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978-0-521-12120-0 - Reading and Fiction in Golden-Age Spain: A Platonist Critique and Some Picaresque Replies

B. W. Ife

Excerpt

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Introduction – first premises

To judge from the frequency with which words like ‘development’ and ‘evolution’ are used in literary studies, one might be forgiven for thinking that books were living beings subject to biological laws. Such words are, of course, insidious in the way that they equate change with improvement. They confuse quality with chronology, and – when we least expect it – they have us thinking in terms of Grand Designs and Historical Goals. The literary output of a group or a period does, however, have a habit of seeming misleadingly purposeful when looked at in retrospect. This danger is particularly acute when we consider the ‘development’ of prose fiction in Golden-Age Spain. The period from the 1490s to the 1650s was one of unequalled literary achievement in Spain. The enormous variety and vitality of the work produced is sufficient indication of the great importance Spanish writers attached to experiment. They tried endless permutations of form, theme and genre, and whenever they exhausted their inherited wealth they went in search of something new. They cudgelled their imaginations to satisfy the demands of a rapidly-growing reading public and in the process they tried and tested genres and formal devices which were eventually to find their way into the main body of European fiction. But the idea of Spain as a proving ground for the novel is as dangerous as it is attractive; it is too tempting to treat the writers of the period as a working party beavering away under the chairmanship of Cervantes in pursuit of the Great Tradition. Evolution simply does not happen that way.

And yet literature clearly does not stand still. No book is ever exactly like those that have gone before. If we take a page at random from a sentimental novel or a romance of chivalry and compare it with a page of Cervantes, or Quevedo’s *Buscón*, or the *Criticón*, we see that there are differences and that the differences are not random. Quite apart from considerations of genre and form, we are immediately

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struck by differences of style, by the self-conscious attitudes which the seventeenth-century writers adopt towards their fictions, by their use of irony, and their habit of treating language as if it had a body, a weight and a life of its own. These differences are the very features which enable us to distinguish at a glance between a text from the time of the Catholic Monarchs and a text from the reign of Philip III or Philip IV, and they add up to something at once too homogeneous to be the result of chance and too contingent to be the result of necessity. However we view these changes, whether as development or decadence, they have to be accounted for. How did Golden-Age fiction come to 'evolve' in the direction it did?

Biology provides us with a model of evolution in which novelty – the chance mutations in the protein structure of an organism – is kept in check both by the requirement that it should be compatible with the system as a whole and by the pressure of natural selection.¹ The requirement of organic compatibility ensures the internal stability of the system and is responsible for its inherent conservatism, while natural selection tests the system's coherence vis à vis the world in which it has to live. This model will hardly do in anything but a non-literal sense for literature. For one thing, novelty in literature is willed and not the product of chance; for another, there is no genetic relationship between books in spite of their evident kinship. But, like life, literature is a fundamentally conservative system in which originality is hard won in the face of an often intimidatory tradition and a strongly conventional sense of what constitutes a genre, what is a fit subject for discussion or a proper style in which to treat that subject. We might easily think of restrictions such as these – conventions governing not just what may or may not be written but also what can feasibly be accepted and understood as a piece of literature – as the means by which new work is made compatible with the internal dynamic of literary tradition. All writers have to face this problem every time they decide whether and what to write.

Literature also has to live with and adapt to selective pressures from the outside world. The mere fact of communication sets limits to the scope of a piece of writing and will even determine details of form and expression. An exigent audience can effectively tie an author's hands and a hostile critic destroy his reputation. Public demand and critical response are only two of the many factors both negative and positive which contribute to the process of equilibration, of action and reaction, to which any writer is subject. It often happens that the tension

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between the conflicting claims of internal stability and changing external circumstances becomes so great that the system breaks down. Species become extinct and other, better-equipped forms invade the vacant spaces they leave behind. The literary arts pass from time to time through similar periods of crisis, and sixteenth-century Spain was in just such a situation. Changed circumstances in the production, transmission and consumption of books found established literary canons wanting, and from the resulting fluidity authors were forced to devise new solutions if they wished to survive. Unfortunately, the very multiplicity of factors which makes such periods of creative flux interesting also makes them difficult to grasp. In this study I want to single out one factor which compelled writers to question the nature and purpose of their art and determined to a large extent the replies they gave: the growth of private reading made possible by the printed book.

The argument of the study is basically a simple one. It starts with two widely-accepted and interrelated premises of no great originality: that the private reading of vernacular prose fiction in the early part of the sixteenth century was a new experience for most people and one which was highly distrusted by many authorities whose opinions we ought to take seriously. From these premises it proceeds to the conclusion that a number of what we regard today as the distinguishing features of mature Golden-Age prose fiction grew up as a consequence of authors taking those two factors – the relative novelty and widespread unacceptability of reading fiction – into account. The work they produced in consequence amounts to a practical defence of reading.

Immense difficulties surround any study of reading. Even if we knew exactly what books were available, where and in what numbers; if we knew who read them and under what circumstances, or even how many people could read in a given place at a given time, it could still be objected that reading is a personal matter, that no two readers are alike and that all generalisation is therefore improper. Difficulty and lack of information do not, though, invalidate the need to consider the problem. Books as such are just inert physical objects unless or until they are read. Anything we say about them will only be partly true until we can give some account of the process that brings them to life. Since this process is primarily psychological it is not so important to know who was reading what (though we can make educated deductions about such matters)² as to know what was happening to

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them while they were at their reading. On this subject the Golden Age has a good deal to say, not all of it very complimentary in that it was the harmfulness of the activity that was repeatedly emphasised. And when a reader's moral and spiritual well-being were at stake, numbers and social classes did not enter the question; one man's fate was enough to decide the issue, or so Cervantes seemed to think when he offered his remaining hand as a guarantee of the harmlessness of his work.

Accordingly, on the principle that the best way to find out about something is to ask someone who disapproves of it, in chapter 2 I offer a detailed analysis of contemporary attacks on literature in order to illustrate how much they can tell us about Golden-Age attitudes to the dangers of reading fiction. Chapter 3 takes up the most serious of the objections raised – concern at the ability of certain kinds of books to command aesthetic belief in the face of empirical disbelief – and illustrates its forcefulness in the light of current research into the reading process and the way fiction induces an almost hypnotic state of rapture in its readers. The argument of chapter 3 justifies a good deal of the readiness of the Golden Age to generalise about the effects of reading and shows that the way people read is to a considerable extent a shared experience. The remaining part of the book is concerned to show how the writers of the Golden Age attempted to deal in fictional terms with the dangers of which fiction itself was alleged to be the cause. The examples which have been chosen to illustrate how this was done are all so-called 'picaresque' novels, but this book is not about the picaresque novel in any conventional sense. It does not deal with matters of genre and is not intended to offer 'interpretations' of the works under discussion. I have chosen the novels because I feel that they best exemplify those general characteristics of Spanish Golden-Age prose fiction which bear on the central theme of this study. Picaresque novels may occupy the foreground of our attention, but in the background there lurk other figures, chief among them Cervantes, whose presiding genius will, I trust, indicate the wider reference and applicability of what follows.

We are so much a product of a typographic culture that it is impossible for us to appreciate any longer the strangeness of what we do when we go to a library, or a bookshop or to our own shelves, take down a book and read it. Yet a man (or very likely a woman: reading is essentially a sedentary occupation) who sat down to read, let us say, *Amadís de*

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Gaula as recently as 1508, was doing several things, at least one of which his grandfather could not have done or would probably not have thought of doing. Reading *Amadis* meant reading from a printed book either aloud to others or to oneself in private; possession of a printed book implied that for at least part of the time its owner would read to himself, and a solitary reader would almost certainly be learning to read silently rather than aloud. Reading a novel of chivalry also meant reading a piece of fiction written in prose, not verse, and vernacular prose, not Latin. These are all things we take for granted when we read novels yet each of them was to some extent a recent development in early sixteenth-century Spain.

The possession of a printed book in 1508 was a novelty which it is historically impossible to deny, but the innovative effects of printing can be overestimated: in its initial stages, the development of printing changed the literary face of Europe to only a very limited extent.³ For the most part the invention of printing was the child of a long-established necessity which it continued to serve for several decades after its inception. Before and after printing the market for books was predominantly a learned and specialist one. From the thirteenth century onwards a steadily-growing number of clients created a demand for books which monastic scriptoria were unable to satisfy. The monasteries lost their monopoly of book production to secular workshops in which copyists were able to improve their methods and develop the mass production of multiple copies. The systems they adopted lasted until the fifteenth century and were the direct antecedents of printing. Continued growth in demand prompted the solution of important technical problems – in particular, paper technology and the metallurgy necessary for the manufacture of moveable type – which had prevented the practical application of a technique familiar as a theoretical possibility for some time. New technology is always expensive; printers were businessmen and the new techniques had to be paid for in sales. Financial considerations encouraged printers to produce titles they knew were in demand, and ensured a conservative publishing policy which, it has been argued, may have helped to prolong the tastes of the late Middle Ages into the age of humanism.⁴ In some ways, then, printing changed little. The new process was designed to duplicate old products and for several decades printers and scribes coexisted, copying each other's work and catering for a clientele with the same basic requirements, albeit different levels of income. At least as far as learned books are

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concerned, it was the readership that created printing and not the printers who created the readership. The figures bear this out: 77 per cent of incunabula are in Latin, 45 per cent are religious books.⁵ Spanish printing in the two decades for which we have the best information, 1501–20, shows somewhat lower levels of production: ecclesiastical and religious publications account for 31 per cent of total production, while of the 1372 editions listed by Norton only 519 (38 per cent) are in Latin, and this proportion falls to 19.3 per cent in Seville and 13 per cent in Toledo.⁶ But in assessing these figures it is essential to take into account Spain's dependence on the import of Venetian-, Lyonesse- and Parisian-printed books to provide the majority of texts needed by scholars and the clergy.⁷

The position on recreational, that is non-specialist, literature is more difficult to assess, since this is an area in which we can be much less sure of the nature of the readership. It is clear that the readers of technical literature will be those specialists who need to refer to it in the course of their professional duties. That is why we can be fairly certain, when considering questions of literacy, that literate members of society will include those who do their work sitting down and/or need to refer to books to make their living – scholars, doctors, lawyers, theologians, merchants, teachers, civil servants, students. For these people the ability to read is a professional tool, a means to an end, but a tool which they may, if they wish, exploit in their spare time for recreational purposes. It is also apparent that others who do not actually need to be able to read have little incentive to acquire the skill if the restrictive nature of book production meant that they were very unlikely ever to set eyes on a book. But the introduction of a technique which increased the availability of books might well encourage more people to acquire reading skills for non-specialist purposes. When, and at what rate, this began to happen is unfortunately very difficult to estimate. It seems probable that in the early period of printing the market for recreational literature would be drawn primarily from those specialised readers who, already having the skills, were able most easily to diversify their interests. However, if Maxime Chevalier is right in thinking that the readership of chivalresque novels was predominantly an aristocratic one,⁸ an appreciable increase in non-specialist reading must have taken place by the mid sixteenth century: reading is scarcely an essential requirement for the profession of aristocracy, and, indeed, was frequently scorned as a mark of purposeful endeavour which was quite out of keeping with true

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nobility.⁹ The position of women readers also points to the growth of reading among non-specialist audiences: while from a strictly professional point of view women had no business being able to read unless they were undergoing religious instruction, they are, as we shall see, frequently cited by moralists as prime targets for pernicious literature.

In some respects, then, printing may well have helped significantly to bring about changes in literary tastes. The sheer quantity and availability of books – of whatever kind – was to have effects which extended beyond the satisfaction of a pre-existent demand: specialist material became available to a wider audience; students could have direct access to primary sources in philosophy and religion; and the layman, for a modest outlay, could put together a library of, say, devotional works or popular treatises on piety. The effects of such developments on the religious complexion of the sixteenth century are too well known to require further comment. As more books became available the conditions were created in which reading might become an end in itself, a pastime practised for pleasure and recreation by an audience who would not otherwise have had any use for books. As the reading public became larger so its nature gradually changed. It became less specialised and began in turn to impose its tastes on printers whose restricted traditional markets were becoming saturated. Prominent among its tastes was recreational literature, and it was this portion of the market that printers helped to develop. Thirty per cent of incunabula were works of classical, mediaeval or contemporary literature.¹⁰ The market was slower to emerge in Spain but it was still significant. Norton lists 310 editions of vernacular literary texts, including translations, approximately 23 per cent of the total output. But when we consider that of these only 49 are ‘works in substantially original Spanish prose’,¹¹ it will be apparent that anyone in search of a good home-spun yarn would have done better at the *tertulia* or the inn than at the sign of the local printer cum bookseller. The reader of novels in early sixteenth-century Spain had very little to choose from, but within a hundred years that position had changed considerably.

Printing had one further important effect on the consumption of vernacular literature which touches on the comparative novelty of what our reader of *Amadís* was doing. It is clear that the demand for narrative literature in the early Golden Age is not a demand for a new product – sub-Arthurian romance could hardly be called that – but

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for an old product in a new format. There is nothing new about narrative. People have always wanted to hear stories, whether true or false or a mixture of both, but before the thirteenth century the dissemination of vernacular works for recreational purposes was almost exclusively oral. Little was read in the vernacular, though many texts must have been composed in it. Printing gave extra impetus to the long process of transformation of a hearing public into a reading one. The consequences of this shift which, again, was already in progress before the age of the printed book, are not easy to gauge, though one at least is immediately apparent. In order to listen to a storyteller or to hear a book read aloud an audience has to come together; private reading is just that, private. What an orator is to an assembled audience, an author is to a dispersed one.¹² Reading requires isolation; it leads inevitably to a loss of direct contact with one's immediate neighbours and the establishment of less tangible relationships with unknown confederates elsewhere. It is likely that a reading public consuming literature in an atmosphere of contemplative solitude will be much more individualistic in its response than a hearing public moved perhaps more readily by mass emotion. Don Quixote's approach to the novels of chivalry might have been healthier had he not read them holed up in his study beyond the protective company of his fellow men. The likelihood that he, in common with most of his contemporaries, read the books silently to himself increased the degree of his identification with the text and his abscission from his society.

Silent reading may also have been comparatively new in the Golden Age, although this is a difficult issue to decide and has given rise to a good deal of discussion.¹³ The modern assumption that silent reading is the more mature form of reading while reading aloud is the sign of the learner or a mark of a low level of literacy has tended to obscure our appreciation of the fact that in antiquity and the mediaeval world it was common practice to read aloud. It may well be that the eunuch whom Philip *hears* reading Isaiah to himself (Acts 8.30) was not a very fluent reader, but there is ample evidence that even skilled readers read aloud to themselves, while silent reading was sufficiently unusual to call for comment. The Rule of St Benedict insists that monks reading after six o'clock should do so silently so as not to disturb others, and St Augustine's celebrated description of Ambrose reading silently can be taken to imply that the practice was unusual. Augustine notes that Ambrose's eyes travelled across the

page while his heart sought out the sense but his voice and tongue were silent, and visitors often sat in silence, unwilling to interrupt him, before they left.¹⁴ Bernard Knox has, however, questioned the view, which grew up on the basis of Balogh's mainly Christian and mediaeval evidence, that silent reading in the ancient world was, if not completely unknown, at least so rare as to arouse astonishment. Against the description of Ambrose, Knox has set a passage from the *Tusculan Disputations* (5.116), first noted by W. P. Clark, in which Cicero attempts to console the deaf by telling them that greater pleasure can be gained from reading songs (*cantus*) than from hearing them. If that is the case, silent reading was not only evidently perfectly familiar and acceptable in Cicero's day, but may also have been regarded as the more satisfying way of experiencing literature. This latter conclusion may also be borne out by the passage from Augustine: what he found striking about Ambrose may have been not so much the silence of the activity as the intensity of his concentration which was made all the more eloquent by the silence.

It is evident that an ability to read silently is not the same thing as the use of that ability in everyday reading. What is more important, and a better guide to normal practice, are the expectations which authors bring to their work. In spite of a good deal of evidence that readers in antiquity could and did read silently, it remains true that ancient and mediaeval books were normally read aloud simply because this method made a work accessible to the greatest number of people at a time when it was not possible for everybody to have his own copy. Authors very often composed with oral performance in view, and their expectation that their work would be read aloud is detectable in the formal aspects of the texts themselves. Yet it seems clear that by the sixteenth century expectations had changed considerably and the habit of silent reading was beginning to predominate. When Campuzano gives Peralta the *Coloquio de los perros* to read, he reads it silently although he is not alone, and there is no suggestion that he should or could have done otherwise. It is impossible to say when the balance began to tilt, but it seems reasonable to associate the consolidation of silent reading with the age of the printed book. The importance of privacy and silence in reading will be dealt with more fully in chapter 3.

While these developments were going forward, printing was also helping to crystallise important changes in the nature of recreational literature. Even such an unexceptional description of *Amadís de Gaula*

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as a piece of vernacular prose fiction puts the work into a category which would not have been accepted or even understood by the majority of critics who might have felt themselves qualified to pronounce on its legitimacy. Categories like fiction and non-fiction are far from being universal and they were by no means clearly differentiated in sixteenth-century Spain. 'Vernacular prose' to some authorities would have been a contradiction in terms. Romances of chivalry and sentimental novels were in many ways hybrids, bridging the gap between the categories of History and Poetry. There had always been some room for fiction in historical accounts, which might incorporate the fabulous and the hearsay in the interests of entertainment or edification.¹⁵ But, for the most part, fact, or whatever went under the guise of fact, was the realm of History. Unashamed fiction went under the banner of poetic truth and was the province of Poetry. Again for the most part, the natural medium for Poetry (things which aren't true but ought to be) was verse, and for History (things which are true but perhaps ought not to be) the proper medium was prose, preferably Latin prose. Vernacular prose fiction sweeps these conventions aside. The process which had begun with the *mise en prose* of verse epic and romance saw the elevation of the end product to a new and respectable status in the age of printing.

This seepage of Poetry into the traditional medium of History brought with it a number of important consequences. Verse has its own devices for building up a protective barrier between itself and its audience. Its artificial structure, prosody, formulaic diction and frequent use of reserved languages or dialects, all contribute towards reminding the reader that what he has before him is a special kind of reality, different from what he sees about him every day. Prosification cuts down the number of artificial elements in the language and brings it much nearer to the reader's own; and at the same time it draws on the fund of authority invested in prose by its long association with History. The use of prose as a vehicle for imaginative literature, a practice which printing extended, helped to create a generation of readers who were exposed to fiction in an unprecedentedly immediate way. In an atmosphere of silence and solitude they recreated for themselves the thoughts and fantasies of others in a language which resembled their own and which they culled from what they were used to thinking of as the ultimate source of learning, the book. If we fail to keep these developments before our minds and allow our familiarity with the reading of novels to dull our sense of its strangeness, we run