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Fall 2011

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### Recommended Citation

Ketchum, Roy. "Reading from the Periphery: Ricardo Piglia and the Liberal Arts." *Hispanic Issues On Line (HIOL)* 8 (Fall 2011): 170–185. Web.

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**Reading from the Periphery:  
Ricardo Piglia and the Liberal Arts**

*Roy Ketchum*

Tal vez los estudios literarios, la práctica discreta y casi invisible de la enseñanza de la lengua y de la lectura de textos pueda servir de alternativa y de espacio de confrontación en medio de esta selva oscura.

Un claro en el bosque.

—Ricardo Piglia, *Tres propuestas para el próximo milenio*

(Perhaps literary studies, the quiet and nearly invisible practice of language teaching and reading of texts, might serve as an alternative and as a space of confrontation in the middle of this dark jungle. A clearing in the forest.)

At colleges and universities in the United States, the liberal arts are seen as a worthy complement to focused learning in a discipline. A discipline is expected to offer specialization in preparation for further study, for careers and for professions. The liberal arts are charged with providing a broad intellectual background. The liberal arts can also serve as an entry point, a first exposure, to the range of disciplines. This is a special relationship promising balance between depth and breadth. Many of the arguments put forth in favor of a strong liberal arts education also emphasize the practical value of the liberal arts background. In recent years, the global initiatives that appear in college and university mission statements and increased interest in a select set of modern foreign languages are just two examples of where the liberal arts are promoted as practical complements to a focus in the discipline and in response to outside trends. Spanish language learning, in particular, is promoted for its instrumental value and its marketability.

In addition to that complementary relationship, however, there is also a perennial tension between academic departments, the home of the discipline, and a core curriculum, the home of the liberal arts.<sup>1</sup> Disciplines are invested in their own approaches to knowledge and there is important debate over what is the appropriate body of knowledge for a broad intellectual exposure. In this context, though, Hispanic literatures are often hardly part of the conversation. In the realm of the more contemporary and “practical” liberal arts, literature itself is anachronistic. It could also be argued that a traditional liberal arts education always meant the intellectual, artistic, and philosophical traditions of Europe, but “Europe” was generally not meant to include the Iberian Peninsula. With the exception of Cervantes, it is rare to see Spanish language texts as part of a traditional liberal arts canon.

In this essay I would like to advance the argument that the best of what Hispanic literatures have to offer to the liberal arts and to learners does not surface in spite of that tension suggested above, but rather because of it. The peripheral location of Spanish and Spanish American literatures paradoxically positions them at the center of the most worthy promise of the liberal arts by maintaining a tension that is both productive and necessary. A discipline prepares for success in a given field by teaching its students to speak the language of the prevailing orthodoxies. Literature at its best has the capacity to teach one to listen to what is silenced by those orthodoxies.

The body of the essay consists of an analysis of three proposals on the promise and challenge of literature in the twenty-first century set forth by the Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia, and an exploration of how those proposals are reflected in two of his most prominent novels, *Respiración artificial* (*Artificial Respiration*) and *La ciudad ausente* (*The Absent City*). My argument is also premised on the hypothesis that how we read provides an analogy for how we participate in communities. In the conclusion I share my own reflections on how the development of reading practices makes us better members of the communities in which we live by promoting a greater degree of comfort with uncertainty.

### **A Gift for the Last Reader**

lo que podemos imaginar siempre existe, en otra escala, en otro  
tiempo, nítido y lejano, igual que en un sueño.  
—Piglia, *El último lector* 17

(whatever we can image always exists, in another scale, in  
another time, vivid and distant, like in a dream.)

In *Artificial Respiration*, published in 1980, Ricardo Piglia’s readers knew more than the censors. For example, they made the connection between the

title of Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, translated into Spanish as *El proceso* and the legal name for the powers assumed in 1976 by the military regime, *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization). They also made the connection between the exploration of authoritarian power in the period of Rosas (1829–1852) and the authoritarianism of their own historical present. When Marcelo Maggi wrote in his first letter to Renzi, “La historia es el único lugar donde consigo aliviarme de esta pesadilla de la que trato de despertar” (18–19) (History is the only refuge I can find from a nightmare from which I would like to wake up [17]),<sup>1</sup> they may not have recognized an inverted quotation from James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, but they did know what he meant by that nightmare.

They also knew more, perhaps, than they were sometimes willing to say out loud, even to themselves. The infamous “por algo será” (there must have been some reason), which accompanied so many disappearances (CONADEP 9), was a fiction perpetuated by the state—it is best to trust in the authority of those who know better.

In *The Absent City*, published in 1992, Piglia's readers are living in the maelstrom of a city obsessed with its own fleeting present, invaded by the “simulacra of global capitalism,” and forgetting its recent past (Waisman, “De la ciudad futura”). When don Monti from one of the stories in *The Absent City*, says, “éste es el mapa del infierno” (37) (this is a map of hell), Piglia's readers know that he is looking out over the expanse of the *pampa*, over an open space with tombs that are unmarked but that refuse to be hidden. They also know that his map of hell is at the same time a map of the present.

Piglia is notoriously optimistic about the future of literature, but not in relation to the conditions of the editorial market or the satisfaction of the needs of a reader as client. His optimism is grounded, instead, in a fundamental assumption that to narrate fictions is a perfectly human endeavor. Fiction is at the heart of how we relate to each other and how we construct societies: “Hay una red de ficciones que constituyen el fundamento mismo de la sociedad” (*Crítica* 164) (There is a network of fictions that constitutes the very foundation of society). By participating in that network of fictions, by contributing to those “relatos sociales” (social accounts), we make sense of our world. What literature does, for Piglia, is engage that network of fictions: “la novela trabaja esos relatos sociales, los reconstruye, les da forma” (*Crítica* 164) (the novel works with those social stories, it reconstructs them and gives them form); but one needs to ask in what way does literature engage those social narratives or what is literature's relationship to the network of fictions in which we live?

Piglia has often pointed out that the state (or the market) has a political relationship with fiction. For example, in a 1984 interview he says, “El discurso militar ha tenido la pretensión de ficcionalizar lo real para borrar la opresión” (*Crítica* 15) (Military discourse has always tried to fictionalize

reality so as to erase signs of oppression). The state reduces a complicated set of factors to a singular closed interpretation, which is offered to “explicar una red social compleja y contradictoria. Son soluciones compensatorias, historias con moraleja, narraciones didácticas y también historias de terror” (*Tres propuestas* 24–25) (explain a complex and contradictory social network. They are compensatory solutions, stories with a moral, didactic narrations and they are also stories of terror). There is a tension between two types of narration; literature constructs alternative stories in combat with the State’s version of events (*Tres propuestas* 21–22).

By reducing complexity, seeking a common denominator, or even reaching consensus by way of the least distasteful option, the stories, which Piglia refers to as the state’s narratives, limit our capacity to imagine. Fundamentally, Piglia’s optimism is grounded in that network of social narratives where we live, as human beings, in society. The state’s narrating machine is mute without readers, without participants. Readers, participants in society, know more than what is told in the headlines and through the constraining narratives of the state or market. There is a greater range of possibilities: “Es por eso que la gente lee novelas, por la idea de que es posible otra vida y otra realidad” (Piglia, Interview 122) (That is why people read novels, because of the idea that another life and another reality are possible). Piglia’s optimism in literature is located in readers as participants in the social network and their fundamental sense of hope.

This essay is structured around the tension that literature maintains with the social narratives. It is guided by the role of the reader, by that confidence that Piglia inspires, not in an erudite reader qualified to recognize all of his sophisticated references, but in a reader who is by definition a participant in the construction of those social narratives. The journey is through the network of stories, fictions, lies, and truths that make up our understanding of reality. The destination is a future that helps us better understand our present.

### **Renzi Passes the Torch: A Replica of Piglia’s *Three Proposals***

—¿Te di la grabación? —dijo Renzi—.  
 Tené—le dijo y le alcanzó el casete—.  
 Escuchála y después me chiflás.  
 —Perfecto —dijo Junior.  
 —Te espero aquí mañana.  
 —A la seis —dijo Junior.  
 —Piglia, *La ciudad ausente* 17–18

(“Did I give you the recording?” Renzi asked.  
 “Here,” he said, and handed him a cassette tape.  
 Listen to it, then you can fill me in.”

“Perfect.”  
 “I’ll meet you here, tomorrow.”  
 “At six,” Junior said. [20]]<sup>3</sup>

The span of twelve years that separates the publication of *Artificial Respiration* and *The Absent City* folds in a form of continuity and a hidden mutation in the structure of power.<sup>4</sup> In what follows I offer my own reading back and forth between the two novels with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to unravel Piglia’s treatment of power and its mutations, and on the other, to explore his theorization of literature’s counter-narratives. The question is: what does literature always do? In other words, what endures? And in what ways does literature reinvent itself in a new historical reality?

The gesture of handing off the cassette is just as significant as the stories it contains. The dialogue quoted above is the moment at the end of the chapter when Renzi hands the cassette to Junior. Just before that moment, Renzi introduces the cassette with this description:

¿Ves? Me dieron esto —le dijo a Junior y le mostró un casete—. Un relato extrañísimo. La historia de un hombre que no tiene palabras para nombrar el horror. Algunos dicen que es falso, otros dicen que es la pura verdad. Los tonos del habla, un documento duro, que viene directo de la realidad. Está lleno de copias en toda la ciudad . . . . Dicen que son falsos pero así no la van a parar —se reía Renzi—. . . . sobre eso tenés que escribir, Junior, ¿qué estás esperando? (17)

(‘See? They gave me this.’ he said to Junior and showed him a cassette tape. ‘A very strange account. The story of a man who does not have words to name the horror. Some say it’s fake, other’s say it’s the pure truth. The inflections of speech, a harsh document, directly from reality. There are many copies throughout the city . . . . They say that they’re fake, but that’s not going to stop it.’ Renzi was laughing. ‘. . . . that’s what you have to write about, Junior—what are you waiting for?’ [19–20])

Piglia (like Macedonio before him) considers a story to be a replica,<sup>5</sup> and this moment contains Renzi’s inquiry from *Artificial Respiration* in miniature. It points to the limits of language: “un hombre que no tiene palabras para nombrar el horror” (a man who does not have words to name the horror). It suggests a social construction of truth emerging from the negotiation of power relations: “Algunos dice que es falso, otros dicen que es la pura verdad” (Some say it’s fake, other’s say it’s the pure truth). It even has a reflection on the genuine simplicity of a language in close relation to the real: “Los tonos del habla, un documento duro que viene directo de la realidad” (The inflections of speech, a harsh document, directly from

reality). This is a replica in miniature that anticipates Junior's investigation, but it is also a condensed version of the "proposals" that Piglia articulates in *Tres propuestas para el próximo milenio* (*Three Proposals for the Next Millennium*).

### **Piglia's *Three Proposals***

In a conference delivered in Havana in 2000, Piglia undertakes a speculative exercise, imagining what might happen with literature in the future. Sharing a premise with Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he assumes that there are things that only literature can offer and that those things will assure a place for literature into the future. The purpose of the conference, then, is in part to justify that place. It is also, however, to ask that question from Spanish America, from Argentina, from Buenos Aires: how might the literature of the future be imagined from that particular "surburbio del mundo" (12) (suburb of the world)? With the supposed decline of literature's importance lingering in the background, Piglia employs his oblique optic—a view from the margin—to revisit literature's fundamental characteristics and practices. The speculative exercise brings together what literature can offer and what the future will need.

Piglia first proposes, "La verdad es un relato que otro cuenta. Un relato parcial, fragmentario, incierto, falso también, que debe ser ajustado con otras versiones y otras historias" (30) (Truth is an account that is told by another. A partial account, fragmentary, uncertain, even false, which should be accommodated to other versions and other stories). The kind of "truth" to which Piglia points is relational, narrative, social, and constructed out of conflict. He suggests that literature is a medium or a terrain where that confrontation is played out. The struggle has a political horizon. It implies the investigative aspect of literature as it was practiced by Rodolfo Walsh, a dismantling of the apparatus of power and a recuperation of alternative versions: "Los vencedores escriben la historia y los vencidos la cuentan. Ése sería el resumen: desmontar la historia escrita y contraponer el relato de un testigo" (29) (The victors write history and the vanquished narrate it. That would be the summary: dismantle written history and counter it with the account of a witness). This dismantling operation, the opposition between truth and falsity, and the tension between fiction and reality point toward the promise that a literature of the future offers. More importantly, though, it imagines the literature that the society of the future (as well as the present) needs, one that would provide the space for confronting those tensions and for adjusting age-old practices to each new historical reality. By disentangling the terms "true" and "false" from the opposition between reality and fiction, Piglia also points toward an approach. The reality of the

future will be one that calls for investigation through the optic offered by fiction, an oblique lens.

In the second proposal, Piglia deals with the limits of language. He is thinking most specifically about the experience of horror, “una experiencia que a menudo parece estar más allá de las palabras” (31) (an experience that often seems beyond the reach of words). It has to do with the question of language and silence and with the difference between “transmitting the experience of the horror” and “informing about it.” In Walsh, Piglia finds a number of “distancing” operations, moments in which the word is given to an *other*. In that distancing, Piglia imagines a way for literature to continue to challenge the limit beyond which there is silence: “La verdad tiene la estructura de una ficción donde otro habla” (37) (Truth has the structure of a fiction where it is the other who speaks).

The third proposal also deals with language, but with language as a social horizon. Literature acts upon a particular state of language, upon the context of a society’s uses of language. Piglia points out that the State always has a certain politics of language. As a shorthand for the locus of power, the “State” also includes multinational corporations, the market, and the media conglomerates. There is an attempt to “neutralizar, despolitizar, borrar los signos de cualquier discurso crítico” (38) (neutralize, depoliticize, erase the signs of any critical discourse). In this sense, he argues that the dominant language of the times is the language of economics:

Quizá el discurso dominante en este sentido sea el de la economía. La economía de mercado define un diccionario y una sintaxis y actúa sobre las palabras; define un nuevo lenguaje sagrado y críptico, que necesita de los sacerdotes y los técnicos para descifrarlo y traducirlo y comentarlo. De este modo se impone una lengua mundial y un repertorio de metáforas que invaden la vida cotidiana. (*Tres propuestas* 38)

(Perhaps the dominant discourse in this sense is the language of economics. The market economy defines a dictionary and a syntax and it acts upon words; it defines a new sacred and cryptic language, which needs its own priests and technocrats to decipher it, to translate it, and to comment on it. This is how a worldwide language with its own repertory of metaphors that invade daily life has imposed itself.)

With this sacred language, a worldwide consensus forms around market-driven approaches to any problem or possibility. A particular way to view the world obtains a monopoly on understanding reality. Debate is neutralized, because whoever does not speak the jargon (either by refusal or by failure) is excluded. The role and possibility of literature in the face of this abuse of language is to do what it has always done, says Piglia:



“descontextualizar . . . y construir una contrarrealidad” (39) (decontextualize . . . and construct a counter-reality). The private language of poetry (Juan Gelman, for example), is paradoxically the most vital trace of social literature (39), because in that private language, the terrain that opens up is clarity. Even in language that might seem obscure or challenging, clarity results from the promise of a confrontation with the “deliberate obscurity” (39) of the official language, that worldwide jargon that blurs our understanding of the real.

To summarize the three proposals: truth resides in a social network but our access to that truth is blocked “por la desigualdad social, por las relaciones de poder y por la estrategia del Estado” (30) (by social inequality, by the relations of power, and by the strategies of the State). All truth is partial; a fiction tells part of the truth, the part that is excluded by history. The truth is embedded in a social network and emerges from fiction, dialogically and in relation. Struggling with the limits to language—with the challenge of saying what is unspeakable—he proposes a displacement, speaking in the voice of an *other*. We are accustomed to simple language, which is clear only by convention. As a way to combat this abuse of language, “deliberate obfuscation” (41), he offers the more genuine clarity of private languages.

These proposals are as much about the place and the challenge of literature in the future as they are an inventory of the social problems it addresses. They also serve as keys to understanding the challenges and possibilities of the present. Contained within those proposals is a legend for the map of what is absent and what is woven into the span of twelve years that separates *The Absent City* and *Artificial Respiration*. They both have the structure of a detective novel, but they never answer the question; they only ever *resolve* the enigma partially. The assertion that “Los vencedores escriben la historia y los vencidos la cuentan” (The victors write history and the vanquished narrate it) is a productive tension running through all of Piglia’s narratives and theoretical interventions.

### **From the Archive to the Machine: An Oblique Perspective for Each Historical Moment**

When Renzi introduces the contents of the cassette in the beginning of *The Absent City*, he points Junior in the direction of his first clue and offers his own oblique vision, an historical understanding of the past, as a lens for understanding the present. Renzi also expresses a sense of urgency: “sobre eso tenés que escribir, Junior, ¿qué estás esperando?” (17) (that’s what you have to write about, Junior —what are you waiting for?). After handing Junior the cassette and urging him on, Renzi steps aside. The quotation at the

head of the previous section promises a reunion, which never happens. Renzi never reappears, suggesting that the inquiry of *The Absent City* calls for a new set of tools, not only what Renzi learned from Marcelo Maggi, but also a different lens for a new historical reality.

Renzi has deep roots in Argentine history. He is a direct descendent of the enigmatic Enrique Ossorio; he also remembers when his father used to listen to tapes of Perón, which had been smuggled in by the Resistance. Junior, on the other hand, is the son of an English expatriate, an outsider. Renzi explains that Junior's outsider status accounts for his early success at picking up the transmissions from Macedonio's narrating machine, which is at the heart of the novel.

These different relationships to the Argentine nation—Renzi the descendent of an *estanciero* (landholder) closely connected to Rosas, and Junior the son of an English immigrant and engineer—produce a different vision. Both have oblique perspectives that allow them to see things “desde un lugar levemente marginal” (*Tres propuestas* 13) (from a slightly marginal place) or “al sesgo” (diagonally). Yet Renzi's vision is primarily informed by the past and by history, while Junior's is the perspective of an outsider. The oft-cited epigraph from T.S. Eliot that opens *Artificial Respiration* points directly toward the historical vision called for by Renzi's inquiry. What is relevant for this question is less the citation itself than the lines that immediately follow it in the original “Dry Salvages” from the *Four Quartets*. The following excerpt begins with the epigraph (the first two lines) and continues on to what reads as a perfect depiction of Renzi's vision:

We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
An approach to the meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning  
We can assign to happiness. I have said before  
That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations—not forgetting  
Something that is probably quite ineffable:  
*The backward look behind the assurance*  
*Of recorded history, the backward half-look*  
*Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.* (39, emphasis mine)

The last three lines condense the lessons that Maggi taught Renzi, even in his absence. There is distrust in “recorded history”; an intentionally tangential perspective, “the backward half-look / Over the shoulder”; and an awareness of violence in the past, “the primitive terror.”

Renzi's vision is also consistent with the setting of *Artificial Respiration* and its temporal references. The narrative is set in a present time; the action

is set in motion by a letter that Renzi receives in April 1976, within a month of the military takeover. Aside from the thin details of exchanging letters, traveling, and situating dialogue, however, there is nothing from the present narrated. Indications of the present read like the stage directions in the script of theatrical play. But Piglia often remarks that “lo más importante de una historia nunca debe ser nombrado” (*Tres propuestas* 17) (whatever is most important in a story should never be named). He also claims that in every narrative there is always a visible story hiding a secret story. In this sense, the visible story of *Artificial Respiration* is the investigation into the Ossorio legacy and his role in the period of Rosas. The secret story is an examination of the authoritarianism of the present.

In *The Absent City*, there are multiple overlapping temporalities. A brief reference to a period of time fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin wall (144) overlaps with the experience of the 1970s state-sponsored terrorism and a dystopic vision of an undefined future. This multiple temporality suggests that the past *and* an imaginary future are relevant to an understanding of the present. Junior’s investigation in an historical present gives grounding to the multiple temporalities of the machine. Those stories of the machine flow through Junior, and whether their own setting is future, present or past, they are always present in the moment of narration and in the moment of reading.

Junior’s vision is also oblique, but in ways different from Renzi’s. As a descendant of English immigrants, Junior cultivates an outsider’s perspective. He is a traveler, a foreigner, and someone never at home. He wants to be startled by the present, but as an outsider he also escapes the conventions of the personal. His vision is anachronistic: “trataba de mirar todo con los ojos de un viajero del siglo XIX” (9) (he tried to look at everything through the eyes of a nineteenth-century traveler [14]). Despite these important differences, Junior and Renzi are both characterized as having an oblique vision that allows them to think against the grain of convention.

In both novels the action is set in motion by a form of interpellation; someone reaches out to the protagonist from behind the nebulous curtain that clouds our vision of reality, and points them in the direction of the truth. A story is asking to be told. *Artificial Respiration* begins with a letter, *The Absent City* with a phone call. The distinction between a letter and a phone call might seem insubstantial, but in both cases the material mechanism that initiates the action is part of a coherent network of supports for narration. In *Artificial Respiration*, the predominant medium is the letter, not simply the correspondence “carta” (letter as sent in the mail), but also the “letra” (letter as part of the alphabet), in the sense of the “lettered city.” In *Artificial Respiration*, the material support for truth is Ossorio’s collection of documents, written artifacts. Even the state exercises its power by censoring and attempting to decode written documents. In *The Absent City*, on the

other hand, the material support for the narration also includes audio recordings (the last known story from the machine), super-8 film (the movie of Macedonio shown by Russo), and of course the machine itself, which is a bio-technological hybrid beyond our recognition. In part this distinction relates to the speed of narration in each novel. The reading of both archival documents and letters, which is much of what the protagonist does in the first part of *Artificial Respiration*, implies a slow, methodical process and sets the novel's pace. Even the dialogue of the second part gives the novel a slower speed. In *The Absent City*, though, the pace of narration is fast. Piglia has described his intention in this regard:

An additional problem in which I was interested was the idea of imprinting a certain velocity in the narration, a concern no doubt related to the manner in which the transitions between the stories are produced, as well as to the issue of interruptions, fragmentation, and suspense. This idea of velocity was something new for me with respect to my previous books. What I try to work with in the *Absent City* is a degree of extreme condensation and speed while dispensing as much as possible with the recourse of irony, which is a trait that comes naturally to me (it is the defining mark of the writing of *Artificial Respiration*, for example). (Afterword 142)

Those interruptions, the suspense and the fragmentation that he mentions, are facilitated by the multiple material supports for the narration. A key example would be the moment when Junior listens to the recording given by Renzi. He gets in the taxicab, puts on the earphones to his "Walkman" and listens to the story. The reader, then, "reads" the recording through the image of Junior traveling across the city in a cab (30).

In the commentary quoted above, Piglia does not elaborate on his idea of velocity, but I would like to suggest that it implies a broad reflection on those distinct media environments: on the one hand, *Artificial Respiration*, dealing with the nineteenth century and the predominance of the written word, and on the other hand, *The Absent City*, the late twentieth century (or the future) and the dominance of audiovisual (or futuristic) media. The lament over the decline of the literary is ordinarily associated with the decline of the written word. There is a defiant gesture, though, in *The Absent City*, where the writing of a novel *contains* those other media forms; it denies the commonsense notion that we live in a post-literary world. Yet it also asks a question: are there dimensions of narration or storytelling that transcend their material supports? Piglia traces a form of continuity from the oral storytelling practices to the novel and into film (or a futuristic medium). Each distinct medium has its own challenges and offers its own possibilities; he suggests, for example, that the oral tradition and film share an immediacy that paradoxically makes them more closely related to each other than either

is to the novel (Interview 128). But fundamentally, storytelling “es un saber generalizado” (125) (is a generalized form of knowledge) with a set of practices that finds its way into whatever medium is available.<sup>6</sup> Something about narration, whatever is at the heart of the story that needs to be told, refuses to be contained by any particular medium.

The action in *Artificial Respiration* is paradoxically moved along by the absence of Renzi’s uncle, as described in the following:

El lector, al identificarse con Renzi, espera constantemente que Maggi se manifieste, y el suspenso producido por la perpetua postergación de este hecho da tensión y coherencia al libro. Si Maggi es, como se sugiere tácitamente, otra víctima más de la violencia policial, el intento de su sobrino de prestarle una voz en la narración es entonces mucho más urgente. (Balderston 115)

(The reader, in identifying with Renzi, is constantly waiting for Maggi to show up, and the suspense that is produced by that perpetual postponement of his arrival gives tension and coherence to the book. If Maggi is, as is tacitly implied, another victim of political violence, his nephew’s intention to incorporate his voice into the narration is then even more urgent.)

The urgency discussed above suggests the dual structure of the visible story and the secret story (*Formas breves* 94). Truth resides in the story never told and the approach to truth is dialogic. Literally: in dialogue, the truth is constructed between characters writing letters or conversing and debating around the table.

The action of *The Absent City* is moved along by the threat of Macedonio’s narrating machine being shut down. Starting with the very first phone call, Junior is reminded again and again that there is urgency to his investigation. The urgency also points in the direction of the locus of truth. The narratives are in danger of being lost, the narratives that collectively tell the truth. With the truth residing in multiple narratives, Junior’s approach to the truth must involve gathering those narratives. For the narratives to reveal their truth, though, he must also explore what holds them together, what is the thread that connects them? In the visible story, they are all connected to the machine; in the untold story, they are connected by enigma. What really moves the action along is not the urgency to “save” the machine, but the permanent (and impossible) quest to unravel the enigma. By keeping the enigma alive, the machine brings us closer to truth. This is also what literature does, provides a material support for doubt.

In *Artificial Respiration*, access to reality is mediated by the written word. The truth rests in the story never told and the past is a lens for understanding the present. For *Artificial Respiration*, the metaphor for

literature is the archive. In *The Absent City*, reality is mediated by the network of social relations. Truth emerges from the negotiation of power relations. Not only the past but also the future is a lens for understanding the present. The space that supports this approach to the truth is “a labyrinthine system, where there is always a corner that pulls you into another story line” (Piglia, Afterword 142). In *The Absent City*, the city is the metaphor for the operations of literature.<sup>7</sup>

There is a distinct contrast in the depiction of the State, its mechanism of control, the location of power, and its approach to dissent. In *Artificial Respiration*, power is centralized, control is authoritarian, and the state, which speaks with one voice, eliminates dissent. In *The Absent City*, in contrast, dissent is absorbed. Power is dispersed throughout the city through different forms and characters: the police, the psychiatrist, and the museum. There is no evidence of an orchestrated program for the exercise of control; there are many voices but they all speak the same language and say the same thing. Within that din of many voices, dissent is drowned out and absorbed. Control is mental, psychological, and linguistic. This focus on the depiction of the state is where Piglia’s two novels most clearly display what Fernando Reati describes as “el hilo conductor del repetido relato del poder en la Argentina” (*Postales* 211) (the unifying thread of a recurring story of power in Argentina). *Artificial Respiration* depicts “el modelo clásico del Estado convertido en instrumento de terror. [. . .] la maquinaria anónima de un mundo donde todos pueden ser acusados y culpables (205) (the classic model of the state converted into an instrument of terror. [. . .] the anonymous machinery of a world where all can be accused and found guilty [207]). Meanwhile, *The Absent City* addresses “una nueva etapa en la historia de las instituciones. El Estado mental, la realidad imaginaria, todos pensamos como ellos piensan y nos imaginamos lo que ellos quieren que imaginemos” (144) (a new stage in the history of institutions. The mental State, the imagined reality, we all think like they do and imagine what they want us to imagine [119]).

Finally, I would like to return to the reader, in whom Piglia’s optimism about literature is grounded. Up to this point, everything has been about the state and literature as a counter-narrative, but I also need to ask, where is the reader? Where are the people who listen? If there is a permanent battle between the state and literature, it must be waged within the minds of readers. What is at stake is the limit between the possible and the real, but for whom?

In a climactic moment of *The Absent City*, Russo, one of the characters closest to the origins of the machine, suddenly stumbles upon the elusive reader. In a lucid reflection, he argues that there are limits on authoritarian power and that only when it oversteps the limits of what is tolerated does it awaken a sense of outrage and provoke demands for justice. Ordinarily, international pressure accepts

como un dato de hecho que se masacre y se torture a los humillados del campo y a los pobres, a los desgraciados afiebrados de los ghettos y de los barrios bajos de la ciudad, pero reacciona cuando se trata de ese modo a los intelectuales y a los políticos y a los hijos de las familias acomodadas. (143).

(as a given that the humble from the fields, the wretched and feverish from the ghettos and the poorest neighborhoods of the city will be massacred and tortured, but reacts when intellectuals and politicians and the children of well-to-do families are treated this way. [118])

But once the international observers have gone home, the powerful—in a mutated form—can go back to a quiet, slow draining of the life of the desperate. Russo's reflection focuses not on the relationship of literature to the state, but rather on the place of the observer and participant, metaphorically the role of the reader who is by analogy a participant in society. We can trust in the institutional explanations of reality as expressed in the prevailing orthodoxies of the day, we can perpetuate the explanations of injustices, or we can be *interrupted*. Russo's reflection asks us, in the network of stories where we live, which parts do we choose to ignore and what activates our attention?

### **Becoming Co-Narrators of our World**

Finally, I would like to bring this discussion back to an explicit connection to the question of a liberal arts education by offering a series of reflections on the development of reading practices. The text is just there, ink on paper. How do those strange hieroglyphs become thought, image, emotion, or idea? Reading is the detained study of individual words, building context, making use of resources, painting a mental picture, hearing sounds, smelling aromas, and listening. Reading is discrete analysis of paragraphs, sentences, individual words or parts of words; it is unpacking grammatical structures, asking a question.

Reading effectively and actively is like juggling while walking a tightrope; within this activity called reading, there are distinct and competing practices. On the one hand, reading requires concentrated attention to the discrete items of language at the level of word and sentence—the building blocks or the work of the bricklayer. On the other hand, it also requires the use of contextual clues and the development of a broad framework to imagine a big picture—the blueprint or the work of the architect. For the operation of reading to be successful, not only for comprehension but for the

pleasure or pain of an experience of the text to occur, the reader must give up her or his grasp on the world. These two practices, the discrete item analysis and the framing of the big picture, demand the use of different sets of lenses. As the reader begins to see through a different lens, he or she is displaced at least for a moment from the ground of certainty. For a student as learner, the challenge is a confrontation with doubt. The promise, though, is that doubt might emerge not as a deficiency, but rather as an antidote to false certainty and as an invitation to participate freely, as a liberated member, in a range of communities.

For the teacher, also as learner, that pathway toward the liberation of students involves a risk. It demands, in the sense best expressed by Paulo Freire, that the teacher relinquish the authority of the podium. How we read, both as students and as teachers, offers an analogy for how we participate in the communities where we live. We can passively let the web of social narratives be woven around us, or we can learn to listen, attune ourselves the quietest voices in the crowd, and become co-narrators of their stories.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Cross for an overview of the hundred-year history of the undergraduate curriculum at Columbia University, which has one of the most rigorous and extensive set of common liberal arts requirements within the U.S. university system.
2. Translations of *Respiración artificial* are from Balderston.
3. Translations of *La ciudad ausente* are from Waisman.
4. In this sense, the period between 1976 and 2001 is seen as one during which the line of continuity refers to the complete transformation of the economy, initiated by military force in 1976 and continued through the transformation to democracy by more subtle psychological means. See Avelar, Masiello, Reati, and Solomianski.
5. “Un relato no es otra cosa que la reproducción del orden del mundo en una escala puramente verbal. Un réplica de la vida, si la vida estuviera hecha sólo de palabras. Pero la vida no está hecha sólo de palabras, está también por desgracia hecha de cuerpos, es decir, decía Macedonio, de enfermedad, de dolor y de muerte” (*Ciudad ausente* 139) (A story is nothing other than a reproduction of the order of the world on a purely verbal scale. A replica of life, if life consisted just of words. But life does not consist just of words. Unfortunately, it is also made up of bodies or, in other words, of disease, pain and death, as Macedonio would say [114]). See also the prologue to *El último lector* for another treatment of replicas.
6. In distinct contrast to this suggestion, Sarlo argues that “es indiferente el soporte material de la lectura: ¿Una página impresa, un microfilm, la pantalla de una computadora, un holograma? En el límite, todos exigen esa capacidad infinitamente difícil: interpretar algo que ha sido escrito por otro” (194) (the material medium of the reading is unimportant: A printed page, microfilm, the computer screen, a hologram? In the limit, everyone notes the infinite difficulty of this capacity: to interpret something that has already been written by another). Note emphasis on the *written* word.



7. "It is from there, perhaps, that my decision came of using the city as a metaphor for the space of the novel" (Piglia, Afterword 142).

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