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Literary Futures: Crime Fiction, Global Capitalism and the History of the Present in Ricardo Piglia

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“Any attempt to examine the status of potentiality must confront a specific aporia: the fact that, by definition, a potentiality is a possibility that exists.”

—Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*

Through his novels (*Respiración artificial*, 1980; *La ciudad ausente*, 1992; *Plata quemada*, 1997; *Blanco nocturno*, 2010), short story collections (*La invasión/Jaulario*, 1967; *Nombre falso*, 1975; *Prisión perpetua*, 1988; *Cuentos morales*, 1995) and essays (*Crítica y ficción*, 1986; *La Argentina en pedazos*, 1993; *El laboratorio del escritor*, 1994; *Formas breves*, 1999; *Diccionario de la novela de Macedonio Fernández*, 2000; *El último lector*, 2005), as well as his academic presence in Argentine and North American universities such as Universidad de Buenos Aires, UC-Davis, Harvard and Princeton, the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia (Adrogué, 1941-) has made his mark as one of the most important voices in Latin American letters in the decades following the “Boom.” As far as poetics goes, Piglia’s writing has little in common with what are now seen

as the most recognizable narrative traits of the Boom novel: magical realism, nouveau-roman inspired experimentalism, proliferation of linguistic play, etc. Cultural sensibilities have shifted significantly since the 1960s, and the peculiar mixture of cosmopolitanism and revolution that inspired García Márquez, Cortázar, Fuentes and others would be seen as anachronistic in juxtaposition to Piglia's work. However, there is at least one important way in which Piglia's thought and writing remain adjacent to the concerns of the Boom writers, despite the probability that their respective approaches to these concerns differ significantly. Whatever else it may have been, the Boom novel was always concerned with the problem of Latin American (national or regional) history; the novel was conceived as an allegorical exploration of Latin American modernity and its discontents: the perpetual return of tyranny in *Cien años de soledad*, the question "¿Cuándo se jodió el Perú" that frames *Conversación en la catedral*, the asymptotic identification of personal and national history in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, and so on. Piglia's novels are similarly concerned with the relation between past and present, but they also reflect grave doubts about literature's capacity to bring history in its totality into view or to provide the symbolic groundwork for knowledge. The historiographical question "¿Cuándo se jodió el Perú?" is supplanted, in *Respiración artificial*, by a more skeptical but equally persistent primordial question: "¿Hay una historia?"

Piglia's early intellectual trajectory fits somewhat uneasily with the periodization framework of the "Generation of '72" that has been proposed as the unifying thread for this collection, at least insofar as that date implies a rupture with what came before it. Piglia's early work (*La invasión/Jaulario*, the Serie Negra and *Los libros* projects, and up through *Nombre falso* from 1975) is informed very much by what was going on in Argentina in the 1960s: not so much the Boom but the tendency of Left intellectuals to begin reexamining and rewriting the intellectual Left's relation to Peronism, as well as the continuation and deepening of a politicization that was initiated in the late 1950s under the figures of Sartrean "commitment" and the Gramscian organic intellectual, and later continued under figures such as Che Guevara and Maoism's "People's War."¹ While "'72" emphasizes the end of the Boom as well as the imminent

¹ For discussions of the transformation of the intellectual Left's relation to Peronism in the aftermath of 1955, see José Aricó, *La cola del diablo* and Oscar

demise of the revolutionary imaginary associated with both the Latin American guerrilla movements and Allende's *Unidad Popular*, it seems to me that in Piglia's case the distinction between "pre 1972" and "post 1972" is less than clean, in large part because his thought and writing pre-1972 was never synonymous with the Boom.

After completing his university studies in history at the *Universidad Nacional de La Plata*, Piglia moved to Buenos Aires in the late 1960s, where he took up several editorial posts in addition to publishing his first collection of short stories.² One project involved a journal, *Los libros* (1969-76), which Piglia co-edited with Héctor Schmucler and Carlos Altamirano (they would later be joined by Beatriz Sarlo, Germán García and Miriam Chorne).³ Schmucler, who had just returned from a stint in Paris where he studied semiotics with Roland Barthes, envisioned *Los libros* as an Argentine version of *La Quinzaine littéraire*, a Parisian journal founded in 1966 by Maurice Nadeau with the goal of serving as a critical compendium of contemporary French literature. The volumes of *Los libros* included critical essays by an impressive array of well-known and up-and-coming Argentine intellectuals, including José Aricó, Oscar Massota, Juan Carlos Portantiero, Oscar del Barco, Eliseo Verón and Josefina Ludmer as well as Sarlo, Piglia, Altamirano and García. The journal disseminated new developments in Latin American letters (literary critical essays by Benedetti, Roa Bastos, Paz, and others) and European thought (translations of, and commentaries on, the work of Lacan, Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Marcuse, Freud and others). Inaugurated in the aftermath of the Córdoba student and worker rebellions against the Onganía dictatorship in May 1969, however, *Los libros* was never simply a literary or cultural journal; its critical impetus was shaped from the beginning by torsion between literary-cultural and political crosscurrents. While *Los libros* continued to publish until it was shut down definitively following the March 1976 military coup d'état, its editorial board suffered a schism following the death of Perón in 1974—who was succeeded in power by his third wife, Isabel. While Sarlo and Schmucler sided with Left Peronism in its support of Isabel Perón's regime despite its repressive, conservative

Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas*. For a brief discussion of Piglia and Maoism see Bruno Bosteels, "In the Shadow of Mao."

² Published in Cuba under the title of *Jaulario* at the same time it was published in Argentina as *La invasión*, *Jaulario* received special mention in the Casa de las Américas literary competition of 1967.

³ For an informative account of the editorial history of *Los libros* see Somoza and Vinelli's recent interview in *Página/12* with Piglia, Schmucler, Altamirano and García.

orientation—because they viewed it as an embattled country’s last bulwark against North American imperialism—Piglia and Altamirano, who saw themselves as Maoists rather than Peronist nationalists, rejected any notion of support for a government they viewed as an inevitable precursor to yet another military intervention. Piglia resigned from the *Los libros* editorial board in 1975.⁴

A year prior to *Los libros*, in 1968 Piglia took up the editorial endeavor of directing *La serie negra* (Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo), a book series dedicated to publishing Spanish-language translations of novels by North American writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Horace McCoy, David Goodis and others. By then the Anglo-American detective tradition was already familiar in Latin America; the classics of Poe, Chesterton and Doyle had enjoyed popularity among Latin American readerships since at least the 1940s. In Argentina, the genre had an important influence on Jorge Luis Borges and Bioy Casares who, in addition to their own stories, coauthored several volumes of detective stories under the pseudonym Bustos Domecq while also coediting Emecé’s Séptimo Círculo series (1946-58), which published Spanish-language translations of Anglo-American detective and mystery novels. Other Argentine writers influenced by the classical detective genre included Silvina Ocampo, the early Rodolfo Walsh (*Variaciones en rojo*), Marco Denevi and Adolfo Pérez Zelaschi. Borges went so far as to assert that Poe’s private detective stories inaugurated a new kind of reader, one attuned to the specific codes and sensibility of the detective story: the enigma of the locked room, the paradox of the hidden amidst the visible, the assertion of the superiority of intelligence and deductive reason, the detective’s radical skepticism vis-à-vis appearances.

The Serie Negra project played an important role in facilitating a broad reception of the “hard boiled” detective novel in Argentina, whose influence can be seen clearly in the works of later generations of writers who rose to prominence in the 1970s and 80s, including Manuel Puig, Osvaldo Soriano, Mempo Giardinelli, Juan José Saer, Juan Martini, José Pablo Feinmann, Vicente Battista and Martín Capparós. A key distinction between the classical detective story and its 20th century “noir” or “hard boiled” successor can help to shed light on what is at stake in the Latin American appropriation of these traditions. Whereas Poe’s and Doyle’s detectives are literary celebrations of the supremacy of reason over evil in

⁴ Three years later, in 1978, Sarlo, Piglia and Altamirano would again join forces to form *Punto de Vista*, in which they began publishing critical essays again under pseudonyms.

the modern world—intelligence vanquishes not only criminality but uncertainty itself—the post-WWI crime fiction of Hammett and Chandler portrays a drab, sunless world of betrayal and injustice in which the hero is run roughshod by an increasingly impersonal and indifferent society.

What, then, does the Latin American adoption and transformation of this 20th century tradition tell us? Giardinelli asserts that the North American noir novel still retains a vestige of faith in justice and the possibility of fighting back against a corrupted system, whereas the Latin American “translation” of this tradition is generally set in situations in which the promise of modernity has been found empty and justice has been rendered impossible. If Hammett and Chandler’s novels reflect the feeling that the system defended by Poe’s and Doyle’s detectives had become dysfunctional or corrupted, the Latin American appropriation of the noir novel introduces a new diagnosis whose difference is subtle but significant: it is not so much that the system is broken, but rather that the system itself in its ordinary functioning—not only the liberal, capitalist State but also the world-system in which it emerges and which it likewise sustains—produces violence and injustice in the form of perpetual underdevelopment, domination. If Hammett and Chandler’s heroes find themselves living in a social system that has begun to break down, their Latin American counterparts reflect the view that the emergence of the modern forms of social organization that have prevailed in Europe and North America since the 19th century was accompanied and buttressed by the asymmetries of colonial and imperial relations between Europe and periphery.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that this perspectival shift from a “developed” view of social relations to an “underdeveloped” sensibility occurs all of a sudden with the Latin American reception of the “hard boiled” tradition in the 1960s. As early as his 1946 essay “Nuestro pobre individualismo” we can already see Borges asserting a fundamental distinction between how State ideology functions differently in developed and underdeveloped worlds:

El argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado. Ello puede atribuirse a la circunstancia de que, en este país, los gobiernos suelen ser pésimos o al hecho general de que el Estado es una inconcebible abstracción; lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no un ciudadano. Aforismos como el de Hegel, “el Estado es la realidad de la idea moral,” le parecen bromas siniestras. Los films elaborados en Hollywood repetidamente proponen a la admiración el caso de un hombre (generalmente un periodista) que

busca la amistad de un criminal para entregarlo después a la policía; el argentino, para quien la amistad es una pasión y la policía una *maffia*, siente que ese “héroe” es un incomprensible canalla. (57-58)

In contrast to the Hollywood character type, whose Kantian ethical heroism is confirmed when he turns in his new friend to the police, in Argentina heroism is conceived according to the model of José Hernández’s Tadeo Isidoro Cruz, a conscripted lawman who discards his badge in order to fight side by side with an unjustly accused but valiant outlaw. Giardinelli proposes that the Latin American *novela negra* marks the exhaustion of any residual faith in justice and systematic change; it is thus very much a post-Boom literary form. For Hammett and Chandler, and perhaps Borges too, this hope had resided in the principle of the individual as social monad capable of suffering and resisting the indifference and abuse of society. However, the individual is itself a concept that emerges in a particular time and place, and thus it must in turn be historicized; for Giardinelli the Latin American “translation” of the noir genre precisely initiates this historicizing operation.

La relación de un estadounidense con el poder es muy distinta de la de un latinoamericano: ambos se resisten, pero el primero está convencido de que puede “hacer algo” para cambiar las cosas, aunque dentro de los márgenes del propio sistema, porque en su conciencia confía en las virtudes del mismo. El estadounidense está educado en la convicción de que el sistema es flexible y amplio; es mutable, se adapta a los tiempos modernos, y si uno se esfuerza y protesta consigue modificarlo. Por esa confianza esencial en el sistema político-social y en su capacidad correctiva, hay la convicción de que las posibilidades son infinitas y están al alcance del esfuerzo y el valor personal, y por eso se valoran tanto la audacia y el individualismo. La rebeldía es individual y puede ser una heroica, fascinante aventura, pero individual. El estadounidense en última instancia siempre se somete al poder y lo acepta porque así fue educado: “la Ley,” en abstracto, es sinónimo de referente de conducta. Un policía es “la ley”; y la gente vive “dentro de la ley” o “al margen de la ley”...En América Latina, en cambio, es muy difícil encontrar un escritor que confíe en el sistema de su país. Casi nadie confía en el poder establecido, más bien se vive en constante sublevación frente a él y, aunque se quisiera modificarlo, es un hecho que se ha ido perdiendo la fe. También estamos llenos de las buenas intenciones y nobles sentimientos, claro está, pero para

muchos de nosotros la vida consiste en una constante rebelión. Vivimos en disidencia eterna y además debemos hacer enormes esfuerzos para mantener nuestra fuerza, nuestros ideales y nuestro espíritu de lucha. De hecho hacer cultura, en América Latina es resistir, resistir todo el tiempo. (233-34)

While the conventions of crime fiction and the noir novel are ubiquitous in Piglia's work, their importance is synthesized in his assertion—almost certainly an echo of Borges—that the crime story constitutes a template for modern literature, with the detective embodying the role of a certain reader (the critic) and the author playing the role of the criminal, whose furtive traces and clues are doggedly pursued by the investigator.⁵ The importance of detective fiction for modern literature goes beyond analogy or exemplarity; for Piglia, the space of modern literature embodies something akin to a crime scene.⁶ This is not to ignore, however, that there are other equally important ways of approaching Piglia's work. Indeed, the question I am interested in pursuing concerns how the detective/noir traditions intersect with or provide a point of departure for Piglia's other literary and extra-literary concerns.

Of course, there can be no substantive exploration of Piglia's novels, short stories and essays that does not also pay attention to a somewhat iconoclastic engagement with the Argentine tradition. While Piglia frequently describes his own writing as attempting to cross Borges with Arlt, his 1992 novel *La ciudad ausente* is one of the first works since that of Borges to proclaim the fundamental status of Macedonio Fernández in Argentine literary history. By the same token, the influence of Brecht and accompanying questions of theatricality, melodrama and gesture in Piglia's writing cannot be ignored. Furthermore, his writing also explores tensions between European and American high modernist prose (Joyce, Kafka, Musil and Faulkner) and questions of orality and testimony raised by Latin American writers such as José Hernández, Juan Rulfo and the later

⁵ See in particular "La lectura de la ficción," 20-21.

⁶ One way of unpacking this enigmatic relation is offered the "Homenaje a Roberto Arlt" portion of *Nombre falso*, where Piglia first begins to develop a thesis concerning literature as plagiarism. See Bruno Bosteels, "In the Shadow of Mao." By the same token, one could argue that, beginning with Sarmiento, the Argentine tradition has repeatedly conceived of the origin of social and political organization as a theft (Rosas as having stolen Facundo's charismatic unifying power, and Sarmiento as aiming to appropriate it for the Unitarian cause, etc.). Or, finally, one could think "crime" in an ontological register, and assert—as Jacques Rancière does—that it is literature which exposes the constitutive gap in the social, the abyssal ground of democracy. See *The Politics of Aesthetics*. I will return to this theme shortly.

Rodolfo Walsh of *Operación masacre* (whose interest in non-fictional or testimonial literature, it should be noted, was influenced by the work of Truman Capote).

Friction between literary experimentalism and oral tradition is especially notable in Piglia's first novel, *Respiración artificial*, which highlights traumatic ideational-linguistic ruptures in the context of state terror and exile, while also advancing a view of literature as site where an encounter with the limits of what can be said or thought (the "experience" of pain, for instance) might be said to take place. The significance of a given event emerges *nachträglichkeit*, as Freud says, belatedly and reshaped by the intervening time between occurrence and signification. If the real of history emerges from one or another *missed experience*, narration for Piglia is an attempt to span the gaps that haunt all experience, which voids it proposes to reconstruct as primal scenes. Piglia's long-standing concern with Argentine social history comes forth in *Respiración artificial* through a strange literary juxtaposition: of the 19th century civil war between Unitarians and Federalists on the one hand (seen through the errant letters of an exiled liberal, Enrique Ossorio, as he discursively constructs a utopian future that would finally be free from tyranny), and the political violence of the 1970s on the other hand (seen through the eyes of Renzi as he searches—a kind of private eye—for his disappeared uncle, Marcelo Maggi). Ossorio's brand of Liberal utopianism is construed teleologically as a people's eventual realization of freedom and self-consciousness; he conceives of this gradual but predetermined self-realization as a date [*cita*] with the future...which turns out to be nothing other than the time of El Proceso.

¿Qué uso de la crítica hace un escritor?...Un escritor es alguien que traiciona lo que lee, que se desvía y ficcionaliza: hay como un exceso en la lectura que hace Borges de Hernández o en la lectura que hace Olson de Melville o Gombrowicz de Dante; hay cierta desviación en esas lecturas, un uso inesperado del otro texto. La discusión sobre Shakespeare en el capítulo de la biblioteca en *Ulises*, y ese capítulo es para mí el mejor del libro, es un buen ejemplo de esa lectura un poco excéntrica y siempre renovadora. (*Crítica y ficción*, 17-18)

Deliberately mixing spaces and practices of writing and reading to the point of rendering them nearly indistinguishable, Piglia uses the double temporal structure of the appointment—the initiation through inscription of a new relation between one time and another, a relation which is necessarily promissory in nature but which proves incapable of

guaranteeing what it promises—to develop his own anti-teleological understanding of literary “communication” and “expression,” an understanding which he elsewhere refers to under the heading of a *relato futuro*.⁷ The *relato futuro* designates a constellation of literary traits and tendencies, especially its peculiar forms of temporality or “inactuality.” It adapts itself to various literary phenomena at different points in Piglia’s writing: his theorization of the enigmatic “secret story” that lurks between the lines of the first, explicit emplotment in the modern short story; the inference or anticipation of alternative forms of narration—a story that would be told in a language different from the quotidian language in which the prevailing order of things is reproduced—brought about by avant garde breaks with tradition (e.g., Joyce’s break with national literature; Macedonio Fernández’s unorthodox relation to the Argentine tradition); or literature as ciphering or fictionalization which, by submitting accustomed forms of experience and discourse to strange torsions and displacements, can unexpectedly open up new possibilities for thought. Generally speaking, the *relato futuro* names the internal difference of narrative with respect to itself, a “difference” which is neither actual nor transcendent but which can be theorized as the immanent capacity of literary language to elicit new and unexpected possibilities through reading, possibilities that cannot be controlled or calculated in advance. Neither written nor read, the *relato futuro* is not a property of either the author or the reader. It is not this or that meaning or interpretive relation but the horizontal structure within which sense emergences, which *qua* horizon for reading can never itself become legible. *El relato futuro* thus also names the structural incompleteness of every text. Pierre Menard’s “rewriting” of the *Quijote* is just one illustration of this internal, unpresentable difference. Literature as *relato futuro* is thus irreducible to any cultural ideology of “national literature” or even “Latin American literature.” Moreover, the concept of the *relato futuro* ruins instrumental conceptualizations of language as vehicle for meaning or tool for controlling and administering differences in hegemonic fashion. The *relato futuro* is literature as no-man’s land; it has no proper concept and is property of no one.

While echoes of the hard boiled/noir tradition can be found as early as the short story “La loca y el relato del crimen” (*Nombre falso*, 1975), and while the investigatory motif is clearly present in *Respiración artificial* and

⁷ Among other sources see the essay “Tesis sobre el cuento” (*Crítica y ficción*) and the conversation between Piglia and Juan José Saer published under the title *Por un relato futuro*. For critical discussions of the concept of *relato futuro*, see Alberto Moreiras, *Tercer espacio* (389-97) and Gareth Williams, *The Other Side of the Popular* (143-72).

La ciudad ausente, it is not until *Blanco nocturno* that Piglia writes what could be considered—at least by half—as a crime novel. In what follows, I propose a reading of this recent novel that would help to shed light on how Piglia’s reflections on literature can be mapped together with concerns about history, and in the case of *Blanco nocturno*, of the history of the present in the context of Argentina’s location within the global capitalist system.

Blanco nocturno takes place in 1972, in a small, rural Pampa town in the Province of Buenos Aires. The novel is divided into two parts whose interrelatedness is not readily apparent. A brief synopsis will help clarify my remarks, in which I will indicate one way of thinking the relation between parts. The first half details the investigation into a mysterious murder in the town’s Plaza Hotel, where a foreigner—Tony Durán, a native Puerto Rican and resident of New Jersey who recently traveled to Argentina for unexplained reasons—has been found lying dead in his room with a knife deeply embedded in his chest.⁸ Working with his assistant Saldías, Inspector Croce uncovers several important clues. For one, Durán is said to have been involved in a love triangle with Sofía and Ada Belladonna, the twin granddaughters of one of the town’s founders who recently returned from a trip to the United States. His death is thus clouded by romantic intrigue and the taint of social transgression (the Belladonas belong to a family of the landed elite whereas Durán was a foreigner and a mulatto to boot). By the same token, Durán is said to have been traveling with a suitcase filled with undeclared US currency, a single bill of which is discovered in the hotel’s laundry room. However, various witnesses claim to have seen the hotel’s effete porter—a Japanese immigrant named Yoshio who is just as much an outsider as Durán in this traditional, rural Argentine setting—leaving the victim’s room around the time of the murder. While Croce’s intuition is to dismiss the possibility that the meek Yoshio might have killed Durán after a lover’s quarrel, faced with the eyewitness reports he is compelled to arrest the porter.

As Croce pursues the investigation, he is joined by Emilio Renzi, an investigative journalist from Buenos Aires and a character who appears in

⁸ Here we see the first of many not-so-subtle allusions to the history of Argentine crime fiction: the scene in the Plaza Hotel unmistakably recalls that of the first murder victim in Borges’s “La muerte y la brújula,” in which Yarmolinsky is killed in a similar manner by the *compradito* Azevedo. The generic echoes resume at later points in the novel, for example when the lead investigator, Croce, recalls his dealings with a line of fictive inspectors and police officers including “Leoni” (a detective invented by Pérez Zelaschi), “Laurenzi” (Rodolfo Walsh) and “Treviranus” (the pragmatic police commissioner and opposite of the Dupin-like Lönnrot in “La muerte y la brújula.”

many of Piglia's works. The dialogue between Croce and Renzi serves as a sounding board for Croce's speculations about the murder as well as a forum for expounding on his theory of detection (more about that in a moment). Meanwhile, the sinister local prosecutor, Cueto, dismisses Croce's intuitions and prepares to bring Yoshio to trial, while also convincing Croce's assistant, Saldías, to turn against his mentor. Betrayed by his friend and strategically outplayed by his nemesis, Croce loses his bearings and is finally forced to commit himself to a mental hospital. With the retreat of that interlocutor whose presence helps define the genre, the detective—that modern exemplar of pure reason—becomes symbolically indistinguishable from the specter of madness—in this case, paranoia.⁹ In the absence of its other, it would seem, there is nothing to prevent pure reason from taking flight and abandoning its senses. From there it is Renzi who must take up the investigation into a sordid family history that finally proves to be the story of the locality's incorporation within the network of transnational capital.

Piglia remarks more than once that, in contradistinction to Aristotelian plot-centered poetics, his own poetics is driven by an interest in character. In *Blanco nocturno* there is no doubt that character or *ethos*—Luca in particular, but also Croce, Durán, Sofía and even the gaucho-jockey Chino—is what drives plot and not vice versa. But to this distinction we must add that *ethos* is never encountered in the form of an individuated subject, but rather displays itself as always-already social and relational. Luca's situation, for instance, cannot be understood outside of the complex familial relations in which he is caught up: his largely imaginary relation with a mother who abandoned him at young age, his rivalry with his—now deceased—brother, and his bellicose relation with his father. Moreover, it

⁹ The detective as exemplar of pure reason is of course an allusion to Poe and to Borges's Lönnrot, who sees himself in the line of Dupin as "un puro razonador." In an interview with Silvina Frieria, Piglia describes *Blanco nocturno* as belonging to a genre of "paranoiac fiction" characterized, in Croce's case, by the absence of any limit on reason's tendency to forge connections between differences. This same theme of unlimited articulation could also be found in the later descriptions of Luca as "mad inventor." The idea of "paranoiac fiction" is also developed further in the interview with Camilo Hernández-Castellanos and Jeff Lawrence. In Croce's case, meanwhile, his familial history helps to put his immediate situation of abandonment and isolation in another context: Croce's father, he relates to Renzi, was a Peronist who suffered greatly in the aftermath of the 1955 Revolución Libertadora and the subsequent proscription of the Peronist Party. His sense of social belonging was effectively suspended, much as would be the case—one imagines—for someone committed to an asylum. The setting of the novel—which takes place in 1972, the year before Cámpora's election and Perón's return from exile—underscores these symbolic resonances between generations and between the personal and the political.

becomes clear that the family is conceived in *Blanco nocturno* as a privileged site for thinking about narrative. If the question of family is frequently a primary motor for inquiry and storytelling (“Who am I, where do I come from, and what were those who gave me life hoping for?”), family as a constellation of relations is itself also produced and sustained by the telling of stories. *Blanco nocturno* is thus a novel about the Belladona family, which as part of the rural Argentine oligarchic elite is profoundly linked to the history of land tenure. If the novel’s focus is influenced by Greek tragedy (the comparison of the daughters to Antigone and Iphigeneia; the theme of the father’s sins being visited upon the sons) it also displays a debt to Faulkner’s literary considerations of the family in relation to the history of a region that remains caught between tradition and modernity.

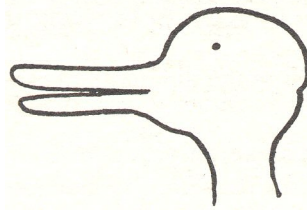
The second half of the novel turns away from the detective genre and fashions itself as a pseudo-Arlian story of a mad inventor who is irredeemably ahead of his time, dedicated to bringing forth new apparatuses for which contemporary society has yet to develop any practical use. It is Luca—Sofía and Ada’s stepbrother and the black sheep of the Belladona family—who emerges as the real protagonist of the novel. The mastermind behind a small, independent but highly innovative automotive factory in the outskirts of the town, he heroically resists the decision of his father and brother to sell the land on which the factory stands in order to resolve the family’s debt problems. Cueto, meanwhile, turns out to be acting as member of a hedge fund whose investors plan to buy the land and resell it for development as a shopping mall. The first and second halves of the story are connected by the death of Durán, who has been illegally transporting US currency into the country for Luca’s cash-strapped father.¹⁰ Luca, meanwhile, imposes the final seal on the impossibility of justice in the noir novel when he gives in to Cueto’s pressure and bears false witness against Yoshio in court—thus ensuring the porter’s conviction—in exchange for the return of his father’s money, which Luca then uses to liquidate the family debt and retain possession of the factory.

In the remaining part of this essay I want to propose one way of thinking the connectedness between the first and second parts of the novel,

¹⁰ Duran was killed, Croce discovers, by a gaucho-like jockey named Chino who acted as a hired assassin. The question of who hired Chino and with what motive remains an unresolved loose thread, which in turn complicates the matter of generic belonging. Paraphrasing a distinction made by Derrida in the “Law of Genre” essay, we could say that Piglia’s novel participates in the hard-boiled detective genre but without belonging to it.

a link that could perhaps shed new light on how Piglia's interest in the detective and noir genre(s) is correlated with and informs a broader understanding of literature. Gastón García has observed that Croce's madness in the first half of the novel is mirrored in the second half by Luca's deliriums. This thematic resonance is strengthened by a series of formal anecdotes through which each character in turn describes the perceptual and cognitive basis for their thought. In his first encounter with Renzi (chapter 9), Croce explains his theory of criminal investigation via what at first seems an obtuse pair of analogies with investigatory reason: the optical illusion and the *rastreador*. Gradually it becomes clear, however, that what Croce is really describing are what we might call the *a priori* or the conditions of possibility for seeing.

¿Ve?—dijo— Éste es un pato, pero si lo mira así, es un conejo. —
Dibujó la silueta del pato-conejo—. Qué quiere decir *ver* algo tal
cual es: no es fácil. —Miró el dibujo que había hecho en el mantel—.
Un conejo y un pato.



Todo es según lo que sabemos *antes* de ver. —Renzi no entendía hacia dónde apuntaba el comisario—. Vemos las cosas *según* como las interpretamos. Lo llamamos previsión: saber de antemano, estar prevenidos. Usted en el campo sigue el rastro de un ternero, ve las huellas en la tierra seca, sabe que el animal está cansado porque las marcas son livianas y se orienta porque los pájaros bajan a picotear en el rastro. No puede buscar huellas al voleo, el rastreador debe primero saber lo que persigue: hombre, perro, puma. Y después ver. Lo mismo yo. Hay que tener una base y luego hay que inferir y dedicar. Entonces —concluyó— uno ve lo que sabe y no puede ver si no sabe... Descubrir es ver de otro modo lo que nadie ha percibido. Ése es el asunto. (*Blanco nocturno*, 142-43)

Let us retrace this account in reverse, beginning with the conclusion where we encounter a kind of hermeneutic circle. In order to follow tracks, as the *rastreador* or detective must, it is first necessary to postulate a concept of what one is trying to pursue (man, dog, puma). The endeavor to pursue and locate something by following its traces (trace → being)

requires that we begin by postulating the specific being whose traces we seek to follow (being → trace). A trace only become visible *as trace* once we have made a determination as to what it is that could produce the trace in its specificity. In order to see (track), a certain prevision (anticipation, postulation of a subject) is first required. This hermeneutic circle poses a problem when it comes to detective work, which, if it is to lead to a true and just outcome, must be unbiased and open to all possibilities from the outset. The optical illusion—duck or rabbit?—thus harbors a more unsettling truth concerning perception, a truth which cannot be explained away by the supposed distinction between appearance and essence or being. The idea of seeing things “as they really are,” according to a certain investigative ideal, is itself already a misnomer, a false problem, since “everything is according to what we know beforehand.” Investigation and the knowledge it brings to light are shaped silently by a primordial decision that never presents itself for scrutiny and discussion. This sheds new light on the novel’s epigraph, taken from the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline: “La experiencia es una lámpara tenue que sólo ilumina a quien la sostiene.” But how is what we know beforehand decided? On what basis and on whose authority is this “prevision” carried out?

If Croce does not provide a final answer to these questions he clearly acknowledges the problem when he clarifies that “la experiencia se da en el momento de cambiar del pato al conejo y viceversa. Llamo a este método *ver-como* y su objetivo es cambiar el aspecto bajo el que se ven ciertas cosas. Este *ver-como* no es parte de la percepción. Por un lado, es como ver y también *no* es como ver” (142). Experience is differential in nature, arising with the shift from one form to another, in the original decision for one or another form—a decision which itself never becomes the object of experience, and which logically, therefore, could not be the decision *of a subject*. Croce’s investigative “method,” meanwhile, seeks to open up the transcendental structure of cognition—the nocturnal target (*blanco nocturno*) of experience—and thus to free thought and perception for other ways of seeing. To offer another analogy, the investigator is to cognition what the philosopher is to history: each endeavor to bracket off the transcendental determination of perception in one or another direction (the “previsión” of the object as “duck” or “rabbit”) and thereby to make possible an experience of seeing itself in its historicity. In other words, each seeks to uncover the contingency at the heart of what we ordinarily take to be sheer necessity, inevitability or nature.

Later in the novel (chapter 16) we find a fascinating account of Luca’s own “method” of technological innovation. Invention, we are

reminded, differs from the forms of production that prevail in the Pampa: unlike agriculture, which cultivates and husbands what are—conceptually speaking—nothing more than natural replicas of pre-existing forms (corn, cattle, etc.), the task of the inventor is to bring into existence something that has never seen the light of day before, something without a model. Seen in this light, invention has to be distinguished from all other forms of production and all other accounts of truth. It constitutes its own modality of truth production, to be distinguished from truth understood as *aletheia*, *adequatio* and revelation. Invention, we are told, is akin to the use of metaphor itself.

Se trata—dijo—, claro, de una metáfora, de un símil, pero también de una *verdad literal*. Porque nosotros trabajamos con metáforas y con analogías, con el concepto de *igual a*, con los mundos posibles, buscamos la igualdad en la diferencia absoluta de lo real. Un orden discontinuo, una forma perfecta. El conocimiento no es el develamiento de una esencia oculta sino un enlace, una relación, un parecido entre objetos visibles. Por eso—y usó nuevamente la primera persona del singular—sólo puedo expresarme con metáforas. (243)

If we think of metaphor as revealing hidden truth we have missed the point. Metaphor is a transfer producing truth through the articulation of a previously unsuspected resemblance. Metaphor is like invention in that, instead of simply revealing what was previously hidden, it brings forth resemblance as having existed only in the mode of potentiality. Let us recall that, for Aristotle, metaphor is the one mode of discourse that cannot be taught. Because metaphor involves discovering sameness or *being* among differences, it can be said to constitute the essence of thought. The always-singular transfer from one word or idea to another is the lightning flash in which language gives us something to think.

The analogy between metaphor and invention is hardly accidental: as Giorgio Agamben puts it, “the historical condition of human beings is inseparable from their condition as speaking beings; it is inscribed in the very mode of their access to language, which is originally marked by a fracture” (*Potentialities*, 51). What Agamben calls “fracture” is a lack or gap haunting being as ground. It is, for instance, Saussure’s thesis on the differential nature of language, the inability of any given signifier to account for its own sense, and the consequent need to turn to other signifiers. In Piglia’s novel, as I suggested in the earlier discussion of the idea of literature as crime scene, this “fracture,” which both gives humans

access to language while also delimiting their sovereignty over it, could perhaps be likened to a primordial crime, an originary out-of-jointness toward which all relationality ultimately points.

The reader is hardly surprised to learn that Luca is misunderstood by friends and family, who appear to dismiss his thought as “unreal.” What does surprise, however, is when the novel’s unnamed editor interjects—in a footnote no less—a contrast between Luca’s thought, which seeks to envision and make realizable what previously existed as potentiality rather than actuality, and an emerging global system of financial capitalism which not only threatens the family factory but which also stands poised to displace the sovereignty of national capitalism and to assert itself as the new dominant form of accumulation and wealth production.¹¹ The ascent of financial speculation is assigned a precise time and place in the aforementioned footnote: the so-called “Nixon shock.” In August 1971, a Presidential decree in Washington unilaterally cancelled the direct convertibility of the US dollar into gold, ending an international agreement that had stood since the Bretton Woods pact was signed in 1944. Bretton Woods had served as the foundation for the global financial system since WWII, establishing shared principles for commerce and financial relations while also giving form to the institutional framework (the IMF and World Bank group) for post-war international finance. While a freely floating national currency provides state monetary policy with considerably enhanced flexibility in times of impending recession, as Paul Krugman notes, the end of the gold standard also creates the possibility for intensified uncertainty and leaves investors “free to be irresponsible” in the face of greater unpredictability in flows of investment capital.¹² In Piglia’s

¹¹ The displacement of national capitalism and import substitution industrialization by transnational capitalism and financial speculation is usually understood in the context of two key moments: the 1976-83 dictatorship and Martínez de Hoz’s role as Minister of Economy under Videla, and Menem’s privatization reforms of the 1990s. Piglia is thus offering in *Blanco nocturno* an idiosyncratic version of the history of the present.

¹² “While a freely floating national money has advantages, however, it also has risks. For one thing, it can create uncertainties for international traders and investors. Over the past five years, the dollar has been worth as much as 120 yen and as little as 80. The costs of this volatility are hard to measure (partly because sophisticated financial markets allow businesses to hedge much of that risk), but they must be significant. Furthermore, a system that leaves monetary managers free to do good also leaves them free to be irresponsible—and, in some countries, they have been quick to take the opportunity. That is why countries with a history of runaway inflation, like Argentina, often come to the conclusion that monetary independence is a poisoned chalice. (Argentine law now requires that one peso be worth exactly one U.S. dollar, and that every peso in circulation be backed by a dollar in reserves.)” (67-68). Several years after Krugman’s assessment, in 2002, Argentina ended the fixed relation of the peso to the US dollar, which led to the

novel the Nixon shock synecdochally designates a longer and more diffuse history of transformation in which national capitalism and import substitution industrialization are supplanted by transnational capitalism and financial speculation. At a moment when the national popular was still very much a potent political signifier in Argentina and much of Latin America, the Nixon shock nonetheless constitutes one of the early symptoms of the decline of the modern State form (the Liberal state, the Welfare State, the populist State, and so on) and its displacement by the market under neoliberalism. It likewise helps to shape a new generational sensibility shared throughout much of the hemisphere, one which gives shape to the literary phenomenon that Brantley Nicholson terms the “Generation of ’72” in Latin America.

The contrast between Luca’s work as inventor on the one hand, and one of the inaugural moments of a new era of accumulation dominated by financial speculation on the other hand, serves two purposes in the novel. First, and most obviously, it comprises a kind of metaphor of the history of the present, of the death of an old form of social organization (import-substitute industrialization and the national popular) and its replacement by a new form (transnational financial speculation and neoliberalism). Second, it juxtaposes the real abstractions of capitalist valuation and social organization with a paradoxical thought that is only confusedly equated with abstraction. The praxis of invention, in which imagination, thought and realization are inextricably linked, compels us to acknowledge the *existence* of what we call potentiality, and thereby to see existence as something more than a mere synonym for the actual. This may provide yet another way of working through Piglia’s formulation of the *relato futuro*, which similarly requires us to see in language the paradoxical immanence of the possible. At the same time, it also provides a literary counterpoint to the Liberal philosophy of history, which locates the end of history in the free market and thereby evacuates any possibility of experiencing the historicity of the present.

massive depreciation of the peso, severe inflation and all of the well-known ills associated with the Argentine economic crisis.

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