was practically illiterate, would promise to recite a certain novel, but in fact, as he himself later confessed to the inquisitors, he would learn the plot, the actions of the characters, the sequences of episodes, and then he would fill in this skeleton of the novel with improvisations of his own.

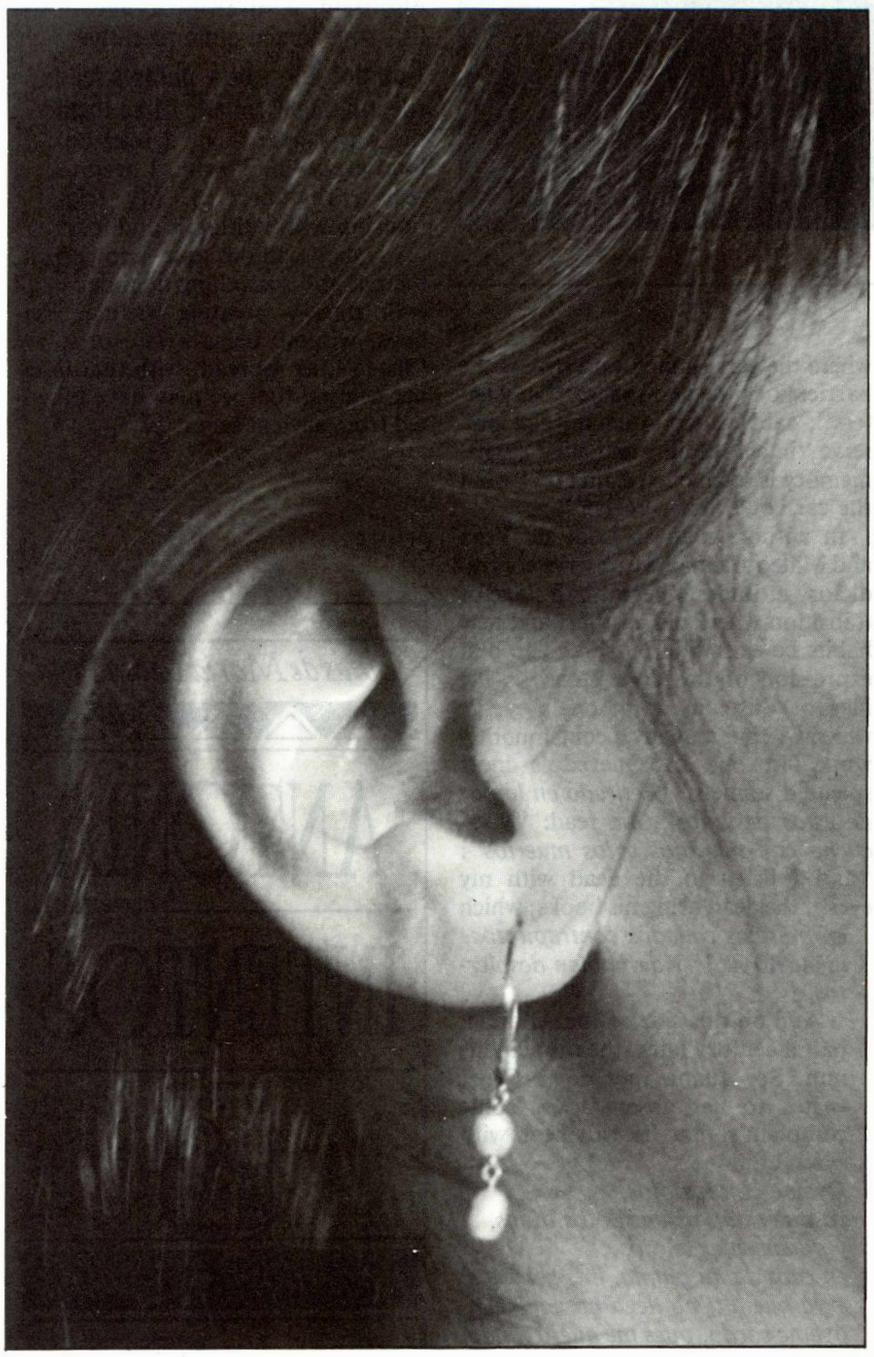
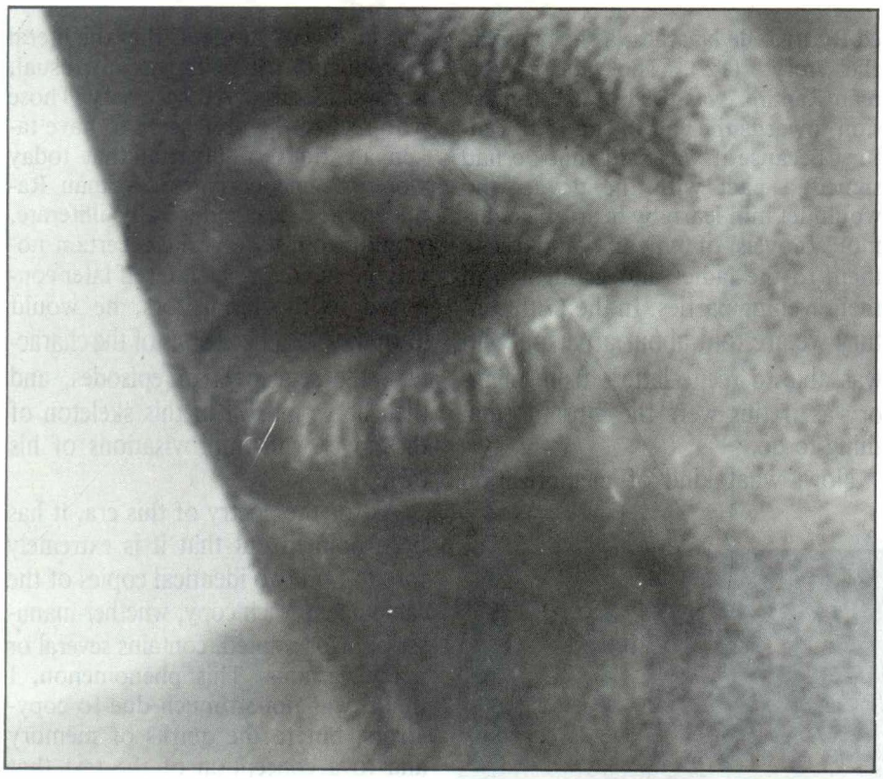


Photo by Ximena Bedregal

As for the poetry of this era, it has been pointed out that it is extremely rare to find two identical copies of the same poem: each copy, whether manuscript or or printed, contains several or many variants. This phenomenon, I think, was not so much due to copy-errors, but to the quirks of memory and to a conception of the text that was noticeably different from our conception today. The text in this period was not a fixed and unchangeable object, but rather something fluid, maleable, capable of changing in successive reptitions. Precisely because of the "oralization" of texts, the written culture of the 16th and 17th centuries was not so divorced from oral culture as it is today. And this fact has important implications for literary history and criticism.

But things, even in this period, were beginning to change. We can observe in certain personalities of this era an increasing awareness of the differences between reading aloud and reading in silence. This awareness often took the form of nostalgia for something that was disappearing. Again and again the "living voice" is contrasted with the "dead letter". Around 1530: "the spoken word exceeds the written word as much as a living man exceeds a body without a soul"; "there is a big distance between hearing something and reading it (...), for, as the apostle said, *littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat*". Beginning of 17th century: "the difference between the living and the dead, between men and statues, is the same as the difference between the written and the spoken word"; "there is no argument so strong that it does not lose its strength (...) if it is not touched by the voice's breath". The great Lope de Vega had one of his women characters say that she prefered listening to sonnets to reading them in silence, for "between reading and listening, there is a notable difference:



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they are both voices, but one is alive and the other is dead":

Entre leer y escuchar
hay notable diferencia,
que aunque son voces entreambas,
una es viva y la otra es muerta.

These writers were of the opinion that when read alone, silently, without intermediaries, without hearing the voice or watching the facial expressions and body movements of a reader or reciter, the text is poorer, it loses strength and vitality. "Only the eyes feast on the written word, but with the spoken word the heart is gladdened", said Antonio de Guevara around 1530.

However, there was also a growing and joyful awareness in those years about the possibilities inherent in silent reading which are denied to those who read out loud. Reading aloud offers us a limited amount of knowledge; if we want to learn many things, we have to consult books ourselves and read rapidly which is impossible when words are pronounced. Even Lope de Vega says: "although it is an excellent thing to listen, with eyesight alone I can listen while reading and know without my ears all that has happened in the world" (*puedo yo con sola la vista oír leyendo y saber sin los oídos cuánto ha pasado en el mundo"*). The eyes reach where the ears cannot, and bypass the barriers of time and space. "Only letters", said Mateo Alemán, can preserve "intact, healthy and alive", what memory is unable to retain and "what the ear could not perceive".

In authors such as Lope de Vega and Mateo Alemán we observe contradictory attitudes inherent in a stage of transition where old customs and new habits co-exist side by side. The best expression of this co-existence is the idea of "listening with one's eyes", which we find in many a contemporary work. In one of Quevedo's most splendid sonnets, "*Retirado en la paz de estos desiertos*", we read: "*y escucho con mis ojos a los muertos*": "and I listen to the dead with my eyes", the dead being his books, which

en músicos callados contrapuntos
al sueño de la vida hablan despiertos.

And on this side of the Atlantic, half a century later, the miraculous nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, writes to her absent lover some complaints that he will hear with eyesight alone:

Oyeme con los ojos,
ya que están distantes los oídos,
y de ausentes enojos,
en ecos de mi pluma, mis gemidos;
y ya que a ti no llega mi voz ruda,
óyeme sordo, pues me quejo muda.

("Listen to me with your eyes, since your ears are so distant; listen, in echoes of my pen, to the cries of distress caused by your absence; and since my rough voice does not reach you, listen to me like a deaf man, since my complaint is mute"). In these words, we can perceive the passage from one historic age to another: writing is a speaking ever more silently to an increasingly deaf reader.

And yet... Today, three centuries later, we realize that, somehow, the voice cannot die. There are writers and there are readers that still have a conscious appetite for sound. Angeles Mastretta, a Mexican woman novelist, commented quite recently:

I do not know how phrases read silently might sound; I like them the way I hear them. I read out loud every line I write, I need to feel a rhythm (...). My relationship with writing is auditory.

Maybe, without our knowing it, there is still something auditory in all —or most— creative writing. Perhaps, without being aware of it, we "listen", as we read, with that internal hearing that we may have inherited from ancient times. □