

Book Reviews

AGUIRRE, Carlos, 2015, *La ciudad y los perros. Biografía de una novela*, Lima, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. 316 pp.

Robert Darnton referred to the history of the book as a rich and varied field of study in his classic 1982 essay "What is the History of the Book?" He affirmed that the discipline resembled not so much a field as a tropical forest, because at every step researchers become tangled in a luxuriant profusion of articles in journals and disoriented by the intertwining of disciplines: analytic bibliography, the sociology of knowledge, history, the new literary history and comparative literature, among others. In order "to get some distance from interdisciplinary riot, and to see the subject as a whole," Darnton proposed a general model to analyze the birth and diffusion of the book in its social context. Printed books, he recalled, have more or less "the same life cycle. It could be described as a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit, because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition." Darnton goes on to point out that "a writer may respond to in his writing to criticisms of his previous work or anticipate reactions that his text will elicit." Thus, "book history concerns each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment." If I have quoted extensively from Darnton's proposed methodology on what the history of the book should be, it is because I could not but think of it when I read Carlos Aguirre's magnificent book.

The objective of Aguirre's innovative study is to reconstruct the history of the writing, production, circulation, and reception of the novel *La ciudad y los perros* (published in

English as *The Time of the Hero*). With singular mastery, he analyzes the process of writing the novel, Vargas Llosa's efforts to have it published by a prestigious publishing house, and the author's relationship with critics and men of letters, which quickly turned out to be essential in promoting the reading of the book. Of particular interest are the pages about the work of the publisher, Carlos Barral, the man behind the launching of the novel, through the role he played, first, in its receiving the Premio Biblioteca Breve and later in its publication in 1963. No less fascinating is Aguirre's analysis of the process of negotiation that took place between Barral and Vargas Llosa, on one side, and Franco's censors and their highest ranking representative, Carlos Robles Piquer, on the other. These negotiations, as the author demonstrates, resulted in Vargas Llosa yielding in order to ensure his novel would be published. Once it was published, first in Barcelona and then in Lima, the book had a history that was, to say the least, eventful. Because of its subject matter, its reception varied. One of the myths that Aguirre sets out to destroy is that copies of the novel were burned in the courtyard of the Colegio Militar Leoncio Prado. This sums up the content of Aguirre's book.

Now, based on the reading of this book, I would like to reflect on various aspects that I think are important to highlight, apart from those already mentioned. One such aspect is that of the book as a material object. Many of us spend time with printed matter but few stop to think about the circumstances of its production. Why does the object that we have in our hands have this or that design or format? What were the criteria for the selection of the illustrations that accompany the text? Who wrote the paratext? Aguirre documents, for example, how the prologue to the first edition of *La ciudad y los perros* written by José María Valverde was imposed by the Spanish censors as part of the negotiations to permit publication of the book and how these same censors refused to authorize a text by Julio Cortázar for the back cover.

Censorship under the Franco regime has a prominent place in the biography of *La ciudad y los perros*. Just as during the monarchic "ancient regime," in postwar Spanish society those who wanted to see their works in type had to submit to preventive censorship. Understandably, this caused the young Vargas Llosa and his publisher, Barral, great and justified uncertainty, which in the medium term lent the novel an air of victimhood, and, consequently, an aura of prestige. This contributed to an increase in its sales because what was prohibited yesterday will seduce the imagination of readers today (and always).

Although censorship became part of the novel's success, this would not have been possible without the intervention of Barral, in Spain, and the writer Manuel Scorza in Peru. In recent decades, historians of the book have given particular attention to the study of booksellers and publishers when it comes to reconstructing the practices of reading and the diffusion

and reception of a work or a particular literary genre. Booksellers and editors are essential elements in the circuit of communication suggested by Darnton and other authors. Not infrequently, they shape our consumption habits as readers. However, it is not always easy to document their activities due to a lack of sources: few archives of publishers or related to publishing activities have survived. But Aguirre was able to document and reveal the fundamental role that Scorza was privileged to play in the mass launch of this Vargas Llosa novel as part of his *Populibros Peruanos* series. Although Scorza cannot be called a model of professional ethics when it came to his editorial practices, he was extremely shrewd in his perception of the commercial potential of this novel.

One final aspect that should be noted has to do with the sources used by Aguirre in researching his book: the files of the Franco government's censors in the Archivo General de la Administración en Alcalá de Henares, Vargas Llosa's correspondence and other papers in his personal archives in Lima and at the Firestone Library at Princeton University, as well as a variety of personal interviews and an extensive academic bibliography. As the good historian he is, Aguirre knew how to read his sources critically, evaluate the testimonies and challenge them when necessary, and contextualize the texts and the people involved. *La ciudad y los perros. Biografía de una novela* is a book of history – or to be more precise, a history of a book and of reading. And, as such, I celebrate its appearance for the originality of its approach, the attention given to its careful composition, and its rigorous treatment of the facts, merits which will no doubt assure its positive reception among those interested in the history of Peruvian culture and literature.

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