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Me veo a mi mismo leyendo: Ricardo Piglia's Aesthetic Education in *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*

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Me veo a mi mismo leyendo:
Ricardo Piglia's Aesthetic Education
in Los diarios de Emilio Renzi

This article examines Ricardo Piglia's relationship to the literary field as an aesthetic education that emerges from the encounter between his field-shaping poetics and its reflection among critics, or critical mimesis. Piglia's field poetics are exemplified by the disjunctive "I" that narrates the diaries, the misattribution of their authorship to Piglia's longtime alter ego Emilio Renzi, and a constant representation of acts of self-observation. The architecture of the diaristic subject is wedded to its institutional inscription; that is, the form of this subject is the communion of readers and writers in the autobiographical and autofictive genres. Similarly, material inscription not only reflects Piglia's life to others; it transforms self-reflection into second-order observation by turning the writer into a reader of his own life-become-text. Raised in this way to the second degree, the diaries exemplify Piglia's poetics by engaging readers in the form of a conspiracy. This is the political lesson of our Piglian aesthetic education: a willingness to challenge the reality of reality and build alternatives in a community of co-conspirators convened by the author's work.

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Following Ricardo Piglia's death in 2017 it was not long before the homages came pouring in. But as was his habit in life, in death too Piglia had anticipated the critics with the publication of his magnum opus, the long-awaited diaries *Años de formación* (2015), *Los años felices* (2016), and *Un día en la vida* (2017)—a kaleidoscopic lifetime's worth of the aphorisms and literary obsessions that have shaped the reception of his work among a generation of readers.

This article examines the relation between Ricardo Piglia and the literary field as an act of aesthetic education that emerges from the encounter between his field-shaping poetics and its reflection among critics, what I will call *critical mimesis*. Piglia's field poetics are exemplified by the disjunctive "I" that narrates the diaries, the misattribution

of their authorship to Piglia's longtime alter ego Emilio Renzi, and a constant representation of acts of self-observation. The architecture of the subject in the diaries is inseparable from its material, social, and institutional inscription; that is, the form of this subject is the community of readers and writers crystallized around the minor literary institutions of the autobiographical and autofictive genres. Material inscription not only reflects Piglia Renzi's life to others; it transforms self-reflection into second-order observation by turning the writer into a reader of his own life-become-text. Raised in this way to the second degree, Piglia's poetics imparts a conspiratorial form to his metafictional oeuvre, which is the political lesson of our Piglian aesthetic education: a willingness to challenge the reality of reality and construct alternatives in a community of co-conspirators convened by the author's work.

My retrospective reading of the politics of Piglia's poetics through *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi* has three goals: 1) to activate aesthetic education as a lens through which to provide a global analysis of Piglia's body of work; 2) to reflect on the role of fiction in political community formation in Piglia's work and more broadly; and 3) to lend credence to the claim that only through pedagogy can literature hope to intervene into politics. The essay is divided into four sections: "Second-Order Observation, Or, 'Piglia y yo'" treats the generic institution of the diaries and the structuring act of second-order observation; "Field Poetics/Critical Mimesis" claims that Piglia's poetics is best understood as an intervention into literature's social form, as a kind of poetics in the second-degree; and finally, "An Aesthetic Education in the Conspiracy Form" and "Politics of Literature or Literary Politics?" together make the argument that conspiracy is an essential if flawed vector for Piglia's aesthetic education and its purported politics.

Early in his career, Piglia was partial to Russian Formalist Yury Tynyanov's theory of literary function. By paying attention to form, Tynyanov glimpsed literature's social ground. "El cambio de función sólo puede analizarse teniendo en cuenta las relaciones de la serie literaria con la serie social. Para comprender los cambios de función es preciso salir de la literatura" (*Crítica* 75). Similarly, each of the planks of my argument—field poetics, critical mimesis, aesthetic education, the conspiracy form—attends to how Piglia's work shifts relations between the literary and social series, even if the social does not reach beyond the literary institution.

Although I ascribe pedagogical agency to Piglia's poetics, it also represents adaptations to changes in the literary system during the second half of the twentieth century. Piglia's aesthetic education seeks to redefine the relationship between the social and the literary. In this light, his brand of paranoid fiction responds to the legitimization crises wracking the political order of peripheral industrial capitalism. Similarly, his field poetics and conspiracy aesthetics seek to endow late-twentieth-century literature with a new social function, as the romantic-aesthetic project that previously enlisted literature to the task of nation formation wanes in tandem with a pedagogical conception of a modernizing Argentinean state.¹

The notion of aesthetic education that I use to describe the social function of Piglia's literary work emerged together with romantic nationalism. Indeed, this notion was Friedrich Schiller's response to the challenge posed by the French Revolution to the German princely states. Aesthetic education, so it was thought, would forestall social revolution by promising, in the words of Schiller's contemporary Friedrich Hölderlin, "eine künftige Revolution der Gesinnungen und Vorstellungsarten" (a future revolution in attitudes and modes of thought) (247).

As literature's influence has been outstripped by other forms of mass media, its primordially pedagogical social function has come to the surface. If literature is to persist, it must serve a social function, even if that function is antiutilitarian. My treatment of Piglia's poetics suggests that, in the late twentieth century, poetics in general should be understood less as the means for crafting literary works and more as a means for constructing (and instructing) a readership. Those readers who expected to find the wellspring of Piglia's narrative in his long-awaited diaries have not heeded the lesson of that narrative. Instead of some mythical origin story of the individual genius, the diaries show us how stories can act as nucleation sites for the self-assembly of collective genius or as nodes in a rhizome of readers rendered co-conspirators capable of making worlds.

1. Second-Order Observation, Or, "Piglia y yo"

Piglia's diaries are fertile ground for the elaboration of a reading attentive to the author's pedagogical poetics, for the relationship between meaning and experience, between art and life, is perhaps nowhere

more apparent than here. Piglia's diaries have played an important role in the mythology that surrounds the author's process, project, and persona. In interviews, essay collections, and autofictional stories, Piglia has alluded to his journals and published from them. In so doing, he has delineated a horizon of expectation that conditions and orients the reception of the three published volumes. If, as he has claimed, "todo lo que escribí fue para poder publicar después mi diario," the publication of the diaries also marks the successful education of his reading public (González 145) or, as the title of Patricio Pron's review proclaims, "El triunfo de un modo de leer." That mode of reading, I will claim, is Piglia's aesthetic education, which conjoins his field-shaping poetics and corresponding critical mimesis to a conspiratorial aesthetics that aims to ground literature in politics through form. In this section, I show how the specular form of *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*—a self-referentiality so extreme that it splits the autobiographical subject in two—contributes to this monumental reproductive labor.

Although readers of Piglia's work have grown accustomed to his fictional alter ego Emilio Renzi, and although the author has often alluded to the wellspring of his novels, stories, and essays in those bound notebooks, in the diaries Emilio Renzi and Ricardo Piglia come closest to reuniting in their full, proper name: Ricardo Emilio Piglia Renzi. The reader formed by Piglia's writing machine is inclined to take the gesture of misattribution seriously and read the diaries not as autobiography but as autofiction along the lines of "En otro país" or "Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire." Attributing the diaries to Renzi also frustrates the desires of some for the revelation of origins in the author's experience. Then again, readers should expect as much, for Piglia has always questioned such literary property rights.²

The authorial misattribution of authorship displaces the equivalence of author, narrator, and protagonist that Philippe Lejeune and other "new model" theorists of autobiography see as constitutive of the genre, even as Piglia's diaries suggest similar conclusions about the fictitiousness of the autobiographical genre and its rhetorics of selfhood (Lejeune 5; Folkenflik 15-18; Watson 59-60). The diaries trade the veracity and referential dependency of autobiography for autofiction's verisimilitude and referential autonomy (Alberca 129-31).³ As Manuel Alberca has detailed in his study of Spanish-language autofiction, the genre's ambiguous reading pact oscillates between novelistic fiction and historical reality, the identification and disiden-

tification of person and character. This ambiguity provokes a parallel “vascificación interpretativa” that breaks the mimetic spell and places readers in a critical disposition (33). Taking seriously Piglia's abdication of his diaries to Renzi, the referentiality that binds together the autobiographical subject dissolves into the process of textual subjectivation that occurs in and through form.⁴

The diaries, especially the first volume, are in fact a mosaic of diary, autofiction, narrative fiction, and non-fiction prose, each form quarantined into different chapters. In *Años de formación*, previously published essays and short stories now serve as metatexts that condense and reflect on the diaristic and autofictive chapters. The republication in Renzi's diaries of texts previously published by Piglia overdetermines those texts' authorship. In the “Nota del autor” at the start of the volume, we are told that the stories and essays were included “porque en su primera versión formaban parte de sus cuadernos personales” (12). But clearly, the form of the diaries is in no way spontaneous but instead constitutes a monumental effort of creative reproduction: that of rereading, transcribing, editing, and rewriting Piglia's 327 notebooks.

Even the “Nota de autor” is no mere paratext, as the title would suggest, but instead performs autofiction's ambiguous reading pact. As we would expect, the “Nota” keys readers to the diaries' themes: parallel lives, split subjects, the alienation of mind-body dualism and self-consciousness, the materialization of alter egos as *Doppelgänger*, and the looming threat of devolving into a state of hypersemiotic paranoia. The title creates the expectation that the empirical author will address the reader. This was the case in “En otro país,” from which the “Nota” is excerpted. Its opening clause accords with the reader's expectations of this minor genre: “Había empezado a escribir un diario a fines de 1957” (*Diarios* 1: 11).⁵ The second clause—“y todavía lo seguía escribiendo”—replaces the expected discursive present of the empirical author with the narrative past (*Diarios* 1: 11). The unequivocal emergence of the third person in the second sentence—“se mantuvo fiel a esa manía”—determines the otherwise ambiguous person in the first sentence, destabilizing the presumed reading pact. In deceiving a naïve reader's expectations, the “Nota” performatively fulfills its introductory, metatextual function. Dividing the text between third person narration and reported speech sets up the autofictional oscillation between author and character. The gesture accords with the conspiratorial aesthetics of

Piglia's readership.

We find a similar division between autofiction and diary in *Los años felices* and *Un día en la vida*. In the latter volume however, Piglia reverses the strategy of the "Nota de autor" from *Años de formación*. Where that text grammatically undermined the generic expectations of its title, in "Días sin fecha" (the final section of *Un día en la vida*) titles typical of Piglia's short stories give a fictitious unity to fragmentary, undated diary entries. Whereas in the "Nota" it was the third person that divorced author, narrator, and character, in "Días sin fecha" fictional unity depersonalizes the entries. In both instances, the impersonal gestures toward the always collective constitution of a text, its actualization in the alienated community of its readers.

Just as the authorship of the diaries is overdetermined, so is their structure. In addition to the apparent structure analyzed above, scenes of reading give the volumes an internal structure. The diaries represent not only scenes of reading others but, more important, scenes of reading oneself. To read oneself, as the reflexive pronoun indicates, requires a division or doubling of that self. Observation of that self/other gives form to the inchoate events of experience. "La experiencia, se había dado cuenta, es una multiplicación microscópica de pequeños acontecimientos . . . sin conexión, dispersos, en fuga . . . [S]i observamos desde un mirador la reproducción de lo mismo, no hace falta nada para extraer una sucesión, una forma común, incluso un sentido" (*Diarios* 1:16). The diaries' ambiguous authorship supplies us with such a vantage point. Claiming, as Piglia has before him, that their autobiography could bear the title "Los libros de mi vida," Renzi chooses to follow the series of books and memories of reading marked by the phrase "me veo a mi mismo leyendo" (*Diarios* 1: 17-18). These scenes of self-observation not only structure Renzi's "autobiografía seriada," they are also scenes of subjectivation of "una vida serial" (*Diarios* 1: 17).

Whereas this search for the diaries' form is implicit in *Años de formación*, it is explicit in *Los años felices*. In the third-person narrative of the introductory chapter, "En el bar," Renzi recounts to the bartender his search for the form that will give meaning to his experience and adequately reflect it to others. After considering genres ranging from the almanac and life writing to comedy and satire, Renzi homes in on the distinction between the personal and the historical as the means of form-giving, a distinction that also anticipates the highly

politicized period covered by *Los años felices* (1968-75). He recalls the time in 1972 when the apartment he shared with his first wife, Julia, was searched by the police. The state's misinterpellation, the confusion of "un pácifico y conflictuado aspirante a escritor" with "un revolucionario peligroso . . . me cambió la vida" (*Diarios* 2: 10). The search also introduces chaos into Renzi's life, impelling him to seek order in the events of experience, not unlike the military "que estaba tratando de capturar, en el azar, un sentido" (*Diarios* 2: 11). The event also emblemizes how "la experiencia personal . . . está intervenida . . . por la historia o la política o la economía" (*Diarios* 2: 11). The intersection of the personal and the historical, the encounter between experience and environment, structures a series of "acontecimientos," "decisiones," "contratiempos," and "puntos de viraje" from which meaning can be derived precisely because it is not solely grounded in "la figura hueca" of the self (*Diarios* 2: 13, 12, 14, 16, 8).

Add to this Piglia Renzi's aforementioned affinity for the Russian Formalists, and it is unsurprising that he would decide to analyze his diaries "siguiendo series discontinuas" to organize "los capítulos de mi vida" (*Diarios* 2: 11). Whether these series concern the incidence of politics in Renzi's life (Series A, vol. 2), the story of his clandestine cousin Luca (Series X, vol. 2), the series on parallel lives, alienation, exile, the foreigner (vol. 1), or the series of reflections on the diaries via copying and repeating, editing and montage (vols. 1-3), it is clear that self-observation constitutes the master series, for only observation—whether retrospection, introspection, or even speculation—is capable of forming accident into meaningful relational differences. "Esa cualidad única de estar adentro y afuera de una historia, y verla mientras sucede, marcó toda mi literatura y definió mi manera de narrar" (*Diarios* 1: 342). Or as Renzi tells the barman: "Ahí en esa serie, vivir, escribir, ser leído . . . descubrí una morfología, la forma inicial, como me gustaría llamarla, de mi vida registrada" (*Diarios* 2: 15). Although in this instance it is Julia who reads Renzi's diaries to discover his infidelity, the claim applies to the hundreds of instances throughout the dairies in which Piglia Renzi observes himself reading, often reading his own writing.

The term "self-observation" is somewhat misleading, for this structuring series does not simply denote a split in Renzi's subjectivity represented in the acts of reading and writing. Instead of self-observation, I might speak of second-order observation. For in the diaries,

the split or resection (*escisión*) of the subject is externalized, hence the appropriateness of the medical term and its material valence. The relationship is not only between two aspects of one subject—one's past and present self, one's self as writer and as reader—but between two subjects, Piglia and Renzi. As Piglia puts it "Pienso desde mí pero no en mí. . . . Y ahí está la revelación de que siempre es otro—no soy yo—el que escribe" (*Diarios 2*: 65).

Alienation characterizes the autobiographical subject; othering characterizes the autofictive one. Through the text's oscillation between reading and writing and between first and third person, Piglia Renzi becomes *as* another to himself—"as" and not "is," for it is only on the plane of metaphor, imagination, or delusion that such transformations take place. Critic Martín Kohan captures this process well: "[A]l ejercicio estético de la extraposición podría agregarse ahora este ejercicio ético de autotransformación Es *como si* el consabido 'giro autobiográfico' comenzara a acelerarse hasta el vértigo, hasta lograr que el autor se transforme en su personaje . . . girar y girar y girar, hasta convertirse en otro" (263, my emphasis). Adding the diaries' dual authorship to the series of second-order observation transforms reading oneself into "ser leído"—at once "being read" and "the read being" that Piglia cites as the moment of subjectivation, the *forma inicial* of his literarily lived life (*Diarios 2*: 15). In the case of *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*, morphology is ontology.

In this way, the architecture of the subject that Piglia insinuates into Renzi's diaries is inseparable from that subject's social and material forms, that is, the community of readers and writers crystallized in the minor literary institutions of the autobiographical and autofictive genres, whose material inscription not only reflects Piglia Renzi's life to others but also—through that reflection—transforms the writer into a reader of his own life-become-text. Second-order observation not only gives form to *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*; it is itself represented so that the form reenters the content, returning its readers to the social and institutional constitution of both the text and its subject.⁶ As Jorge Fornet suggests in a gloss of Piglia's "Tres propuestas para el nuevo milenio," metatextuality of this sort requires "un lector que se reconozca en el drama y desde allí cuestione la realidad que le ha correspondido. Tal vez ese sea el nudo político de la literatura" ("Último lector" 153). As we will see, this is precisely the aim of Piglia's aesthetic education of his readers in the conspiracy form.

Second-order observation in *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi* socializes the alienation of each individual subject in the community of reader-writers and writer-readers. Perhaps, then, in teaching us how to read this corpus, the diaries enable us to reflect on ourselves, to see our selves as others, in and as a collectivity. This community of co-conspirators, however, runs the risk of having no more content than the specular, conspiratorial form of the literary field and its illusory autonomy.

2. Field Poetics/Critical Mimesis

Piglia asserts that Borges took recourse to literary criticism “para que sus textos pudieran ser leídos en el contexto en el cual funcionaban” (*Crítica* 159-60). The same could be said of Piglia's literary pedagogy, which he enacts by occupying the positions of privileged readers: the literary critic and the professor. There is no doubt that Piglia's work exploits the difference between criticism, theory, and fiction. This presents a problem for the critic of his work.

Estudiar a Piglia entraña un riesgo difícil de eludir. Él es a tal punto coherente y convincente en sus opiniones que no es extraño verse atrapado en su propia lógica, explicando sus textos—en una tautología infinita—a partir de sus propias ideas. En cierto sentido su poética impone, y hasta exige, esa lectura, sobre todo si de lo que se trata es de ver cómo él mismo teje la red en que deberían moverse y ser entendidas su figura y su obra. (Fornet, *Escritor y tradición* 21)

Despite Piglia's claims that “es importante no querer controlar la lectura, cada cual debe hacer con los textos lo que le parece mejor,” that a writer “se resiste a ser canónico . . . porque eso limita y prefigura la lectura,” and that he is “en contra del texto ‘importante,’” there can be little doubt that by anticipating the publication of his novels, and especially the diaries, Piglia gave his readers an expectation that each text then determined (Carrión 428). Writing six years before the publication of *Años de formación*, critic José Manuel González at once exemplifies and analyzes this expectation:

el diario atesoraría potencialmente todas las modulaciones que gobiernan su escritura, confirmándose entonces como vía . . . de que se sirve Ricardo Piglia para donar claves interpretativas . . . encuadrar una

lectura pertinente de su producción literaria y abrir un espacio crítico para que sus textos sean encauzados en la senda correcta. (48)

I call this phenomenon *critical mimesis*, which occurs when the criticism of a text comes to imitate or simply reiterate the text's own theories, thereby negating or short-circuiting critical distance.

Where Fornet (*Escritor y tradición*) sees this phenomenon as the effect of coherence and persuasiveness, Diego Poggiese sees it as the effect of repetition and apodictic aphorism (159). The tropic rhetoric of Pigliá's criticism gives it the appearance of certainty, since "en la significación de múltiples posibles significados, incluso contradictorios, está la infalibilidad de los oráculos" (160). This appearance of certainty is magnified less by the coherence of Pigliá's critical aphorisms than by their incessant repetition over the course of his career; indeed, Pigliá justifies the late publication of a collection of critical texts in the following way: "porque quiero que sepan que hoy, a los setenta y tres años, sigo pensando lo mismo, criticando las mismas cosas que criticaba cuando tenía veinte años . . . sigo fiel a mis ideas" (*Antología* 357). According to Poggiese, "la repetición instituye," not only in Pigliá's writings but also among a chorus of critics in thrall to the critical mimesis of his texts (161).

At the same time, the autofictional, metatextual, and self-referential qualities of Pigliá's work make it difficult to propose a reading of any one work of this hyperlinked textual universe that does not open onto every other work. It is not therefore a matter of finding the key that will unlock the Piglian system or reaching some vantage point that will reconstellate Pigliá's work around the perspective of the privileged reader. Not only are such keys and vantage points freely given but Pigliá's metafictional also make the reader the necessary operator of the machine, so that any chance reader, regardless of his or her position in the literary system, has only to make a choice, hazard an interpretation, to set it in motion. The play of meaning and experience, literature and life, second nature and nature appears as necessary as it is accidental. The question, for me, is not how to escape the "infinite tautology" that besets the criticism of Pigliá's critical fictions, but instead to illuminate how Pigliá's corpus intervenes in the literary institution by means of this mechanism.

Critical mimesis is not some chance effect of Pigliá's system but is the outcome of what I call his *field poetics*. In an interview from the

early '80s, Piglia summarizes the goal: "el lector ideal es aquel producido por la propia obra. Una escritura también produce lectores y es así como evoluciona la literatura. Los grandes textos son los que hacen cambiar el modo de leer" (*Crítica* 60). Producing this reader entails determining what reception aesthetics would term the "horizon of expectations," in which "reader attitudes and textual structure . . . are . . . conjoined" (Hohendahl, "Introduction" 63). In contrast with the descriptive aims of reception aesthetics, Piglia's field poetics deliberately produces this horizon of expectations; that is, it produces an aesthetics of reception. Piglia, in turn, learned this lesson from his precursors: on the one hand from Jorge Luis Borges, whose "tácticas de la lectura" constitute "una práctica que excede la crítica propiamente dicho y avanza en otra dirección, más pedagógica . . . [que] tiende a constituir el universo literario como tal, al definir sus límites y sus fronteras" (*Crítica* 155); and on the other hand from the historical avant-gardes, in whose wake "el debate artístico ya no pasa entonces por la especificidad del texto sino por sus usos y manipulaciones. Se trata de actuar sobre las condiciones que van a generar la expectativa y a definir el valor de la obra" (*Antología* 22). After the avant-gardes, the task of the artist is to "construir la mirada artística antes que la obra" (*Antología* 22). Considered individually and as a whole, Piglia's fiction, criticism, interviews, and seminars supply his readers with a mode of reading that facilitates the interpretation of his texts and changes their perception (*aisthesis*) of the literary and of literary history.⁷

Los diarios de Emilio Renzi are essential to this project, as Piglia always knew. First, his field poetics relies as much on his literary production as it does on the construction, performance, and position of his authorial persona. In "Conversaciones en Princeton," critic Michelle Clayton poses Piglia a question about the role of autobiography in an author's body of work. His response—which refers to the myths of Kafka, Macedonio Fernández, and Hemingway—concludes: "Hay siempre como un enigma . . . una relación paradójica entre el texto y el sujeto, lo que funda el mito. . . . [M]e parece que hay siempre un enigma y que el escritor a menudo es una figura de transacción entre el lenguaje y la vida, digamos, por eso la vanguardia termina por trabajar casi exclusivamente con el mito, con el escritor sin obra" (*Forma inicial* 213-14). As we have seen, the misattribution of the diaries casts Renzi as the author of Piglia's work and life, leaving Piglia as an author without an oeuvre. Thus he divests himself of his personal history and

retreats into the timelessness of myth, a position fortified by the timelessness of death, which was imminent at the time Piglia began editing his notebooks. The diaries, letters, and (auto)biographies of writers have a “doble efecto de concentración . . . una vida convertida en destino, una vida leída, y a la vez la tensión entre el lenguaje y la experiencia, el sujeto escindido ahí ¿no? el modelo de ‘Borges y yo’” (*Crítica* 215-16). As we have seen, this split (*escisión*) is not only within the subject but is externalized *as* the difference between two subjects bearing proper names. This resection (*escisión*) is not only registered in the diaries’ overdetermined authorship but also in the structure of second-order observation that casts the text as autofiction.

The diary form is also a vehicle for authors to act as critics, to say something about literature and define modes of reading, because an author’s diary will necessarily represent acts of reading and writing and reflection on those acts. In the diary entries from 1981, the last dated entries of the three volumes, Piglia muses, “¿Qué clase de lectura es ésta? . . . El tipo de intervención define la forma. Muchas veces es personal (diarios, cuadernos, conferencias, prólogos). Muchas veces es pedagógica, las clases de Nabokov, el curso de poética de Valery, los manuales de Pound. Muchas veces es polémica, discusiones, manifiestos, debates, cartas. Muchas veces está en los textos de ficción, basta pensar desde luego en *Don Quijote*” (*Diarios* 3: 137). As author, critic, professor, and public intellectual, Piglia made ample use of each of these modes of intervention to define a mode of reading.

Finally, the diaries are crucial to Piglia’s field poetics and its critical mimesis because they provide the sense of an ending that secures the meaning of a narrative and a life, yet an ending whereby the form of the literary system recursively feeds back into the text as its content. The diaries represent the social form of the literary system (the encounter of selected-for writers and readers) in the historicized (pre)figure of Piglia Renzi’s disjunctive “I” by virtue of the ambiguous autofictive reading pact. The saturation of readers’ horizon of expectation reduces the variety and number of interpretive schemas and impresses critics into critical mimesis. This incantatory repetition constructs the myth of the author and his work, their timelessness, and their canonicity.

The intercalated story “Una visita” exemplifies these three aspects of the diaries—as authorial performance and myth, as critical vehicle, and as recursive system closure—and their importance for the author’s field poetics. “Una visita” is an autofictive tale presumably writ-

ten in the 1960s and inspired by a 1959 meeting between a nineteen-year-old Piglia and one of his literary heroes, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, at least according to the accompanying footnote (*Diarios* 1: 62). It narrates a dialogue in which a poet-professor outlines the speech he will deliver to his university colleagues announcing his most recent and presumably last work and renouncing his professorship before going into exile to escape state surveillance and censorship.

The ambiguous autofictional pact is established by the coincidences between the professor and Piglia, the editor of the diaries: a gravely ill author announces the publication of a book about his life that he plans to publish under a pseudonym, what the professor-Piglia calls “la obra maestra voluntariamente desconocida cifrada y escondida entre los libros” (*Diarios* 1:66). Just as the diaries’ overdetermined authorship resects Emilio Renzi from the body of Ricardo Piglia, the story autofictitiously “others” Piglia’s life story in a form that invokes the basic social unit of the literary institution: an act of communication between authors and privileged readers, in this case the professor’s “Discurso a la Universidad.” As the narration of an inner dialogue, “Una visita,” like all of Piglia’s work, serves as a vehicle for literary criticism (in this case autocriticism) and philosophical reflection. For example, the narrator reflects on the conjunction of disability and thought (“Hay una lucidez extrema en la extrema enfermedad [*Diarios* 1: 64]) that also characterizes the wheelchair-bound Senator Luciano Ossorio in *Respiración Artificial* (“Dijo que su inteligencia le debía todo a su enfermedad, a su parálisis” [54]) as well as Piglia himself, who while suffering amyotrophic lateral sclerosis at the end of life concludes the diaries by asserting, “La enfermedad como garantía de lucidez extrema. . . . El genio es la invalidez” (*Diaries* 3: 294). I could also cite the professor-Piglia’s claim that thinking dwells in indecision (*Diarios* 1:65), which is either repeated or copied from Piglia’s essay “Ernesto Guevarra, rastros de lectura” (*Último* 103). As these examples suggest, what appears as the repetition of the past in the future is indistinguishable from the copying and insertion of the future into the past, and this indecipherable backwards or forwards self-citation gives the text an oracular quality that bolsters the myth of the author. It is not enough to dispel the myth by noting the intensive editing and revision of the diaries to prepare them for publication at the end of Piglia’s life. Such an attempt at demystification fails to address the genetic structure of belief: a message from the past becomes prophecy when its recipients in

the future have been *predisposed* to receive it as such by some feedback loop. Piglia's poetics, I argue, are best understood as a just such a feedback loop, or self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, the saturation of readers' horizon of expectation through the conjunction of his field poetics and our critical mimesis.

3. An Aesthetic Education in the Conspiracy Form

Piglia's work performs a reproductive labor that continually shores up the literary institution. His field poetics saturates readers' horizon of expectations, thereby engendering the critical mimesis of his texts. I will now show how field poetics and critical mimesis engender a conspiracy aesthetics, which is the lesson of our Piglian aesthetic education. As it was for Schiller and the subsequent "radical aesthetic tradition," aesthetic education aims to conjure new political communities (Eagleton 118). An aesthetic education in the conspiracy form would then ground Piglia's literary field poetics in the political writ large.

Inquiry structures every Piglian plot and each protagonist plays the detective, whether in the form of the biographer (*Respiración artificial*), the investigative journalist (*Ciudad ausente*), the police inspector (*Blanco nocturno*), or the literary critic (*El camino de ida*).⁸ Unlike most detective fiction, in which the denouement restores order to the represented social universe, Piglia's modernist impulse prevents the total closure of his fictions. The inquiry remains inconclusive, with one question merely opening onto another. Limitless inquiry often becomes generalized suspicion, paranoia, the constant questioning of the reality of reality. "La investigación no tiene fin, no puede terminar. Habría que inventar un nuevo género policial, *la ficción paranoica*" (Piglia, *Blanco nocturno* 284). Renzi's reverie is of course an instance of metafictional irony, for Piglia's novels are already instances of paranoid fiction. Accordingly, many critics in thrall to critical mimesis have read *Blanco nocturno* and others of his works through that lens.⁹

To challenge the reality of reality, as the formulation indicates, posits its doubling, splitting, or resection (*escisión*). To do so makes reality a problem in the sense suggested by Argentinean social theorist Diego Sztulwark: "un problema es la producción de un exceso que está ahí" (22). To do so, according to French sociologist Luc Boltanski, loosens the world (understood as everything that is the case) from

reality (understood as the socially secured set of regularities that frame events and orient action by limiting interpretation) (*On Critique* 57-61; *Mysteries* 9-11). To make reality a problem, then, transforms it into an open field of interpretative frames for possible actions. Framing inquiry in this way makes visible the family resemblance between inquiry and conspiracy. Regardless of their different connotations, both give root to alternative realities.

Conspiracy is the reasoned belief in an emergent, hidden reality that is repressed by dominant realities and the institutions that secure them.¹⁰ Boltanski defines conspiracy as “an object that is only perceived as such . . . from the outside,” an object that is characterized by an “*unveiling* that sets an apparent but fictitious reality and a hidden but real reality side by side, on the same level” (*Mysteries* 13). Given that the structure of reality lays claim to universality, the leveling of two realities sets up a power struggle over the right to designate “the whatness of what is,” the basic semantic function of the social institution (Boltanski, *On Critique* 73). The conspiracy form is the basis for the political agency of minorities, whether dominant elites who may conjure fictitious foreign agents to secure power or the marginalized and oppressed who may conspire to overthrow these elites in pursuit of justice.

If inquiry, critique, conspiracy, and paranoia represent different modes of challenging the reality of reality, conspiracy is the most powerful among them. Inquiry and critique are largely negative in their challenge, remaining largely within grammars of normality (Boltanski, *Mysteries* 212-23). Conspiracy and paranoia, on the other hand, envision alternative realities and new norms. A conspiracy's staying power derives from its social embedding. For this reason, we say that paranoiacs suffer delusions; they do not construct realities. The invention of paranoia in the late nineteenth century effectively quarantined it to individual pathology. Often the politics of marginalized minorities (as opposed to hegemonic minorities, i.e., elites) are denounced as paranoid delusion in order to weaken their reality claims.¹¹

Conspiracy produces a reality in excess of reality. The difference between conspiracy and conspiracy theory is the razor's edge separating an excess of reality that is there from the excess of reality that is not—a real reality from a fictitious one. Conspiracy theory can endlessly challenge the reality of reality precisely because there is no excess of reality that is

there. The conspiracy theorist therefore resembles Piglia's ideal reader: the literary critic who, like Piglia's investigator-protagonists, is caught in seemingly endless inquiry, the unending interpretation of literary fictions.

Metafiction is a tool of Piglia's field poetics. The reflexive doubling of the diegesis within the fictive world tends to relativize extradiegetic reality by making the first fictional frame appear closer to it. The metafictional operation parallels what Boltanski calls a "vast conspiracy," which fuses reality and its representation (*Mysteries* 164). For Piglia, positing a vast conspiracy contains an emancipatory potential if it can avoid devolving into quixotism or bovarism, which would confine the conspiracy to imagination.¹² Even so, quixotism and bovarism model the construction of new, albeit fictitious, worlds on the basis of discursive practice. Here we see the centrality of conspiracy to Piglia's field poetics.

First delivered as a lecture in 2001, "Teoría del complot" complicates the difference between conspiracy and fiction by reflecting on the conspiratorial form of three discourse communities: literature, the avant-garde, and economics. Conspiracy theory is not only, as Piglia speculates, "el modelo que tiene el sujeto aislado de pensar lo político" but is also a model for the isolated subject to *experience* the political (*Antología* 102). In articulating the imaginary relationship of the subject to the real, which characterizes any ideology, conspiracy theory can also reconfigure social bonds.

Piglia's analysis of the conspiracy form holds up a mirror to his field poetics. In a reading of Macedonio Fernández's *El Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, Piglia writes,

El nudo ficcional es la construcción de un complot y, a la vez, ese complot se superpone con la escritura de una novela. Las múltiples estrategias de lo novelístico que circulan por la novela tienden a funcionar como una conjura destinada a producir efectos en la realidad y a construir un conjunto específico de lectores que actuarán como conjurados ellos mismos. Así la novela construye a sus lectores como cómplices de una conjura secreta. (*Antología* 106)

Even more fundamental than artistic "experimentación con los lenguajes sociales" (*Antología* 109), the political modality of a work of art is to seed new societies on the basis of the sensibilities, languages, and worldviews it mediates. In short, a fictitious conspiracy theory can gather together a very real band of conspirators.

Just as conspiracy limns the boundary between reality and fiction, so does Piglia's field poetics intervene from the literary work into the community of his readers, especially those readers who populate the literary institution. If fiction produces realities that are not there, the institution of literature produces realities in excess of reality that *are* there, by gathering communities of actors for whom the ontological status of "being there" is a problem. The act of reality construction is not merely the creation of fictional worlds but the (re)production of the literary institution on which those fictional worlds depend. In this sense, then, Piglia's conspiratorial politics of aesthetics posits the autonomy of the literary institution insofar as it constitutes a world apart, a secret society governed by its own rules.

The conspiracy form is at work in critical mimesis, too. In the terms he supplies his critics, "La vanguardia sustituye la crítica por el complot" (*Antología* 110). Conspiracy posits a critique that moves beyond the negative questioning of the reality of reality to the positive affirmation and construction of alternative realities. Indeed, my central claim about the functioning of Piglia's field poetics unveils the conspiracy form of Piglia's project at the risk of being accused of adopting the same form. Such is the asymmetrical perception of conspiracy: either you take the red pill or the blue pill. Couched in his pedagogical fictions, Piglia's criticism preempts literary critics' only claim to change the world: the aesthetic education of a reading public.

4. Literary Autodidacts or Literary Autonomy?

What lessons does Piglia's aesthetic education impart? The overt curriculum teaches his readers literary history, the history of ideas, literary theory. The hidden curriculum, as we have seen, shapes the literary field by constructing a gaze, a way of reading and sketching a canon not just of Argentinean but also of world literature.¹³ Even more fundamentally, Piglia's aesthetic education cultivates a conspiratorial worldview, that is, a willingness to cast reality as a problem, to question the reality of reality, and to construct new realities in a community of co-conspirators convened by the author's work.¹⁴ This conspiracy aesthetic education politically grounds the production and reception of art, poetics, and aesthetics alike. As Piglia tells us in his afterword to the English-language translation of *Ciudad ausente*: "Politics enters the contemporary novel through the novel of a conspiracy, through the

form of an intrigue—even if this conspiracy is devoid of any explicitly political characteristics. The form itself constitutes the politicizing of the novel” (“Afterword” 145).

This political grounding is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, Piglia’s aesthetic education shows that what appears as literary genius or autonomy is but a vast conspiracy, the necessary fictions of a literary field that struggles to distinguish between reality and representation, for these are precisely what his field poetics constructs. On the other hand, Piglia’s aesthetic education in conspiracy clearly aspires to something beyond the “office politics” internal to the literary field, those squabbles among privileged writers and readers over the right to nominate which texts count as classics or even as literature.

At the start of the twentieth century, Max Scheler argued that conspiracies are often authored by delegitimated or self-appointed intellectuals who bridge the narrative chasms that open during legitimation crises. Elaborating on Scheler, Boltanski suggests that conspiracies grow in the gap between individuals’ perceived power and their actual powerlessness (*Mysteries* 180-83). To *cultivate* a conspiracy aesthetics is then to open up a discrepancy between a person’s formal equality and their factual power (*Mysteries* 179).

In one sense, Piglia’s literary pedagogy can be seen as licensing autodidact critics and intellectuals. His field poetics conjures a literary conspiracy against the educational apparatus and its credentialing mechanisms. Here I should recall that Piglia, like so many luminaries of his generation, participated in the underground meetings of the so-called *universidad de las catacumbas* during the Videla dictatorship. In a different sense, this aesthetic education plays on readers’ real impotence simply by confirming the inequality that obtains in the pedagogical relation between teacher and student, in this case between Piglia and his readers. In both instances, the figure of the autodidact threatens canons of knowledge and experience with the act of licensing oneself or, in the older lexicon of genial aesthetics, by giving oneself the rule (see Kant, par. 46-49). A conspiracy of autodidacts would exercise autonomy in an etymological sense by its members nominating themselves to legislate their own (*auto*) laws (*nomos*).

In this schema, conspiracy redoubles the claim to literary autonomy but now also freed from the concrete educational organizations that are largely, and increasingly, responsible for literature’s

reproduction. At the same time, a conspiratorial aesthetic education, like the avant-gardes on which it is modeled, only succeeds in revolutionizing the field of cultural production insofar as it shores up the illusion of literary autonomy at the cost of confirming its very real political impotence. However real the conspiracy convened by a conspiracy theory might be, it may nevertheless fail to translate theory into practice. In that case, even an education in conspiracy aesthetics runs the risk of merely reconciling individuals to their unfreedom through the illusion of freedom manufactured by the aesthetic commodities of the capitalist lifeworld.

Whether internal to the literary field or aiming beyond it, it appears that the politics of Piglia's aesthetic education redounds in aesthetic autonomy. The value of his pedagogical work, then, is that it seeks to enact a politics at all, especially given the largely antipolitical modernist tradition and postmodernist milieu in which he wrote.

All forms of education are acts of social reproduction, however minor, that secure interpretive schemas and orient action. Often, they do so by doubling the world, whether by modeling, demonstration, or analogy. The contradiction of Piglia's literary pedagogy is that education is a centripetal process of interiorization that makes the unfamiliar familiar. The avant-garde tradition in which Piglia writes is interested in the centrifugal movement of alienation that renders the familiar strange. Interiorization and alienation reflect the uncanny dialectics of the diaries' structure and autofictional reading pact. In the center of these centrifugal and centripetal movements is the narrative form that gives meaning to experience. As Piglia Renzi tell us in *Años de formación*: "Ver la literatura desde la vida es considerarla un mundo cerrado y sin aire; en cambio, ver la vida desde la literatura permite percibir el caos de la experiencia y la carencia de una forma y de un sentido que permita soportar la vida" (*Diarios* 1: 309).

The relationship of meaning and experience, literature and life echoes throughout Piglia's work. In his fiction, it takes of the form of T.S. Eliot's "approach to meaning" that "restores the experience," as cited in the epigraph that frames Renzi's genealogical and literary inquiries in his first novel, *Respiración artificial*. In his last novel it drives the search for some explanation of the actions of anarchoprimitivist terrorist Thomas Munk so that the death of his colleague Ida Brown

“will have a meaning” (*Camino* 283). In Piglia’s criticism it takes the form of the tension between reading and politics in the example of Che Guevarra, for whom reading is a “filtro que permite darle sentido a la experiencia . . . un espejo de la experiencia, la define, le da forma (*Último* 103). And it takes the form of “reading addicts” like Don Quijote, Madame Bovary, and Jorge Luis Borges, for whom “la lectura no es sólo una práctica, sino una forma de vida” suspended somewhere between the imaginary and the real (*Último* 21, 31). In *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*, “el hiato insolvable . . . entre la vida y la literatura” (*Diarios* 1:22) takes the form of the disjunctive “I,” the second-order observation that allows the subject to see him or herself as an other.

In light of Piglia’s field poetics and conspiracy aesthetics it appears that form—social, discursive, aesthetic—gives meaning to experience. “El arte de narrar es un arte de la duplicación,” a doubling that traces back to the very structure of signification, to the relationship between words and things. Narrative form secures realities and interpretive schemas by welcoming the new—“es el arte de presentir lo inesperado”—and reproducing itself anew in others (*Formas* 137). This constitutes the centrifugal movement of Piglia’s aesthetic education. “En la experiencia siempre renovada de esa revelación que es la forma, la literatura tiene, como siempre, mucho que enseñarnos sobre la vida” (*Formas* 137).

At the same time, meaning is the form of experience, its epistemological condition of possibility. As such, form runs the risk of becoming “el régimen metafórico de sustitución pero también . . . de la equivalencia psicótica” (*Diarios* 2: 364). Rather than restore some given experience through an approach to the meaning, Piglia’s paranoid fictions narrate how meaning comes to replace experience, how experience is rendered indistinguishable from fictions, however necessary those fictions may be. This is the gesture of the author of *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*. According to Piglia: “Ha dado su vida, la entregó a cambio de la obra y se ha convertido en el objeto que intentó representar” (*Formas* 137). “Esa es la paradoja, es mi vida . . . pero no soy yo el que la escribe. . . . El ser o no ser. . . . La construcción de este lugar, y la posibilidad de hacerlo convincente y creíble es el núcleo de lo que llamamos ficción” (*Diarios* 2: 373). Fiction is this undecidable space between the writer’s being and not being. Beneath the overlapping autobiographical and autofictive pacts, somewhere between Emilio Renzi and Ricardo Piglia,

readers go in search for the *forma inicial* of their apophatic discourse. Instead we discover that we are the secret source of its “iluminación profana”; we are they who make sense of Piglia's being for the other, his “ser leído” (*Formas* 109; *Diarios* 2: 15).

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NOTES

¹ See Anderson; Readings; Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature*; Court; Graff; Godzich and Spadaccini; Sommer.

² See “Parodia y propiedad” in *Crítica y ficción*. In the early novella “Homenaje a Roberto Arlt,” Piglia famously misattributed to Robert Arlt a short story by Russian author Leonid Andreev that Piglia had rewritten. This “literary crime,” as Ellen McCracken dubbed it, is famous because many believed Piglia's claim, and for a time his story “Luba” circulated in the academic community under the authorship of Robert Arlt. Even the Library of the Congress and several important Arlt scholars were duped. See McCracken, Mudrovic and McCracken.

³ Critics are quick to distinguish between the diaries and Piglia's 327 notebooks (see Kohan; Laera; Montaldo), pointing to an intensive selection and revision process noted in many of the diaries' metafictional passages. See *Años de formación* (“Una visita,” “En el estudio,” “Canto rodado”); *Los años felices* (“En el bar”); *Un día en la vida* (“Sesenta segundos en la realidad,” “Los finales”).

⁴ Raquel Fernández Cobo (Review) makes a similar claim in her review of the diaries.

⁵ In this article I cite the three volumes of Piglia's diaries as *Diarios* 1, *Diarios* 2, and *Diarios* 3, corresponding to their order of publication: *Años de formación* (2015), *Los años felices* (2016), and *Un día en la vida* (2017).

⁶ Brett Levinson (73) and Joanna Page (174) make similar arguments about the social form and formation implicit in Piglia's early novels. My argument adds specificity to theirs by claiming that the “social” invoked by Piglia's political aesthetics is largely confined to the literary institution.

⁷ See Jauss 25-26. This is also the lesson of Borges's “Kafka y sus precursores”: “Cada escritor crea sus precursores,” for “[e]n cada uno de esos textos está la idiosincrasia de Kafka . . . pero si Kafka no hubiera escrito, no la percibiríamos; vale decir, no existiría” (281-82).

⁸ In his *Poetics of Prose*—a text Piglia was familiar with—Tzvetan Todorov connects the theory of detective fiction as two stories, that of the crime and that of the investigation, to Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists' distinction between *fabula* (story) and *sjužet* (plot) (44-45). See also Ehrlich (240-42). Piglia famously declares, "A menudo veo a la crítica como un variante del género policial. El crítico como detective que trata de descifrar un enigma aunque no haya enigma. . . . En más de un sentido el crítico es el detective y el escritor es el criminal. Se podría pensar que la novela policial es la gran forma ficcional de la crítica literaria" (*Crítica* 12-13).

⁹ See Mesa Gancedo; Feuillet; Fornet, "Un debate de poéticas." Paranoid fiction was also the topic of a graduate seminar Piglia taught at Princeton. See his *Forma inicial* (47-69).

¹⁰ In recent years, conspiracy theories have garnered increased public attention as they have gained adherents around the world. The casting of mainstream media organizations and traditional political parties as well as cultural and scientific elites around a politics of truth has foreclosed meaningful discussion of the conspiracy form that such a turn of events might have occasioned. If what follows seems to belabor the inquiry into that form, it does so against this backdrop.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" is emblematic in this regard. By positing a paranoid style shared by communists and McCarthyite anti-communists, Hofstadter defends the norms and reality tests of liberal capitalist hegemony.

¹² Bruno Bosteels employs Piglia's definition of conspiracy to critique the always present but only ever virtual constituent power in Hardt and Negri's notion of empire (275). Bosteels worries that Piglia's conspiratorial politics of vanguard art "runs the risk of doing nothing more than mimic the blind knot between power and conspiracy that is said to shape all social relation within the state" (275).

¹³ Ana Gallego Cuiñas has recently reframed Piglia's work as world literature, a welcome innovation in the scholarship that, especially in the United States, has tended to employ a national allegorical hermeneutic (see Williams; Dove; Levinson). Although Piglia gives the regional and the nation its due, he is more invested in literature's cosmopolitan character (*Diálogo* 28).

¹⁴ Kellman (12) and Fernández Cobo ("Nostalgia" 365) make similar observations about the pedagogical aspect of Piglia's theory of conspiracy.

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