

Ricardo Piglia

(1940-)

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One of Argentina's two most important living novelists (Juan José Saer is the other), Ricardo Piglia has seen his reputation grow steadily since the publication of his first book of stories, *La invasión* (The invasion), in 1967. *Nombre falso* (1975; *Assumed Name*, 1995), consisting of two parts, the novella *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt* and a story included as an appendix to it titled "Luba," and the novels *Respiración artificial* (1980, *Artificial Respiration*, 1994), *La ciudad ausente* (1992; *The Absent City*, 2000), and *Plata quemada* (1997; *Burnt money*) occupy central places in the Argentine narrative of the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century. Piglia also is known for his brilliant essays and lectures and for his film scripts and adaptations. To complete the picture, he has been an important editor of crime fiction in Argentina, bringing the "hard-boiled" tradition and its successors to the Argentine public. Piglia's work in various media (including the critical essay) can be characterized as an exploration of the possibilities of narrative, with an emphasis on chance, mystery, and ambiguity.

In a brief essay in *Formas breves* (1999; *Short forms*) titled "Tesis sobre el cuento" (Theses on the short story), Piglia argues:

El cuento es un relato que encierra un relato secreto. No se trata de un sentido oculto que depende de la interpretación: el

enigma no es otra cosa que una historia que se cuenta de un modo enigmático. La estrategia del relato está puesta al servicio de esa narración cifrada. ¿Cómo contar una historia mientras se está contando otra? Esa pregunta sintetiza los problemas técnicos del cuento.

A short story is a tale that hides another secret story inside it. That is not because there is a hidden meaning that depends on interpretation: the enigma is nothing other than a story that is told in an enigmatic way. The strategy of the story hinges on that hidden narration. How to tell one story while another is being told? That question is a synthesis of the technical problems of the short story.

Piglia's views in this essay, which was originally published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín* (the largest daily newspaper in Argentina) in 1986, subsequently were extended in "Nuevas tesis sobre el cuento" (New theses on the short story), also included in *Formas breves*. It provides in a nutshell the essence of Piglia's approach to narrative; as we shall see, his reflections on these problems have illuminated his creative and critical works since the mid-1960s.

Piglia was born in Adrogué, in the province of Buenos Aires, on 24 November 1940. He came from a lower-middle class background, and his parents (Pedro Piglia, an insurance agent, and Aída Maggiori) were

ardent Peronists (followers of Juan Domingo Péron, Argentina's president from 1946 to 1955 and from 1973 until his death the following year). Adrogué in the 1950s was a fading suburb of *quintas* (country houses) and vacation hotels, which had been favored by middle-class intellectuals of Buenos Aires, including the family of Jorge Luis Borges, in previous decades. In fact, it is the setting of Borges's story "La muerte y la brújula" (1942), in which the house Triste-le-Roy is based on Hotel Las Delicias, where Borges and others vacationed. It is also the setting of important films of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Argentine filmmaker Torre Nilsson's 1960 release *La mano en la trampa*. If Borges, who was at heart an urban writer born in the center of Buenos Aires, was interested in the edges of the city and wrote often of the suburbs and their inhabitants, Piglia, coming from one of those suburbs, looks toward the city center for the fundamental space of his fiction.

When Piglia was an adolescent, his family moved to Mar del Plata, which by then had evolved (thanks to Perón and the government policies of paid vacations and of union-owned vacation hotels and sports facilities) from an elite watering hotel on the Atlantic coast to the Argentine resort for the masses. (Many of the elites moved their own vacation houses to Punta del Este in Uruguay.) Mar del Plata's year was marked by an invasion of Buenos Aires tourists in the summer months and by a windy climate and rather empty atmosphere the rest of the year. In Piglia's semi-autobiographical text "En otro país" (In another country), from in *Prisión perpetua* (1988; Life imprisonment), the discovery of his vocation as a writer came shortly after the 1955 overthrow of Perón, which greatly affected Piglia's family and other devoted Peronist families. In that text, however, his calling is attributed to an encounter between the young Piglia and an imaginary displaced New York writer named Steve Ratliff, after a character created by William Faulkner. In subsequent work, most notably in *Artificial Respiration*, Piglia was haunted by the figure of the failed writer, a writer whose projects and fantasies seem to matter more than the published work. For Piglia, the two great failed writers of Argentina—Macedonio Fernández (1874–1951) and Roberto Arlt (1900–1942)—interest him precisely for their unfinished projects. Among

these were Arlt's wild inventions (such as his 1929 novel *Los siete locos*) and Macedonio's novel composed mostly of prologues, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, which seem to embody the chaotic possibilities of the literary imagination, its struggle against limits and order, and its strivings toward an ideal absolute.

After studying history at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata, in the new planned city that was created in the late nineteenth century as capital of the province of Buenos Aires when the city of Buenos Aires became the federal capital, Piglia moved to Buenos Aires, where he became involved in various small leftist groups and literary magazines, most notably *Los libros* (from 1969 to 1974) and *Punto de vista* (from 1977 to 1983), and also worked for several publishers. His political and literary evolution brought him close to the testimonial novelist Rodolfo Walsh (who was kidnapped and killed in 1977 during the military dictatorship that led to the "disappearance" of some thirty thousand people), with whom he traveled to Cuba in 1967–1968. Piglia's activity in several small Maoist groups took him to China for three months in 1973. The leaders of one of those groups, to whom *Artificial Respiration* was dedicated—"A Elías y a Rubén que me ayudaron a conocer la verdad de la historia" (To Elías and Rubén, who helped me to know the truth of history)—would also number among the "disappeared." The importance of this political history cannot be overstated, though it is significant that Piglia's work turns on a political history that is implicit rather than explicit, making him a rather different kind of writer than many of the social realists who were important in the 1960s literary scene in Buenos Aires.

Piglia's first book of short fiction appeared in Cuba under the title *Jaulario* and in Argentina as *La invasión*. It consists of ten stories, ordered differently in the two editions. The best known of these is "Las actas del juicio" (The trial records), about the death of the nineteenth-century Argentine strongman and political figure Justo José de Urquiza (1801–1870), narrated by Urquiza's assassin (a former comrade-in-arms). This text brilliantly recreates the disillusionment that Urquiza's followers felt as his career evolved from the leader of the crusade against the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas to petty tyrant. It suggests already that Piglia's

take on historical fiction would focus more on collective hopes and individual failures than on the circumstantial details of the historical epoch being recreated (a tendency developed later in *Artificial Respiration*).

Stories of particular interest in *La invasión* include "Tarde de amor" (Evening of love), a story of homoerotic attraction and homosocial violence, and "La invasión," the first story in which Piglia's alter ego and sometimes narrator Emilio Renzi appears. This title story tells of Renzi's "invasion" of a prison cell where two prisoners have established a sexual relationship—when he is involuntarily placed in the same cell. Other stories relate different kinds of marginality. "La pared" (The wall) is a story of madness and isolation in a home for the elderly; "Una luz que se iba" (Dying light) tells of the rejection that the migrants—the "cabecitas negras" (the name of a migratory bird with a black head, used as a derogative term for mestizo immigrants to Buenos Aires from northern Argentina)—felt in Buenos Aires after the fall of Perón; and "Mata Hari 55" describes betrayals within the Peronist movement after the "Revolución Libertadora" of 1955.

In the prefatory note to "Mata Hari 55" Piglia writes:

La mayor incomodidad de esta historia es ser cierta. Se equivocan los que piensan que es más fácil contar hechos verdícos que inventar una anécdota, sus relaciones y sus leyes. La realidad, es sabido, tiene una lógica esquiva; una lógica que parece, a ratos, imposible de narrar.

The most uncomfortable thing about this story is that it is true. Those who think that it is easier to tell true stories than to make up an anecdote with all of its inner relationships and laws are wrong. Reality, we know, has a slant logic, a logic that seems, at times, impossible to narrate.

In this note, as later in "Tesis sobre el cuento," Piglia establishes a powerful but complex relationship between fiction and reality. The finest story of *La invasión*, "Las actas del juicio" (the story about the assassination of Urquiza), works out of the hallucinatory sense that history, although it seems a nightmare from which the subjects would like to wake up, remains a hallucination that is all-absorbing.

La invasión was followed by *Assumed Name*. This collection consists of five stories (one of which is a reprinting of "Las actas del juicio" from the previous

volume) and a famous novella, *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt* (Homage to Robert Arlt; so named in the first edition, though sometimes subsequently entitled *Nombre falso*, like the volume in which it appeared). The timing of the publication in 1975, in the chaotic period just before the military coup of March 1976 in Argentina, is recalled as singularly inauspicious at the beginning of *Artificial Respiration*.

In "El fin del viaje" (The end of the trip), the first story from *Assumed Name*, Emilio Renzi travels by bus to Mar del Plata after being told of his father's death. In the bus he encounters a strange woman who tells stories that Renzi gradually realizes are lies. "El Laucha Benítez" is the story of two boxers, Laucha Benítez and el Vikingo (the Viking), and of the violence and erotic attraction that are mixed in their relationship. Reminiscent of the great novella *Jacob y el otro* (1961) by the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti, this story of Piglia's again underlines the importance of the homoerotic in the constitution of masculinity (an idea developed much later in *Plata quemada*).

Homenaje a Roberto Arlt represents a new direction in Piglia's fiction, explicitly mixing fictional narrative with literary criticism, somewhat in the way that Borges had done years earlier, but with a still greater attention to the reconstruction of a precise literary career and milieu. Concerned with the last year in the life of Roberto Arlt, the author of important fiction like *El juguete rabioso* (1926), *Los siete locos* (1929), and *Los lanzallamas* (1931) and of hundreds of journalistic pieces known as the "Aguafuertes porteñas," or Buenos Aires sketches, it is the tale of the narrator's attempt to locate and then to publish a lost original of Arlt's. The narrator here is not Emilio Renzi, but Piglia himself. In the novella Piglia is contacted by a friend of Arlt's, Saúl Kostia (a real person, mentioned in Onetti's memoir of Arlt), who tells him of an unpublished manuscript of Arlt's, "Luba," which corresponds to various notes of Arlt's that Piglia has been studying. Eventually Piglia buys the manuscript and is reading it for publication when Kostia publishes it—under his own name. This text is followed by that of "Luba," a story of a Buenos Aires prostitute and her world.

For many years critics did not know what to do with "Luba," with some (including Arlt's daughter, Mirta, who tried to collect royalties) thinking that it was

indeed an Arlt original and others thinking that it was a brilliant imitation of Arlt by Piglia. It has been confirmed that neither hypothesis was correct: the text is actually an adaptation of a story by the Russian writer Leonid Andreev, whose Spanish title, "Las tinieblas," is mentioned a couple of times in *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt*. Indeed, a rereading today, in the knowledge that "Luba" was adapted by Piglia from Andreev, one of Arlt's literary models, rather than from Arlt himself, cannot but focus on the interesting use Piglia makes of the French journalist and socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's phrase "property is theft" and of Borges' insights into the relations between literary creation and plagiarism. In one of the footnotes toward the end of *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt*, Piglia states that "Un crítico literario es siempre, de algún modo, un detective" (A literary critic is always, in some sense, a detective). This insight is crucial to Piglia's recasting of some of the conventions of crime fiction, which was anticipated by Borges in the 1940s but is developed in a masterly way here.

Unlike many writers of his generation and political leanings, Piglia spent much of the period of the military dictatorship (the "Proceso," or the Process of National Reorganization) in Buenos Aires, where he was lucky enough to survive, although on at least one occasion he narrowly escaped being detained. Not choosing exile would mark his subsequent writing, giving it an inward-looking, tormented quality. At the same time, though, he has stated in interviews that during the years of the Proceso he felt an estrangement from the city where he lived that was not unlike exile. *Artificial Respiration*, started before the Proceso but completed during it, expresses a constant sense of foreboding, of clear and present danger. It is a novel that takes great risks, not unlike those taken by its author in those years.

Artificial Respiration in many ways develops from *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt*. A brilliant synthesis of historical fiction, critical essay, crime fiction, and political writing, it stands as the central text of the literature written within the boundaries of Argentina during the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983. (There is, of course, also an important body of exile literature, with which Piglia's novel provides an interesting dialogue.)

Artificial Respiration, like *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt*, also is haunted by the odd couple of Roberto Arlt and

Jorge Luis Borges, as well as by some other odd couples (Adolf Hitler and Franz Kafka, Hitler and René Descartes, the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz and Borges, to name a few). The novel begins with the publication (in April 1976, weeks after the military coup) of a novel by Emilio Renzi based on the life of an uncle, Marcelo Maggi, who vanished years earlier in a scandal that rocked the family. The novel reaches the uncle, who is living in Concordia, up the Paraná River toward Paraguay. The uncle and the nephew begin an exchange of letters that takes up most of the first half of the book. Also revealed is a series of documents relating to a project of historical research that Maggi is working on about an imaginary figure from nineteenth-century Argentine history, Enrique Ossorio. Ossorio, according to Maggi, was at work on a Utopian novel called *1979* at the time of his suicide in 1850. The fragments of the novel that are quoted are letters that very pointedly refer to the Argentine experience of the mid-1970s: torture, exile, and disappearance. When Renzi travels to Concordia to meet his uncle, the papers eventually are turned over to him by one of the uncle's friends. While awaiting Maggi's arrival, these two men engage in an astonishing all-night conversation about the relationship between reality and fiction, Argentina and Europe, history and philosophy. The uncle himself never appears; though it is never stated directly, he has become one of the "disappeared."

One of the Maggi's friends with whom Renzi has the all-night conversation is a Polish exile, Tardewski, loosely modeled on the Polish novelist Gombrowicz, who spent a quarter of a century in Argentina after landing there by chance in 1939. Tardewski has many interesting things to say about the relationship between Argentine to European culture. Another of Renzi's interlocutors that night, a local writer named Marconi, argues with Renzi about Borges and Arlt. In this section of the novel, Piglia clearly is using the two characters to debate the shape and values of the Argentine national literary tradition. The endless dialogue stands in, then, for polemical essays that Piglia sketches out here, and later develops in some of the interviews in *Crítica y ficción* (1986; expanded ed., 2000; *Criticism and fiction*) but never writes fully in essay form.

After the publication of *Artificial Respiration*—a difficult act to follow—a period of relative silence

followed. Piglia's next book, *Prisión perpetua*, was a collection of short fiction and other prose, much of it republished. Essentially a new edition of *Assumed Name*, *Prisión perpetua* includes two new stories: one about an invented North American friend Piglia had in Mar del Plata, Steve Ratliff (based, as stated earlier, on a character from Faulkner), the other about the adventures of Friedrich Nietzsche's sister in South America.

Piglia's next major work, *The Absent City*, is a futurist fantasy based on certain aspects of the life and works of Macedonio Fernández. The story revolves around an imaginary museum in which the body of Fernández's wife, Elena de Obieta, has been preserved and turned into a speaking machine. An apocalyptic novel, it depicts Buenos Aires as a nightmare of ruins and ghosts. The protagonist of the novel, Junior, is a reporter and detective, and the intrigues he discovers by those who would destroy Fernández's speaking machine lead him into the future but also into the recent past: the speaking machine sees scenes of torture, disappearance, and madness. Part of the novel concerns James Joyce's tormented daughter Lucia, whose circular madness in the novel concerns the endless river of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939); other parts focus on Fernández's *Museo de la novela de la eterna*, an unfinished project that consists mostly of dozens of prologues.

One of the wonderful moments in *The Absent City* is the presence of Lazlo Malamüd, the Hungarian translator of the Argentine poet José Hernández's *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, who speaks a form of Spanish that consists almost entirely of lines from Hernández's great poem (1872; 1879). Those who remember him say: "Contar con palabras perdidas la historia de todos, narrar en una lengua extranjera" (He is telling in lost words the story of everyone, narrating in a foreign language). This is a perfect metaphor of Fernández's infernal machine, the central image of the novel, and, by extension, the quintessence of Argentine culture.

The Absent City was turned into an opera, *La ciudad ausente*, by the Argentine composer Gerardo Gandini, with a libretto by Piglia. It premiered at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires in 1995. The opera somewhat simplifies the structure of the book, turning the stories told by the speaking machine into a series of mini-operas. In 2000 there was also a brilliant adaptation of

the novel as a comic book by Luis Scafati and Pablo de Sanctis.

Piglia's 1997 novel, *Plata quemada*, won that year's Premio Planeta, an award given by the Editorial Planeta for the best unpublished novel in Spanish. Piglia's receipt of the award gave rise to some controversy; apparently, the rules of the competition may have been side-stepped by the publisher, or perhaps by Piglia himself, which was regarded as damaging to his reputation for ethical behavior. In the note, Piglia (or Renzi) says that a first version of the novel was abandoned in 1970. That he took it up again after *Artificial Respiration*, *Assumed Name*, and *The Absent City* is testimony to his abiding interest in crime fiction and in true crime novels from Truman Capote to Rodolfo Walsh. It also testifies to a desire for a drastic change in register in his fiction after the three intensely bookish novels just mentioned. Many readers were surprised by the change in tone, in difficulty, in theme; *Plata quemada* is radically different from the novels that preceded it in publication, but connects thematically with earlier works, such as "Tarde de amor" and "La invasión."

The novel derives from a real-life crime story, a 1965 bank robbery in Buenos Aires that ended with some of the robbers fleeing to Montevideo, where they faced a bloody shoot-out. Narrated by Emilio Renzi, *Plata quemada* is based (according to the novel's epilogue) on press reports, interviews, and a chance conversation held on a Bolivia-bound train in 1966 with the girlfriend of one of the robbers. Tense and quick in pace, *Plata quemada* is also a novel of narrative experimentation, featuring subtle changes in point of view as the story unfolds.

Central to *Plata quemada* is the excruciatingly long showdown scene, which includes the burning of some of the stolen money and the tossing of it out into the street. The most intense moment of the shoot-out is the death of el Nene, one of the robbers, who bleeds to death in the arms of his lover, el Gaucho Rubio. The homoerotic charge of this scene grows out of the story of the lovers (told in the fourth chapter). It is one of the book's surprises that the hard-boiled world of the true crime novel yields to a scene of ravishing tenderness. The motion picture version of *Plata quemada*, directed by Marcelo Piñeyro with a script by Marcelo Figueras, was released in 2000, and the film script and other

materials were published in the same year. The film emphasizes the homoerotic elements of the violent saga; it has had considerable popular success in Argentina and has been shown widely at film festivals around the world.

Piglia's treatment of masculinity is an issue of great interest in much of his work. Though distant from the radical critiques of machismo that one can find in the writings of Piglia's compatriots Manuel Puig and Néstor Perlongher, his work is haunted by a tense homosociality, or male bonding. In the early stories and in *Plata quemada* the sexual possibilities of male friendships are explored, but even in other works, where those possibilities are only implicit, the issue is important. Gabriel Giorgi, writing in an article for a volume published by the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, argues for a queer reading of Piglia's work; though it is certainly a decentered vantage point (as have been various feminist approaches to Piglia), the project is important. Piglia's work, though usually heterosexual in content, is fraught with tension concerning the homoerotic, especially in relation to violent male bonding.

The corpus of Piglia's fiction, then, includes a number of excellent short stories, a brilliant novella, and three important novels. A significant portion of that work is characterized by a mixture of narrative and essay that grows out of Borges' experiments along those lines in the 1940s; indeed, like Borges, Piglia's fiction sometimes leans toward the essay of ideas, while his essays sometimes are marked by strong narrative characteristics. This is true, for instance, of the brief recastings of a story by Anton Chekhov in "Tesis sobre el cuento," where Piglia imagines how Chekhov's tale would turn out if told by Ernest Hemingway, Kafka, or Borges. There is a significant other body of work, however, that includes a number of the early stories and *Plata quemada*, where the affinities are more with the hard-boiled detective genre than with Borges. This is not to say that there is no contact between the two tendencies in Piglia's narrative: works like *Assumed Name* and *Artificial Respiration* also have underlying crime fiction plots, and their narrators function much like the hard-boiled detective created by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Piglia was for many years the main champion of the hard-boiled tradition in Argentina. His first anthology along this line was called *Cuentos policiales de la Serie Negra* (1969; Hard-boiled crime stories), edited by Emilio Renzi, Piglia's alter ego. It was followed by a series of some thirty translations—a series interrupted in 1976 by the military coup. The authors in the series included Chandler, Hammet, David Goodis, Horace McCoy, J. H. Chase, Charles Williams, and Cornell Woolrich; the translators included Rodolfo Walsh, Estela Canto, and Floreal Mazzia. The importance of the "Serie Negra" publications consisted partly in bringing to the attention of the Argentine reading public the writings of crime fiction authors who had been excluded from the anthologies and translation series edited by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Their *Los mejores cuentos policiales* (published in two volumes, 1943 and 1972) and dozens of titles for the "Séptimo Círculo," published by Emecé, had championed the armchair, or analytical, detective tradition. Piglia's editing efforts showed that the genre included other tendencies of great interest to younger generations of readers.

Piglia also participated in a fascinating rewriting of a series of major texts from Argentine literature, *La Argentina en pedazos* (1993; Argentina in pieces) in comic book form, with introductory texts by Piglia and comics by a series of avant-garde Argentine artists in the medium. In this work, Piglia delves once again into the relations between reality and fiction, into the construction of a social imaginary. As with the later adaptation of *The Absent City* to the comic book form, Piglia's collaboration with the illustrators of *La Argentina en pedazos* is evidence of his profound engagement with a great variety of media of popular culture. It is also one of the best places to see his skills as a literary essayist: his brief appreciations of Arlt, Borges, Julio Cortázar, Puig, and others are brilliant and suggestive.

A few of Piglia's essays, including two essays on the short story genre ("Tesis sobre el cuento" and "Nuevas tesis sobre el cuento") and one on Borges' last story ("El último cuento de Borges"), are included in *Formas breves*, but many of the author's essays on Puig, Borges, Arlt, the Argentine writer and critic David Viñas, and others remained uncollected at the end of the twentieth century. Additional works include collected and

uncollected interviews with Piglia and book-length transcripts of conversations that took place at Princeton University. Piglia's conversations with Juan José Saer have been published in *Diálogos* (1995; *Dialogues*). The author also has published a few extracts from a diary he kept since adolescence, but the far greater part of that diary is unpublished.

Piglia is an exemplary independent intellectual. He intervenes in public debates but is not affiliated with any political party, which in the modern landscape of a debased and corrupt party politics in Argentina is something of a virtue. He often is interviewed for the media, and his role in recent years has been that of a public figure but not of a publicity hound. Piglia taught for many years at the University of Buenos Aires, where his classes on Argentine literature were the most popular courses offered. He resigned that post in late 2000 to take up a full-time teaching job in the United States, where he has lectured at Princeton and at the University of California at Davis. The author's work has been well known in Argentina for many years, but only in the late 1990s did it begin to circulate widely elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking world, thanks to new editions in Cuba, Mexico, Spain, and elsewhere. Translated into Portuguese and English, Piglia's works also have circulated to critical acclaim in Brazil and the United States.

One of the constants—even the commonplaces—of the criticism of Piglia's works is the search for a close correspondence with political and historical realities; this tendency is exemplified by my own writing on Piglia in the 1980s and by the recent work of Jorgelina Corbatta. Piglia protested—in a fascinating interview with Marina Kaplan published in the *New Orleans Review* in 1990—that that was a reductive reading of *Artificial Respiration* and other texts, but it is still common to read Piglia's work as primarily referential to the period of the "Dirty War" that devastated his generation.

The principal focus of criticism of Piglia's work has been a reflection on the relationship between literature and history, and between literature and politics. Although I am not averse to such readings, it seems to me that many of the readings resemble each other and do not serve to open new approaches and fresh interpretations. There have been a few new avenues of

critical research that are promising, however. First, there is Adriana Rodríguez Pérsico's introduction to *Cuentos morales* (Moral tales), the anthology of Piglia's short stories that Espasa Calpe published in 1995. Rodríguez Pérsico comments lucidly on various moments of Piglia's narrative and essayistic practice, and the connections between them, and concludes:

Piglia thinks of literature as a private utopia. Literature provides a virgin territory of freedom; that is what provides its capacity for questioning and its potential for revealing external conflicts. In the fascinating exercise of its practice, the writer is bound necessarily to the present, forced to speak of the present moment in which he or she lives, even if that is not his or her immediate purpose. In turn, the reader is not immune when he or she finishes reading. Each time that this happens, the miracle of literature is renewed; in this sense, Piglia's narrative exemplifies a way of making literature that simultaneously prompts reflection and moves us. Perhaps the motive of this double calling is due to the fact that literature emerges from the heart of collective life.

Rodríguez Pérsico does not seem to discount the importance of the present moment, or rather of that double present: the moment of composition and also the moment of reception. Instead of that moment being something stable or fixed, literature's referentiality "prompts reflection" in an active sense: it destabilizes and surprises us. The reader inhabits for a moment what Gérard Genette, in his first essay on Borges in the 1960s, called a "literary utopia." What Rodríguez Pérsico calls a "virgin terrain of freedom" is that non-place that is utopia.

It is worth remembering the sensation of surprise and liberation that readers felt upon the publication of *Artificial Respiration*. That sensation of liberation does not depend entirely on the immediate situation of 1980. The fierce writing in *Artificial Respiration*—which takes us from an epigraph from T. S. Eliot's "The Dry Savages" ("We had the experience but missed the meaning, / and approach to the meaning restores the experience") to reflection on a famous phrase from the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ("What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence")—speaks of the conditions

of possibility of the novel, and not in a purely negative sense. It is not silence but the fullness of reflection. What Rodríguez Pérsico deems a "private utopia" is this sensation, which does not depend solely on the moment of composition. It is a shared as well as a private experience, and as such is mobile and constantly renewable.

In the interview with Kaplan, Piglia commented:

I believe that coding is the work of fiction in any context. I don't believe that the ellipsis of political material performed by fiction depends on authoritarian situations. Perhaps the type of coding is different in the latter cases, and that would be interesting to research: whether there are different types of coding according to the different contexts within which the novelist works. I believe that fiction always codes and constructs hieroglyphs out of social reality. Literature is never direct. . . . What I do believe is that political contexts define ways of reading.

This formulation is similar to Piglia's notion in "Tesis sobre el cuento" that the fundamental problem of the short story is how to tell one story while seemingly telling another. It is also reminiscent of Piglia's reference in the preliminary note to "Mata Hari 55" that reality has a "slant logic," which makes it apparently impossible to narrate. "Slant logic" and "coded narration," constants in Piglia's work, are different ways of saying that literature is never direct.

From what vantage point are real events narrated in Piglia's works? Not from the interstices of everyday life, as the censor Arocena thinks in *Artificial Respiration*. Instead, the real is written from literature, as Jorge Fornet has stated eloquently in an article on *Homenaje a Roberto Arlt for Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*. The real, which according to Piglia in "Mata-Hari 55" "seems, at times, impossible to narrate," is narrated in an oblique way. Just as Borges states in "El Aleph" that the "central problem" of his tale "is impossible to resolve" because it is "the enumeration, however partial, of an infinite set" so in Piglia the apparent impossibility is the point of departure.

José Javier Maristany notes in his recent book *Narraciones peligrosas*, at the close of one of the chapters on *Artificial Respiration*:

The text hides and makes visible at the same time: it is elliptical and explicit. Its apparent disarticulation as a collage of heterogeneous texts disconnected among themselves acquires meaning when we are able to perceive their functional interrelationships and their generic connections with those discursive practices that constitute the textual plot of society.

The key words here are "functional interrelationships," which are at once "elliptical and explicit." Although Maristany focuses on the theme of the political content of the novel, he does so more subtly than either Corbatta or I. Referentiality does not function in a simple way for Maristany. When he speaks of "interrelationships," and admits the heterogeneity and the elliptical nature of the text, he complicates their interpretation in a significant and interesting way.

I am not arguing that Piglia's works should not be read in relation to the tradition of the political novel. They can be read in those terms and also in other ways; the ways of reading their political content are not fixed or stable. Luckily, the period 1976–1983—atrocious years in the history of Argentina and its neighbors—are over, and these works (and those of some of Piglia's contemporaries) can be read with today's eyes, which are less passionate, perhaps, and more skeptical.

Piglia is one of the central figures in the Latin American novel of the "post-Boom" period, the literary and commercial phenomenon that took place in the 1960s. His intellectual rigor and honesty have given him great authority as a critic, while the fierce intelligence of his fiction has endowed it with a life of its own that does not depend anymore on the circumstances of its composition. Piglia's fiction from the early 1980s could be read today in Mexico, Cuba, and Spain as if just written, seeming to speak directly to contemporary dilemmas. The author's work in film and other media has given him access to an audience other than the somewhat reduced reading public for a literature that is often bookish and difficult. In some ways a continuation of the mixing of story and essay that characterized Borges' writing in the 1940s and 1950s, Piglia's work also is intensely involved with contemporary realities, making him an heir of Arlt and of certain moments in the writing of Cortázar. An independent intellectual of

great authority, a brilliant writer, a renowned teacher and critic, Piglia is an essential voice of the turn of the millenium.

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