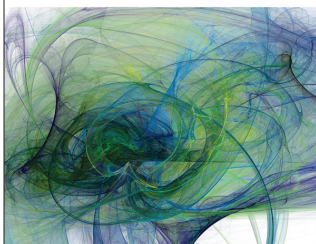


**CREATIVITY AND SCIENCE  
IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE LITERATURE**

*Between Romanticism and Formalism*



*Joanna Page*

## CREATIVITY AND SCIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE LITERATURE: BETWEEN ROMANTICISM AND FORMALISM

Joanna Page

ISBN 978-1-55238-770-2

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# 1 | The Science of Literary Evolution: Between Romanticism and Formalism

Guillermo Martínez's *La mujer del maestro* (1998) is not particularly representative of his fiction in general: no mathematicians figure among the characters, and formal systems, logic, and the operations of chance are not prominent in the diegesis. The novel does, however, explore in depth two of his recurrent concerns: the nature of creativity and the figure of the genius in the contemporary world. This chapter focusses on the themes of artistic exhaustion and renewal that are central to both *La mujer del maestro* and *Respiración artificial* (Piglia, 1980). Piglia's first novel explores the difficulty and the necessity of writing in the context of military repression in Argentina, finding in the distanced perspectives of history a way to overcome the seeming impasse of the present. Both novels create a powerful and paradoxical dialogue between Romantic ideas of artistic creativity and Formalist notions of literary evolution. In Piglia, narrative figurations such as alienation, exile, utopia, and betrayal, taken from episodes in the political and cultural history of Argentine Romanticism, are used to articulate the displacements, estrangements, and anachronisms that underpin the Formalist vision of literary renewal. Martínez's novel bears witness to the demise of the Romantic artistic genius in the modern world; however, he draws on Formalist theories of literary succession, and on the dialectical tradition of science, to carve

out the possibility of artistic innovation in an age of epistemological and aesthetic crisis. Both writers demonstrate how Formalist ideas of literary evolution can be mobilized to combat postmodern pronouncements of the “exhaustion” of literature.

## A POSTMODERN PROMETHEUS: INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN LITERATURE / MARTÍNEZ

The possession of originality cannot make an artist unconventional; it drives him further into convention, obeying the law of the art itself, which seeks constantly to reshape itself from its own depths.—Northrop Frye<sup>1</sup>

Set in the unscrupulous, feud-riven literary circles of Buenos Aires – Martínez suspects that a change of name may not have been sufficient disguise for some of his characters<sup>2</sup> – *La mujer del maestro* becomes the author’s most direct enquiry into originality and literary evolution. The novel follows the struggle of a young writer who becomes locked in rivalry, both sexual and literary, with an older, more established author. The counterpoint between youthful inexperience and weary cynicism allows Martínez to stage several conflicting ideas about creativity: to ask, for example, whether originality arises from a close engagement with literary tradition or from a deliberate disregard of it, what value should be ascribed to a commercially successful author measured against the lonely pursuer of artistic originality, and whether reflexivity should be considered as a form of innovation or a signal of its exhaustion.

We could identify these conflicts in Martínez’s novel as belonging to a central tension between Formalist concepts of literary creativity and those of recognizably Romantic stock. The staging of the struggle against literary inheritance, the novel’s principal theme, draws on the Formalist understanding that “Every literary trend represents a crisscrossing, a complex interplay

between elements of tradition and innovation.”<sup>3</sup> For the Formalists, this interplay is characterized by dialectical struggle and discontinuity, in contrast to the classical idea of literary history as proceeding in a linear fashion through epochs, each united by a particular style and spirit. Apparently removed from Martínez’s mathematical concerns, this novel establishes a crucial correlation that recurs throughout his fiction and critical essays between artistic innovation and logical reasoning, and between the battle of the individual against the literary canon and the dialectical progress of scientific thought. Martínez’s novel brings into the light the cynicism that feeds, and is fed by, postmodern discourses on the “exhaustion” of art; with much greater ambivalence, it sketches out what genuine creativity might look like in our times. Although the novel charts a journey that takes its characters from enthusiasm, creativity, and love of literature to cynicism, parody, and self-serving ambition, it also reveals the dialectical processes that underpin literature’s continual self-renewal, and that for Martínez render specious the now-familiar postmodern discourses of artistic exhaustion.

### Avatars of Romantic creativity: Prometheus and Faust

In the invocation of three mythical figures in *La mujer del maestro* – Prometheus, Faust, and Daedalus – we can trace three contrasting conceptions of creativity. Since Aeschylus, Prometheus has been cast as the giver of writing and other civilizing skills to humankind, in defiance of Zeus; in later versions of the myth, he becomes involved in the very act of creating humankind. For Shelley (*Prometheus Unbound*, 1820) and others in the Romantic period, he became a symbol for rebellion against the tyranny of the established order. The novelists in *La mujer del maestro* – the young, unnamed protagonist starting his second novel and Jordán, the older, established author working on his life’s masterpiece – discover that they are both writing versions of the Prometheus myth. The protagonist’s plan is to insert the mythological character into the contemporary world, letting his young Prometheus loose in the midst of a huge city. His intention is to pose the question of whether any of the Romantic notions of heroism have survived his cynical century, and on this score he begins to have real doubts:

había empezado a preguntarse si todo el asunto tenía sentido, si era posible reconocer todavía en algún pliegue de la época contemporánea los elementos del mito, si no habría habido un corte definitivo, la pérdida de una fe, o de un grado de profundidad, que prohibía definitivamente resucitar al héroe después de Shelley.<sup>4</sup>

he had begun to ask himself whether the whole thing made any sense, if it were possible still to recognize any element of the myth in some hidden crease of the contemporary world, if there hadn't been a definitive rupture, a loss of faith or of depth, that prohibited, once and for all, the possibility of resuscitating the hero after Shelley.

Jordán's own novel-in-progress appears to draw on classical rather than Romantic versions of the myth, and specifically on Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. It explores the idea that fire is not the first gift that Prometheus gives to man, but the ignorance of his end, the inability to predict the number of his days. As he cannot grant man the immortality reserved for the gods, Prometheus puts within his heart the "esperanza ciega" (blind hope) that Jordán describes as "Esa confianza absurda que nos hace dormir a la noche, creyendo que siempre veremos de nuevo la salida del sol [...] la condición que debe anteceder a todas, la única capaz de darle sentido a las empresas humanas" (that absurd confidence that sends us to sleep at night, believing that we will always see the next sunrise [...] the condition that has to come before all others, the only one able to lend meaning to human enterprise).<sup>5</sup> In his novel, however, Jordán imagines the experience of a man to whom this gift is *not* given: who struggles to complete his great work, robbed of meaning by the knowledge of exactly when he is going to die. Jordán therefore reworks the classical myth from a Romantic perspective: that of the tragedy of finitude, as explored by Fichte, Schlegel, and others.

Hope and cynicism, heroism and nihilism, creative life and finitude: these are also the themes of the framing story of *La mujer del maestro*. The

struggle between Prometheus and Zeus is mirrored in the relationship between the young writer battling to define a path of his own against the supremacy of an older author. It is a struggle that allows Martínez to explore several ways of figuring the relationship between an individual writer and the literary canon. The protagonist finds his second novel impossible to write, as “lo paralizaban las voces superpuestas de la tradición, el peso abrumador de lo que ya estaba escrito” (he was paralyzed by the superimposed voices of tradition, the overwhelming weight of what had already been written).<sup>6</sup> His first book is admired by Jordán, who is moved by the reverent belief in literature that emanates from each page and sees something of his younger, naïve self in such zeal. He warns him that writing from within literary tradition means that “para entender a fondo su libro hay que cargarse encima una biblioteca entera” (to really understand your book, you’d have to carry a whole library on your shoulders) and that battling against the canon will inevitably result in his work being swallowed up into that same tradition.<sup>7</sup>

For his part, the protagonist recognizes instantly that Jordán’s new book is crushingly original, laying waste to literary tradition and his earlier concerns and styles, banishing irony altogether. It is different from anything he has ever read, “un libro desolado y arrasador” (a desolate, devastating book).<sup>8</sup> The protagonist suspects that the books piled high in Jordán’s study, once the objects of fervent study, have lain unopened and unread for some time; while young authors, as Jordán rather dismissively observes, are always interested in the subject of literary succession, it is a question that seems to have become irrelevant for writers of Jordán’s stature and experience.

Thus far, Martínez’s novel would seem to allow for the possibility of a kind of originality that represents a complete rupture with tradition: a Romantic creativity born of reclusion from the world and rebellion against its norms. And yet Jordán is deeply cynical about his achievement, attributing his success to his scorn for words: like women, he says, they flee from you if you adore them; humiliated and disparaged, they will never deny themselves to you. His reclusion, which once inspired the protagonist’s Romanticized view of him as a lone genius, is eventually suspected to be nothing more than a publicity stunt.

It is not Prometheus who provides the most accurate model for the kind of creativity ultimately pursued by both Jordán and the protagonist, but Faust. Jordán's wife describes a character from one of his novels as "un Dorian Gray invertido" (an inverted Dorian Gray):<sup>9</sup> unlike in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), in this case the moral degradation of the Jordán's Faustian composer results in the ever-greater perfection of the musical score. Martínez returns to the image of Dorian Gray at the book launch at the end of the novel, at which the previously youthful Jordán appears suddenly emaciated and cadaverous: "La edad, su verdadera edad, lo había alcanzado de pronto, como si hubiera estado suspendido, mientras escribía la novela, a salvo en un limbo fuera del tiempo, y esa gracia le hubiera sido quitado cruelmente, de un solo golpe" (age, his true age, had caught up with him all at once, as if he had been suspended, while writing the novel, safe in some limbo outside of time, and that gift had been cruelly taken from him, in one fell swoop).<sup>10</sup> Like Faust and Dorian Gray, Jordán sacrifices moral integrity in the pursuit of pleasure and success, abusing his wife's loyalty and humiliating her in front of his latest sexual conquests. The protagonist, too, makes for an unconvincing Prometheus: he is too timid to carry through with his own robbery (of Jordán's manuscript), and his rebellion is cowardly, serving no one but himself. He follows Jordán's Faustian path, moving all too easily from youthful enthusiasm to cynicism: Jordán's complaint that his first novel lacks "el fermento humano por excelencia, la maquinación" (that human ferment *par excellence*, evil scheming)<sup>11</sup> is quickly remedied in the second.

The creative impasse the protagonist experiences on reading Jordán's manuscript is broken only through the power of revenge. Seeing Jordán and Cecilia at the book launch occasions a flash of inspiration: rather than writing about Prometheus, he will write about them. The solution, as is so often the case in postmodern reflexive literature, is simply to move up a level in the hierarchy of narrative and meta-narrative levels. To produce a version of Prometheus when one has already been published is discounted as an achievement of lesser value than to write *about* the production of such a version; this story is then embedded, of course, within yet another narrative frame: the novel we are reading. As a novel about the writing of a novel about

the writing of a novel about a myth, *La mujer del maestro* could not be more exemplary in its use of postmodern recursion.

## Artistic exhaustion and postmodern skepticism

Recursion is, of course, a form of innovation, and one taken seriously by John Barth in his influential essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.” Barth extols Borges’s use of reflexive techniques to overcome a widespread sense of the exhaustion of aesthetic innovation. By taking artistic constraints and philosophical impasses as his overt theme, “he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work,” an act that represents an “artistic victory” over the perceived crisis in creativity.<sup>12</sup> In a similar manner, the protagonist of *La mujer del maestro* has found a way of engaging with literary tradition without being overwhelmed by it: the cultivation of ironic distance. However, this technique is associated in the novel with rancour and jealousy. We do not rejoice with the protagonist when he finally finds the inspiration for his novel, and we find nothing laudable in his approach: he merely shows that he has adapted perfectly to a literary environment in which books are used as tools for the promotion of oneself and the denigration of others. Martínez’s representation of the creative achievements of his protagonist is thus highly ambivalent.

The epigraph to *La mujer del maestro* – “Man is half dust, half deity, / alike unfit to sink or soar”<sup>13</sup> – is taken from Byron’s drama *Manfred* (1817), in which Faustian echoes also lend ambivalence to the portrayal of Manfred’s Promethean defiance. Manfred goes on to speak of man’s “mix’d essence”: we breathe “The breath of degradation and of pride, / Contending with low wants and lofty will, / Till our mortality predominates.”<sup>14</sup> Martínez never fully manages to imagine a Promethean hero for our times: the generosity and desire for freedom that motivates Prometheus’s daring rebellion is replaced with a much more selfish and cynical form of ambition. If his characters are patently of “mix’d essence,” they have none of Byron’s tortured guilt; rather than a battle with the spirits, theirs is a much more prosaic scramble for precedence in a market-driven, mass-media society. As the protagonist comes to realize, literary success in his world is not about writing well at all



but about the vagaries of critical reception, the marketability of novels, pulling off a convincing performance on the social scene, and adding some spice to one's public profile by provoking a scandal in one's private life. Critical acclaim does not reward divine inspiration but petty competitiveness, latching onto those who find an edge in an increasingly crowded market. As for Jordán's own masterpiece, which has taken him fifteen years to complete, the book launch is poorly attended and only his young rival buys a copy of the book. Jordán advises the latter, with not a little bitterness, to forget about serious literature and pursue the kind of scandal loved by the press in order to convert himself into a celebrity overnight: get someone pregnant and make her have an abortion, or sleep with another writer's wife and make sure he finds out.

For all its appeal to Romantic figures of creativity and rebellious dissent, then, *La mujer del maestro* conspicuously (and deliberately) fails to bring these to life in the contemporary world. Significantly, however, for Martínez this failure does not give credence to postmodern discourses of artistic exhaustion; on the contrary, the novel allows us to suspect that it is the dominance of such discourses, and particularly their skepticism towards rationalist epistemology, that may be responsible for the sad plight of contemporary literature. Jordán's cynicism towards artistic creativity derives at least in part from a loss of faith in the advance of human knowledge. All his life, he claims, "Confíaba en ese dibujito de la espiral, el entendimiento que se desarrolla volviéndose hacia atrás para incorporar lo anterior, y asciende al mismo tiempo en cada vuelta a nuevas alturas" (I trusted in that little diagram of the spiral, the understanding that develops by looping backwards to incorporate what has gone before, and at the same time ascends to new heights with every loop).<sup>15</sup> The diagram he refers to is often used to illustrate the Hegelian model of historical progress, which moves forward by subsuming apparent oppositions (thesis and antithesis) into a new synthesis at a higher level. It is in this kind of progress that Jordán has lost all confidence. Although he has produced a masterpiece, Jordán no longer trusts in the increasing enlightenment of generations to come, who will appreciate the value of the work that is destined to be overlooked by his own generation. He speaks of "un quiebre en nuestra época" (a rupture in our era),<sup>16</sup> brought

about by a realization that those who come after us may not be better, or understand more, than we do: in fact they may understand significantly less. This loss of faith in the dialectical process by which human knowledge is advanced is at the heart of Jordán's skepticism regarding innovation in literature. If artists often create for a future generation better able to understand their work, the erasure of that better future makes the work of the artist seem futile.

This connection between artistic originality and the processes of dialectical reasoning sheds significant light on the novel's otherwise rather ambiguous treatment of questions of genius and literary innovation. It prevents us from making the mistake of attributing Jordán's skepticism to Martínez's own approach to creativity in the postmodern era. In his essays, Martínez is openly critical of such defeatism, defending the power of dialectical thought in arguments that clearly associate epistemological skepticism with the discourse of artistic exhaustion. Moreover, as I will show, *La mujer del maestro* itself allows us to glimpse a different form of creativity that *does* survive in our cynical age, precisely by remaining bound to the dialectical advance of human knowledge in which Jordán cannot now believe.

In his essay "Literatura y racionalidad," Martínez argues that our era's over-hasty dismissal of rational systems of thought produces a skepticism that also undermines the possibility of innovation in the arts. That human knowledge is limited does not mean, he insists, that it is totally impotent.<sup>17</sup> From the perception that rationalism has been demolished stems another new rhetoric: that everything has already been said, and all that is left is repetition and parody.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Martínez takes issue with what he identifies as a dominant notion in contemporary Argentine literature and criticism, upheld by César Aira in his essay "La nueva escritura" (1998), that the professionalization of novel-writing has led to its stagnation. Aira argues that heroic attempts to renovate the genre in a radical fashion have ended in "un callejón sin salida" (a dead end) and that the law of diminishing returns governs all attempts at literary innovation: every artist reduces more and more the space left to his successors, and it is increasingly difficult to innovate.<sup>19</sup> Martínez presents various objections to Aira's proposition, which he identifies as one of the most virulent "clichés" of literary discussions, circulating

uncontested like a sacred truth.<sup>20</sup> He admits the growing difficulty of “escribir contra todo lo escrito” (writing against everything that has been written), particularly as literature has become more self-conscious.<sup>21</sup> But, faced with this difficulty, we should not immediately abandon hope of innovation and sink into a belief that “está todo dicho” (everything has already been said). If literature is – as Martínez sustains – a form of knowledge, then its history will be a long one of “permanente invención, variación y agotamiento de recursos y de efectos, de teorías, de retóricas y de géneros” (constant invention, variation on, and exhaustion of, resources, effects, theories, forms of rhetoric and genres). Why – he asks – should we suppose that this history has reached its end?<sup>22</sup>

## Daedalus, the art of puzzle-solving, and Formalist literary renewal

The sheer variety of ways in which the Prometheus and Faust mythemes are employed in *La mujer del maestro* is demonstration enough of the endless potential for each period to question and reinvent its own myths. But it is the more discreet figure of Daedalus in the novel who may be seen to crystallize most effectively the reasons for Martínez’s confidence in the continued potential for innovation in literature, providing an alternative model to the Promethean and Faustian ones that are more conspicuous in the novel’s diegesis. Daedalus, who gives his name to a previous novel by Jordán, represents art as fine craftsmanship and was associated in the Romantic period with classical art. He is also associated with puzzle-inventing and puzzle-solving, being the creator of a mythological labyrinth so deviously intricate that he barely managed to escape from it himself. Jordán’s writing desk is cluttered with games and puzzles, and at one point the analogy is explicitly drawn between writing fiction and completing a jigsaw puzzle. The comparison is surprising: we might more readily associate the deductive logic of puzzle-solving and code-deciphering with the act of literary criticism, not composition. In what sense can writing fiction be creative if it is likened to the reconstruction of a jigsaw puzzle, which involves merely discovering an

order already set down by the creator of the puzzle, leaving no room for individual expression?

This picture of a writer who is not constructing a puzzle for his reader to decipher so much as engaging in an act of problem-solving himself finds echoes in Martínez's own experience of the process of composition. He describes the impression of discovering links already buried in the story, waiting to be uncovered, and the sensation of euphoria that follows "la aparición imprevista de las piezas que faltaban en el rompecabezas, con reordenamientos súbitos en los que uno alcanza a ver lo que verdaderamente había en la historia, lo que no sabía antes de empezar" (the unexpected appearance of those pieces that were missing from the jigsaw puzzle, with sudden reorderings that allow you to see what was really there in the story, what you didn't know before you began).<sup>23</sup> For the writer, Martínez suggests, the relationship he draws between narrative and rationality may not seem so strange: it stems from viewing each work "como un organismo con leyes íntimas que se pone en marcha y que el transcurso de la lectura (de la escritura) permite conocer" (like an organism operating according to its own secret laws, which are discoverable in the course of reading [or of writing]).<sup>24</sup> While this knowledge may take many different forms, it always represents a revelation, as much for the writer as for the reader.

Martínez's conception of literary composition as a form of puzzle-solving resonates strongly with the understanding of literary evolution developed by the Russian Formalists. In articles and interviews Martínez often dissociates himself from Formalist approaches: they cannot, he maintains, provide an exhaustive account of literary innovation, as a significant proportion of experimentation is dedicated not to playing with new forms and techniques but to expressing new and different modes of subjectivity. As he writes,

No es solamente la cuestión de si sacamos o no la letra *E* para hacer experimentos en la literatura. La cuestión es que hay una cantidad de experimentos posibles que tienen que ver con la manera en que la gente reflexiona sobre problemas humanos que son diferentes en cada época.<sup>25</sup>

Literary experimentation is not just about the issue of whether we omit the letter *E* or not. The issue is that a great number of experiments are possible that are really about how people reflect on human problems, which are different from era to era.

These human problems, he maintains, cannot be reduced to forms of textual manipulation, which seem nothing more than pyrotechnics in comparison.<sup>26</sup> Martínez clearly distances himself here from the work of writers such as Raymond Roussel, Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and others associated with the Oulipo group, who applied strict formal constraints to their literary compositions and might be thought of as precursors in some ways to Martínez's own translation of mathematical forms and concerns into literature. Perec's novel *La disparition* (1969) is composed without a single use of the letter "e," while in his *Les revenentes* (1972), "e" is the only vowel used throughout.

The rather narrow definition Martínez applies here to Formalism should not blind us, however, to some significant overlaps between his conceptions of innovation and evolution in literature and those of Formalist literary-critical approaches. For Viktor Shklovsky, as for a number of the Russian Formalist critics, the crucial quality of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) in literature is often generated through puzzles and riddles, a play with forms and structures that estranges the reader from the content. As René Wellek explains, according to Shklovsky's approach,

Art is putting up hurdles, it is like a game of patience or a jigsaw puzzle. Frame stories, such as *The Arabian Nights* with their constant delays and disappointments, adventure and mystery stories, detective novels with their surprises and riddles serve as examples.<sup>27</sup>

Martínez's suggestion that art also presents itself as a puzzle for the *writer* to solve, not just the reader, is closely aligned with Formalist views on the creative act as an act of discovery and assimilation, here articulated by Northrop Frye:

It is hardly possible to accept a critical view which confuses the original with the aboriginal, and imagines that a “creative” poet sits down with a pencil and some blank paper and eventually produces a new poem in a special act of creation *ex nihilo*. Human beings do not create in that way. *Just as a new scientific discovery manifests something that was already latent in the order of nature, and at the same time is logically related to the total structure of the existing science*, so the new poem manifests something that was already latent in the order of words. Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions, of what you will for its *content*; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels.<sup>28</sup>

Of particular note here is that Frye, like Martínez, constructs an analogy between scientific and literary discovery, suggesting that both arise out of an existing structure and are related to existing forms. Martínez’s understanding of literary evolution as a dialectical process means that innovation can only really take place in dialogue with the canon, not in a wildcat stroke of inspired genius. Just as the scientist must measure his new findings against those of previous studies, so the writer must carve out his original work with regard to literary tradition, which is not stultifying, but on the contrary contains an inexhaustible source of ideas and forms that have not yet been fully developed and can be redeployed for new ends. Indeed, this process is vital to ensure originality rather than mere novelty or a naïve reinvention of the wheel. Originality cannot be conceived without reference to the tradition from which it emerges and that it aims to renovate:

*Originalidad*: entendida no como mera novedad, sino como aquello que lucha por abrirse paso entre la marea de lugares comunes, de lo ya dicho, de lo que alguna vez fue expresivo y ahora sólo es retórica. La originalidad, en este sentido, debe

tener en cuenta necesariamente a la tradición como medida y desafío.<sup>29</sup>

*Originality*: understood not as mere novelty, but as that which fights its way through the tide of commonplaces, of the already-said, of that which was once meaningful and is now mere rhetoric. Originality, in this sense, must of necessity take tradition into account as a measure and a challenge.

Martínez finds this approach to be common to literature and scientific thought, both of which require us to “luchar con lo anterior y tratar de crear nuevos paradigmas que supriman pero a la vez incluyan desde una nueva altura lo ya hecho” (battle with what has gone before and try to create new paradigms that eradicate it but also include it as part of a new, higher position).<sup>30</sup> This conception also reinforces Martínez’s superimposition of reading or deciphering, on the one hand, and writing or creating, on the other: as writing involves writing with or against the canon, writing is also, inescapably, an act of reading.

There is also a strong correlation between Martínez’s sense here of how certain forms and ideas can lose their critical edge and become exhausted, before being recombined in new ways and for new purposes, and the Formalist understanding of processes of automatization and refunctioning in literary evolution.<sup>31</sup> The notion of originality Martínez articulates resembles the one developed by Frye in his discussion of painting. Frye argues that originality is as much a flight *towards* convention as it is away from it:

By breaking with the Barbizon school, Manet discovered a deeper affinity with Goya and Velasquez; by breaking with the impressionists, Cézanne discovered a deeper affinity with Chardin and Masaccio. The possession of originality cannot make an artist unconventional; it drives him further into convention, obeying the law of the art itself, which seeks constantly to reshape itself from its own depths.<sup>32</sup>

Equating literary evolution with dialectical rationalism also means that this dialogue with tradition is always a struggle, never a straightforward line of influence from one writer or generation to another, but one that is stimulated by contradiction and looping back to previous forms. This conception of literary evolution is very similar to the discontinuous process observed by the Formalists. As Yury Tynyanov states,

When people talk about “literary tradition” or “succession” [...] they usually imagine a kind of straight line joining a younger representative of a given literary branch with an older one. As it happens, things are much more complex than that. It is not a matter of continuing on a straight line, but rather one of setting out and pushing off from a given point – a struggle [...]. Each instance of literary succession is first and foremost a struggle involving a destruction of the old unity and a new construction out of the old elements.<sup>33</sup>

*La mujer del maestro* illuminates the extent to which writing is always *writing against*; positing literary succession as a dialectical process and a problem-solving activity allows Martínez to demonstrate that newness does and will always emerge through antithesis and assimilation. Significantly, the much-vaunted original composition that is Jordán’s novel remains a tantalizing absence in *La mujer del maestro* that cannot fully be brought into being, while it is the younger protagonist’s reflexive treatment of the struggle for innovation that becomes the dominant theme of the novel we read. The contradiction that fuels creativity may be a noble battle with the Greats of literary tradition or – as here – petty feuds with fellow authors sparked by sexual jealousy and revenge. Whatever motivates the writer to join that battle (and Frye reminds us that “There is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and good man, or even a tolerable human being”<sup>34</sup>), it is clear that literary tradition remains, for Martínez, the fount and measure of great innovation, not a constraint upon it. His work also suggests that notions of creativity and progress borrowed from Hegelian dialecticalism and the evolution of scientific thought may shed light on the perceived crisis



of artistic innovation in our era, as well as on possible ways through that apparent impasse.

## NON-LINEARITY, TOPOLOGY, TURBULENCE, AND OTHER (FORMALIST) MODELS OF LITERARY RENEWAL / PIGLIA

Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to a man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism.  
—Viktor Shklovsky<sup>35</sup>

If Martínez's *La mujer del maestro* imagines the anachronistic thrusting of Shelley's Romantic hero, Prometheus, into a contemporary world that is deeply skeptical of heroism and the possibility of genuine transformation, Piglia's *Respiración artificial* invokes Romantic figures and discourses to mark a similar series of displacements and divergences. The young writer Emilio Renzi publishes a novel based on the more sordid and scandalous episodes of his family history; this prompts a letter from his uncle, Marcelo Maggi, who has been absent for many years. The two strike up an epistolary relationship, through which Renzi learns of Maggi's efforts to reconstruct the history of the grandfather of his father-in-law, Enrique Ossorio, who was exiled from Argentina during the nineteenth-century dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas. The novel we read includes a number of letters, written by characters in the present about the past, and from the past about the future (which turns out to be the novel's present): this intersecting of temporalities allows Piglia to comment on the persistent presence in the late twentieth century of certain founding myths and figures in national history. More than simply establishing an allegorical relationship between the military regime in power when the novel was published (1980) and the earlier Rosas dictatorship, Piglia's novel returns to the utopian and revolutionary politics of Romanticism in Argentina, which shaped the newly independent nation,

and asks what may be salvaged for the present from that turbulent period of visionary ideals and bloody political rivalry.

For both Martínez and Piglia, the anachronistic return to Romantic motifs and ideas becomes a way of posing the question of what modes of utopian thought might be possible today, in spite of our postmodern sense of endings and the ruinous collusion of language and power, or after the chillingly rational basis on which the twentieth century carried out its genocides. If Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is, as the exiled Polish philosopher Tardewski in *Respiración artificial* comes to believe, "la culminación del racionalismo europeo" (the culmination of European rationalism),<sup>36</sup> is it possible to resurrect philosophy as an ethical enterprise? Is social and cultural innovation destined to fail in an era in which cynicism and parody seem to have infiltrated every aspect of experience?

Against the spirit of the times, in which "está de moda ser escéptico y desconfiar de la historia" (it is fashionable to be skeptical and to mistrust history), Piglia's Marcelo Maggi, the absent correspondent of *Respiración artificial*, is – as Piglia himself describes him – "un pensador inactual, está a contramano del nihilismo deliberado que circula actualmente" (an un-contemporary thinker, swimming against the current-day tide of conscious nihilism).<sup>37</sup> *Respiración artificial* calls urgently for an historical approach to understanding the novel's present, Argentina under military dictatorship; Piglia's particular synthesis of Romantic themes and Formalist theories is wrought with the aim of constructing precisely such a perspective. As we will see, "history" in this sense does not refer to a single narrative of fixed meaning; neither is it a chronological exercise. Piglia's historical approach is far from linear in its understanding of causality, dealing instead with conflictive temporalities, ruptures, unresolved tensions, and unexpected congruities. Anti-institutional in its focus on marginalized figures and currents, it is often vigorously anti-historicist in its pursuit of genealogies that transcend conventional models of influence and in its championing of anachronism as a key to understanding the present. In the discussion below, I bring Piglia's approach into dialogue with Formalist thought on the evolution of literary history and also with Michel Serres's appropriation of the physics of chaotic systems in his explorations of the multitemporality of history. These

approaches share a vision of the past as a storehouse of dissensions and alliances that can be endlessly revisited, renewed, and resignified to create new avenues for the present. This, as *Respiración artificial* suggests, is the key to both political and literary renewal.

## The “real story” of *Respiración artificial*

It has become common for critics writing on *Respiración artificial* to claim that a principal function of the narrative is to hide the “real story” of Maggi’s suspicious disappearance in late-1970s Argentina and simultaneously to draw attention to that covering-up. Stefanie Massman, for example, suggests that narration in the novel “es utilizada para ocultar más que para mostrar” (is used more to hide than to reveal),<sup>38</sup> and Mirta Antonelli is one of many critics for whom Tardewski’s citation of Wittgenstein towards the end of the novel – “Sobre aquello de lo que no se puede hablar, lo mejor es callar” (on that which cannot be spoken about, it is better to remain silent)<sup>39</sup> – is an oblique but obvious reference to what cannot be spoken about in 1976: the violence carried out in the name of the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*.<sup>40</sup> These readings are prompted by the apparently dubious relevance of the literary and philosophical discussions in the second half of the novel to its ostensible plot, namely Renzi’s correspondence with his uncle Maggi and Maggi’s sudden disappearance. Rita Gnutzmann, like many other critics, observes a “clara oposición” (clear opposition) between the two parts of the novel, with history dominating the first and literature the second.<sup>41</sup> In his perspicacious reading of the novel, Idelber Avelar argues, against the prevailing critical consensus, that the apparently superfluous second part is not accidental to the story at all but may even be viewed as the “real” story.<sup>42</sup> However, in identifying the theme of this story as the limitations of narration, he ends up falling back into a position that is not so far removed from that of the dominant critical hypothesis he is at pains to challenge, that of “un relato-velo-para-despistar-censores” (story-as-smokescreen-to-confuse-the-censors):<sup>43</sup> he is left asserting, in a similar manner to other critics, that “*Respiración artificial* es el prólogo al texto jamás escrito. La verdadera

historia no se ha narrado" (*Artificial Respiration* is the prologue to a text that is never written. The real story has not been told).<sup>44</sup>

The novel does, of course, lend some credence to these conclusions, perhaps most clearly when Tardewski observes to Renzi that if they have been talking all night it was to avoid speaking about Maggi because there was nothing about him that could be said. But if the characters perceive the conversation to be incidental and irrelevant to their situation, the role their discussion actually plays in Piglia's novel is neither of these. Underlying the critical accounts I have cited here is a struggle to reconcile form with content in a novel that demands to be read alongside the momentous events of Argentine politics in the late 1970s, but that seems deliberately to divert the reader's attention onto something else. In the reading of the novel that follows, I will suggest that, far from displacing or covering-up the "real" story of Maggi's disappearance, it would be more accurate to consider the discussions of literary form and evolution as the central story of *Respiración artificial*, as a novel that is primarily and reflexively concerned with its own mode of enunciation. This will lead to a rather different conclusion concerning the novel's approach to literary creativity and evolution. If, in Avelar's reading, the novel's aim is to "Narrar el fracaso, narrar la imposibilidad de escribir" (narrate failure, narrate the impossibility of writing),<sup>45</sup> I wish to emphasize instead its commitment to the resourcefulness and the enduring inventiveness of literature. Where Santiago Colás argues that the novel's experimentation with form expresses the "damage" that has been done by the military regime, both to the narrating subject and to representation itself,<sup>46</sup> I will suggest that its formal fragmentation also, and more insistently, explores the conditions of possibility for a renewed vision.

My argument takes inspiration from Russian Formalist approaches to literary criticism, which are explicitly referenced within the narrative of Piglia's novel and for which Piglia has professed an interest and admiration in several interviews. *Respiración artificial* appropriates Romantic tropes of exile, utopia, and alienation to elucidate a Formalist understanding of artistic expression and literary change; in doing so, it demonstrates that displacement and anachronism are *motors* for narrative creativity, not indicators of its impossibility. Studying the novel through the lens of Formalism not only

responds to some of the difficulties raised in critical work on the novel but also, as I will show, lays the groundwork for an understanding of Piglia's use of tropes from science and technology to explore the nature of creativity in literature, placing *Respiración artificial* into a much closer relationship than has often been perceived with the concerns of Piglia's later novels and short stories.

## Exile, utopia and the epistolary novel: Formalist *ostranenie* and the “mirada histórica”

*Respiración artificial* constructs a web of significations to link together multiple forms of temporal and spatial displacement. The first node in this network is the epistolary genre. Among the many texts cited or imagined in the novel is a sequence of letters between Marcelo Maggi and his nephew Renzi, the young writer who has just published a novel inspired by the more sordid and scandalous episodes of his family history. Maggi, a historian, is involved in a narrative project of his own: the reconstruction of the story of Enrique Ossorio, his father-in-law's grandfather, who was a key figure in the nineteenth-century regime of Juan Manuel Rosas before being exiled as a traitor. In a trunk full of papers dating from the year 1850, Maggi finds sketches for a novel Ossorio had planned to write, with the title *1979*. Although the novel is set in the past (1837–38), the protagonist receives letters from the future (1979), allowing him to imagine an Argentina that has not yet come into being.

In his diary, Ossorio reflects on the form he has chosen for his novel and its appropriateness for the theme of utopia, the second figure in Piglia's series of displacements and anachronisms:

Entonces un relato epistolar. ¿Por qué ese género anacrónico? Porque la utopía ya de por sí es una forma literaria que pertenece al pasado. Para nosotros, hombres del siglo XIX, se trata de una especie arcaica, como es arcaica la novela epistolar.<sup>47</sup>

An epistolary narrative, then. Why that anachronistic genre? Because utopia is itself, already, a literary form that belongs to the past. For us nineteenth-century men, it is an archaic form, just like the epistolary novel.

Correspondence, Ossorio goes on to suggest, is itself a utopian form of conversation “porque anula el presente y hace del futuro el único lugar posible del diálogo” (because it deletes the present and makes the future the only possible locus in which dialogue can take place).<sup>48</sup> To utopia and the epistolary genre, Piglia adds a third term: exile. “¿Qué es el exilio sino una situación que nos obliga a sustituir con palabras escritas la relación entre los amigos más queridos, que están lejos, ausentes, diseminados cada uno en lugares y ciudades distintas?” (what is exile if not a situation in which we are obliged to substitute with written words our relationship with our dearest friends, who are far away, absent, flung far and wide in different cities and other places?).<sup>49</sup>

The epistolary novel was already an archaic form in the nineteenth century, looking back to a time that did not question “la pura verdad de las palabras escritas” (the pure truth of written words).<sup>50</sup> Equally archaic, in the context of the late twentieth century, are the utopian visions of liberty and progress that underpinned the nationalist discourses of Argentine Romanticism. And yet, their need has never been felt as much as in the present. An anonymous Argentine exile writes, in the 1970s, “A veces (no es joda) pienso que somos la generación del ’37. Perdidos en la diáspora. ¿Quién de nosotros escribirá el *Facundo*?” (sometimes, I’m not kidding, I think we are the Generation of 1837. Lost in the diaspora. Which of us will write *Facundo*?).<sup>51</sup> *Respiración artificial* asks, in a similar way, what kind of utopian thought might be still possible, what projects of national (re)founding might be imagined, in a contemporary era characterized by violence and disillusion, and after the twentieth century’s experiences of political utopianism. A significant section of the second part of *Respiración artificial* addresses fascism as the terrible culmination of European rationalism, and literature as its accomplice in forging and justifying an exclusionary politics, a relationship that would seem to destroy the ethical basis of all philosophical and literary projects. The Romantic imbrication of literary praxis and emancipatory

politics in Argentina – epitomized by the Generation of 1837 – now appears to be irrevocably sundered.

However, we must read *Respiración artificial*, not simply as an articulation of this crisis, but as a path through it. In Ossorio's suicide note, with which Maggi decides to start his story, a line of direct exhortation to his readers is rendered in a bold font for particular emphasis: “**No se desapasionen porque la pasión es el único vínculo que tenemos con la verdad**” (do not lose your passion because passion is the only link we have with reality).<sup>52</sup> Piglia's novel, far from simply lamenting the lapse of utopianism into disillusion, or experience into parody, is full of characters in pursuit of their passions; with a persistence that matches theirs, *Respiración artificial* searches for ways to represent the *almost* unrepresentable, taking inspiration here from Kafka, who knew better than anyone that “los escritores verdaderamente grandes son aquellos que enfrentan siempre la imposibilidad *casi* absoluta de escribir” (truly great writers are those who always confront the *almost* total impossibility of writing).<sup>53</sup>

Piglia's crucial rhetorical operation is to take the displacements and anachronisms produced by the presence of Romantic tropes and figures in the novel, and to demonstrate – in accordance with Formalist approaches – that it is precisely these decontextualizing and recontextualizing exercises that may provide ways through a political or cultural impasse. In Piglia's conception, thinking historically makes it possible to start to understand the present, through defamiliarizing it:

Para el Profesor estaba claro que sólo la historia hacía posible esa *ostranenie* de la que hablábamos hace un rato. ¿Cómo podríamos soportar el presente, el horror del presente, me dijo la última noche el Profesor, si no supiéramos que se trata de un presente histórico?<sup>54</sup>

For the Professor it was clear that only history made possible that *ostranenie* we were talking about a while ago. How could we bear the present, the horror of the present, the Professor said to

me that last night, if we didn't know that we are dealing with a historical present?

Piglia borrows the Formalist term *ostranenie* (estrangement, defamiliarization) to express a distance from the present that is indispensable to a greater understanding of it, or even just to the possibility of surviving it. He reclaims the anachronisms and displacements of exile, utopia, and social/cultural marginalization as ideal preconditions for the *ostranenie* that was so central to Formalist and Brechtian approaches. There is repeated reference in the novel to a kind of “mirada histórica” (historical gaze) that is deliberately dislocated from the heat and immediacy of experience in order to better understand the broader patterns of history. This is the approach advocated by Tardewski, and it brings him into line with the Senator's search for continuities in Argentine history. As Tardewski states,

Hay que evitar la introspección, les recomiendo a mis jóvenes alumnos, y les enseño lo que he denominado *la mirada histórica*. Somos una hoja que boya en ese río y hay que saber mirar lo que viene como si ya hubiera pasado.<sup>55</sup>

You need to avoid introspection, I tell my young students, and I teach them what I've called the *historical gaze*. We are a leaf floating in that river and we need to know how to see what is coming as if it had already happened.

Understanding the present as a “historical present” in this way is only possible for those characters who take a distanced perspective. Tardewski refers to

esa forma de mirar afuera, a distancia, en otro lugar y poder así ver la realidad más allá del velo de los hábitos, de las costumbres. Paradójicamente es al mismo tiempo la mirada del turista, pero también, en última instancia, la mirada del filósofo.<sup>56</sup>



that manner of looking outwards, from a distance, in another place, and in that way to be able to see reality beyond the habits and customs that veil it. Paradoxically it is at the same time the gaze of the tourist, but also, in the last instance, the gaze of the philosopher.

In Piglia's fiction more broadly, it is often the outsider, the foreigner who can barely speak the language of his host country, or the madman, who is most capable of lucid thought and clear perception.

The multiple digressions, texts-within-texts, postponements, truncations, and recommencements of *Respiración artificial* are not simply divergences from (or concealments of) the "real story": they subject the novel's events to the oblique, distanced perspective of the "mirada histórica" as defined in the narrative. For Shklovsky, art is the vision that results from "deautomatized perception," and it seeks to defamiliarize its material for the viewer/reader by impeding perception and drawing attention to unusual forms and devices.<sup>57</sup> What is true in our reading of literature is true in our reading of the political present: it is an attention to the *form* of narrative that enables us to see crucial continuities and ruptures that transcend the immediate clamour of content. It is also experimentation with form that permits the refreshing of vision and the creation of new experience. Anachronism and displacement are not expressions of failure in the narrative but the source of new perceptions. To read the novel's epistolary structure (as many critics have done) as evidence of the impossibility of narrating experience, as a series of monologues rather than encounters between characters,<sup>58</sup> is to fail to grasp the positive re-evaluation of this separation in time and space that stems from Piglia's Formalist understanding of the power of *ostranenie* to renew perception.

## A Formalist reading of Argentine literature

Piglia's engagement with the approaches adopted by Shklovsky, Tynyanov, and other Formalists is made explicit in *Respiración artificial* and in a number of interviews.<sup>59</sup> For Piglia, Tynyanov's approaches have held – and continue

to hold – supreme relevance for debates on literary criticism. “Tinianov es clave” (Tynyanov is key), he claims; his work on literary evolution is nothing less than “el *Discurso del método de la crítica literaria*” (the *Discourse and Method* of literary criticism).<sup>60</sup> Piglia argues that Tynyanov’s attempts to understand literature as form, as the history of forms, but also to grasp the relationship between these forms and the non-verbal dimensions of the social, remain highly significant for a series of critical debates and theories, including structuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism, and contemporary discussions on the relationship between politics and literature.<sup>61</sup>

The discussions on Argentine literature in the second half of the novel are thoroughly underpinned by a Formalist understanding of literary evolution as “*un efecto de la lucha de poéticas*” (the product of a battle between opposing poetics):<sup>62</sup> not an organic, natural progression in which each generation bears the influence of the previous generation and reworks this into something new, but a much more complex and conflictual series of lateral moves, throwbacks, literary parricide and unsanctioned alliances, with continuities more likely to be evident in the work of disowned orphans and bastard offspring than of legal inheritors. It is this understanding that allows Piglia’s characters to make some distinctly polemical assertions about literary influence: to claim, for example, that narratives written by the highly erudite and cosmopolitan Borges are really sequels to the nineteenth-century nationalist epic *Martín Fierro* in their use of a popular lexicon and the rhythms of oral speech,<sup>63</sup> or – with a brazen disrespect for literary chronology – to posit Arlt as a more modern writer than Borges.<sup>64</sup> Piglia/Renzi’s reading of Borges is a recognizably Formalist one, focussed on the exhaustion of particular genres, signalled for the Formalists by parody, and the “refunctioning” of others.<sup>65</sup>

The discussions of literary history and criticism in *Respiración artificial*, devising genealogies and points of rupture between prominent figures such as Lugones, Arlt, and Borges, evidently become a way of approaching national history and the political context. Questions of how the literary establishment deals with linguistic and cultural difference, what is closed off and excluded from the national canon and what is included and given regulatory power over the rest: these cannot fail to resonate with a broader politics of the authoritarian defence of national purity against intruders of a different

ideological persuasion and the exclusion of unwanted diversity of political views. Indeed, Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* makes the association abundantly clear, referring to the shared enterprise between Lugones the father (poet) and Lugones the son (chief of police under the Urriburu regime and widely supposed to have been the first to introduce the cattleprod as a method of torture):

El comisario Lugones dirigió la inteligencia del Estado y realizó y llevó a su culminación la obra de su padre y fue su albacea y el encargado de prologar todas las composiciones poéticas y literarias del poeta, avanzó y profundizó en el espíritu nacional y del mismo modo que su padre escribió la *Oda a los ganados y las mieses*, él usó un instrumento de nuestra ganadería para mejorar el control del Estado sobre los rebeldes y los extranjeros.<sup>66</sup>

Superintendent Lugones headed up state intelligence and he put into practice his father's work and brought it to fulfillment, and he was his executor and the one in charge of writing prefaces to all the poet's literary compositions, he progressed and went deeper into the national spirit and, in the same way that his father wrote *Ode to the Cattle and the Grain*, he used an instrument from cattle-ranching to heighten state control over rebels and foreigners.

Piglia reverses here the conventional relationship of priority established between literature and history by sociological criticism, according to which shifts in literary form may be explained according to "external" social changes. He suggests instead that it is literary form (the purity to which Lugones the father aspired) that shaped social change (the intolerance of political difference that motivated Lugones the son).

A Formalist emphasis on the evolution of literary style as an effect of an *internal* dialectic within Argentine literature allows Piglia to avoid producing a simplistic social reading of these texts, according to which writers might be understood as reflecting or reacting against dominant ideas in society

on nationhood, immigration, or modernization. Renzi's analysis does not centre principally on how writers have engaged with the "external" events of Argentine politics but how their texts can be understood as a series of readings of other texts, often revealing surprising alliances or divergences that militate against established narratives of Argentine literary history. This focus alone should warn us against the folly of reading *Respiración artificial* as a "dictatorship novel" with a primarily external referent in the form of military violence and persecution. Instead, I would contend, the text is much more accurately understood as a conscious intervention in another battleground – Argentine literature – and a reflexive exploration of the nature of literary evolution.

It is the Formalist understanding of literary evolution as a series of truncations and oblique connections that links the discussions of the second half of the novel to the ostensible plot concerning the relationship between Renzi and Maggi and the literary-historical pursuits of both. Roberto Echavarren is among a number of critics who have signalled the significance of the disruption to father-son relationships in *Respiración artificial*. These are replaced by relationships such as those of uncle/nephew (Maggi-Renzi), grandfather/grandson (Enrique Ossorio-Luciano Ossorio) and father-in-law/son-in-law (Luciano Ossorio-Maggi), relationships that – as Echavarren observes – follow an oblique family line, skip a generation or are founded on association rather than bloodlines.<sup>67</sup> For Echavarren, the two halves of the novel contrast with each other: the first recounts an investigation, the second abandons it; the first is structured around letters, the second, dialogue; the first tells a fictitious story, the second explores real history;<sup>68</sup> the first is concerned with "literariedad" (literariness) and the second with "no literariedad" (non-literariness).<sup>69</sup> Although he notes a shared interest in both halves in "una preocupación con la tradición literaria y su capacidad de iluminar un proceso histórico" (a concern with literary tradition and its capacity to illuminate a historical process),<sup>70</sup> this vital link remains undeveloped in his reading of the text. This may be because he does not relate the lateral and dislocated family lines he observes to a statement made within the text of *Respiración artificial* itself on this oblique form of lineage as one that best demonstrates the workings of literary influence: "Alguien, un crítico ruso, el

crítico ruso Iuri Tinianov, afirma que la literatura evoluciona de tío a sobrino (y no de padres a hijos)” (someone, a Russian critic, the Russian critic Jury Tynyanov, asserts that literature evolves from uncle to nephew, and not from parents to children).<sup>71</sup> It was Shklovsky, in fact – although similar phrases are to be found in a number of Formalist essays – who in an oft-quoted formulation declared that in the liquidation of one literary school by another, the inheritance is passed down, not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew.<sup>72</sup>

The dramatic reversals in familial rifts and allegiances that Renzi writes about in his novel (the story of his uncle and his cabaret-dancer lover) mirror a similar story on the national level of collusion, betrayal, exploitation, and exile (Rosas and Ossorio). Both Maggi’s family drama and Ossorio’s political career are marked by radical change and reversals of fortune: the sudden ascendancy to power and the equally swift exile or imprisonment of those falling out of favour, and momentary or unexpected allegiances and betrayals. That these themes – family resemblances, the truncation of certain lines of influence and the reappropriation of alternative ones, disinheritance, literary-critical disputes – are also the central motifs of the novel’s discussions of Argentine literature allows us to reverse the usual approach taken in analyzing the novel. It is not the “real” story that is postponed or concealed by *Respiración artificial*’s experiments with narrative form; it is those experiments with form that open up possible readings of the novel within its precise social context. Many of the novel’s characters are forced to forge relationships with uncles or grandfathers because their biological fathers came to an early violent end or were exiled. The profound sense of orphanhood, fractured communities, and a crisis of succession that were the intellectual legacy of the Argentine dictatorship becomes an extreme case of the need for the kind of literary renovation theorized by the Formalists. The oblique passage of literary inheritance from uncle to son therefore becomes the key to the survival of a whole generation of intellectuals and artists persecuted by the military regime. Formalist theory maintains that where one artistic line is exhausted or truncated, another will emerge, moving in from the margins, forging new alliances or revitalizing forms from the past: a message of

hope and survival in the context of the decimation of Argentina's literary and intellectual community through imprisonment, death, and exile.

The conscious reworking of filiations and genealogies to construct new (and often surprising) lines of descent or dissent has been a dominant theme in contemporary Argentine literature and literary criticism. Indeed, Edgardo Berg observes that “el motivo de linaje ocupa un lugar central” (the lineage motif occupies a central place) throughout the history of Argentine literature, in which “La búsqueda y construcción de genealogías o filiaciones de procedencia arman cierta cadena de textos” (whole series of texts are assembled from the search for, and construction of, genealogies and lines of descent).<sup>73</sup> Marta Morello-Frosch finds this tendency to be much heightened in the work of contemporary writers, who have revisited and revised the literary history of the nation as part of their own textual projects, giving rise to “a radically original reading of the dialectics of a national culture.” As she argues, with clear relevance for the argument I am pursuing in relation to *Respiración artificial*,

This confrontation and rapprochement of seemingly estranged literary programs form the basis of a recent literary consciousness in Argentina. Through these strategies of reappraisal, the continuity of national literary heritage is assured especially at a time when cultural process is threatened by state intervention or historical stagnation.<sup>74</sup>

The pursuit of anachronism in *Respiración artificial*, as well as providing a distanced historical perspective, therefore also acts in the manner described by the Formalists to renew literature by looping back to find alternative influences, to mix lineages and create complex literary genealogies. In his anachronistic choice of an epistolary form, Ossorio deliberately chooses not to read the writers of his own time but searches for inspiration “en libros pasados de moda” (in old-fashioned books).<sup>75</sup> His reading list contains a mixture of Enlightenment satirists and Romantic non-conformists; many of the works mentioned are epistolary works and/or utopian novels. Recycling material and forms from the past leads not to empty parody but to

renewal through the creative interplay between similarity and dissimilarity. Tardewski experiences this power when, quite by chance, he comes across a footnote in a critical edition of *Mein Kampf* that allows him to postulate a vision-changing encounter between Kafka and Hitler:

Al leer esa pequeña nota al pie se produjo una instantánea conexión, lo único parecido a eso que los científicos y los filósofos suelen experimentar, o al menos describir con alguna frecuencia y que llaman un *descubrimiento*: la inesperada asociación de dos hechos aislados, de dos ideas que, al unirse, producen algo nuevo.<sup>76</sup>

Reading that little footnote sparked off an instant connection, similar to that usually experienced by scientists and philosophers, or at least that which they often describe and that they call a *discovery*: the unexpected association of two isolated events, of two ideas that, in coming together, produce something new.

The sense of both history and literature as archives full of intriguing footnotes and marginalia simply waiting to be (re)discovered, the sense of the infinite and meaningful trajectories that just one individual might construct as he moves from one dusty edition to another, or of the impact such chance connections might have on our whole understanding of the events of history: this is the potential Piglia sees in the oblique uses of the past that underpin Formalist notions of literary creativity and evolution.

## A Formalist reading of Argentine history

In his first letter to Renzi, Maggi tells him that “La historia es el único lugar donde consigo aliviarme de esta pesadilla de la que trato de despertar” (history is the only place where I am able to escape from that nightmare from which I am trying to awake).<sup>77</sup> The citation is often referenced by critics of the novel to support a reading of the novel as a staged covering-up of the real

story. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus states that *history* is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake; Maggi's suggestion that history provides the only *refuge* therefore places the nightmare firmly in the present. The novel as a whole, then, in focussing on the historical person of Ossorio, might be read as taking refuge in history in order to escape from the nightmare of present Argentine reality, as that which exceeds the possibility of narration. Piglia himself concurs in part with this interpretation but suggests a very different conclusion:

la pesadilla, sin duda, está en el presente, en 1976. Y la historia es el lugar en el que se ve que las cosas pueden cambiar y transformarse. En momentos en que parece que nada cambia, que todo está clausurado y la pesadilla del presente parece eterna, la historia, dice Maggi, prueba que hubo otras situaciones iguales, clausuradas, en las que se terminó por encontrar una salida.<sup>78</sup>

the nightmare, of course, is in the present, in 1976. And history is the place where we can see that things can change and transform themselves. At moments when it seems that nothing changes, that everything is closed off and the nightmare of the present stretches out into eternity, history, says Maggi, proves that there were other situations the same, closed off, in which a way out was eventually found.

This is a crucial articulation of the visionary (textual) politics of *Respiración artificial*. History is not a "refuge" in the sense that it allows us respite or an escape from the present. It is a source of hope in the form of alternative visions that would revitalize the present and open up the possibility of thinking about the future at a time when utopian projects have ground to a halt and even simple survival is far from guaranteed. The Rosas regime is not primarily brought into *Respiración artificial* as an allegory for a more recent dictatorship, in order to circumvent censorship by speaking more obliquely about the experience of oppression and exile; rather, the novel enacts a conscious return in time to another crisis in history that shares



some characteristics with the present one, in order to mine it for alternative directions and to rescue the present from stagnation. There is more than an echo here of the Formalist notion of regeneration through a return to “submerged” lines.<sup>79</sup> Oddly enough, perhaps, it is in history that we can see the possibility of change and transformation, in contrast to the impasse in which the present finds itself. As Piglia states, “la historia es la proliferación retrospectiva de los mundos posibles” (history is the retrospective proliferation of possible worlds).<sup>80</sup> Art has a unique role to play in reviving those possible worlds and creating new experiences. As Shklovsky claims, “Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to a man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism.”<sup>81</sup>

What are the effects of using the tools of (Formalist) literary criticism to analyze the events of history, as the novel seems to exhort us to do? Firstly, it encourages a focus on the *forms* that underlie political discourse – unexpected continuities that connect utopian nationalist projects to the dystopian police state, for example – rather than the immediate content. Political power, Piglia insists, is exercised through the act of narration;<sup>82</sup> he calls us not to focus solely on the content of the state’s fictions but their form. To uncover this, it is perhaps literature that provides us with “los instrumentos y los modos de captar la forma en que se construyen y actúan las narraciones que vienen del poder” (tools and modes of capturing the form in which narratives of power are constructed and operate).<sup>83</sup>

Secondly, the vision of history constructed becomes an essentially anti-Romantic one in its relative disregard for the agency of individual human actors. Piglia’s characters are engaged instead in a sustained quest to discover the immanent laws that transcend history and link together a diversity of events (and texts). The Senator feels near to discovering

una línea de continuidad, una especie de voz que viene desde la Colonia y el que la escuche, ése, el que la escuche y la descifre, podrá convertir este caos en un cristal traslúcido. Por otro lado hay algo que he comprendido: *eso*, digamos: la línea de continuidad, la razón que explica este desorden que tiene más de cien años [...].<sup>84</sup>

a line of continuity, a kind of voice that comes from colonial times and whoever listens to it, yes, he who listens to it and deciphers it, may transform this chaos into a translucent crystal. On the other hand there is something I have understood: *that*, shall we say: the line of continuity, the reason that explains this disorder that has lasted more than a hundred years [...].

To apply Formalist logic to history in this way is to remove the individual motivation from particular episodes and to search for immanent patterns that might account for the ascendancy of particular forms and functions in the dialectical struggle that underlies history as well as literature. In the Senator's vision, history becomes a "gran máquina poliédrica" (great polyhedral machine) and a "fábrica de sentido" (factory of meaning);<sup>85</sup> only those able to remove themselves from the swings of fortune and the immediacy of personal experience may even glimpse something of its workings. Piglia constructs a vision of history that is not the cumulative sum of the works of great men, heroes or villains, but the turning of a vast machine that transcends the individual and that governs the repetition of forms within a series of cycles. This idea, as we will see in chapters to come, becomes central to the formal experiments of *Prisión perpetua* and *La ciudad ausente*.

## History and the science of chaos and turbulence

Piglia's Formalist approach to history in *Respiración artificial* bears some resemblance to Michel Serres's topological approach to time and history. Time, for Serres, is a crumpled handkerchief, pulling into proximity points that had seemed distant;<sup>86</sup> it does not flow in a linear fashion, but through "stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps."<sup>87</sup> Serres replaces "naïve," linear conceptions of history – too simplistic to account for "a formidable complexity, for the strongest multiplicities, for what we rightly call history"<sup>88</sup> – with a polytemporal model borrowed from the physics of chaotic systems, principally turbulence. The complex interaction in turbulent flows of multiple eddies at various scales eludes

simple, deterministic analysis. In a similar way, Serres insists that what we refer to as history combines different times, including “the irreversible, that of entropy, the fall towards disorder; that, on the other hand, which goes against the current, that of negentropy; the reversible, that of clocks, of the solar system, of our dating, that we have so long taken for that of history.”<sup>89</sup> It is this approach to history that allows Serres to place the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius “in the same neighborhood” as modern theories of turbulence, despite the distance that appears to separate them in time.<sup>90</sup> This non-linear understanding of historical relationships also, as we have seen, enables Piglia to construct unexpected genealogies that show little respect for chronological succession.

As we have seen, the Senator in *Respiración artificial* searches for “una línea de continuidad” (a line of continuity) that might convert the chaos and disorder of more than one hundred years of Argentine history into something more legible.<sup>91</sup> Serres claims to have glimpsed something similar beneath the apparent disorder of history, a “quasi-invariant of very great duration.”<sup>92</sup> There is a striking resemblance in the language of fluidity and crystallization used by both Piglia and Serres to express something of the complexity of historical time, which “passes and doesn’t pass;”<sup>93</sup> both writers have recourse to geological metaphors to describe this slower-moving constant. Serres imagines a tectonic plate that advances imperceptibly but causes drastic changes in the “tormented, complicated” visible landscape above.<sup>94</sup> The Senator pictures ice floes to express a very similar idea. As if he were a bird flying high, he sees:

abajo, en las planicies heladas, a la izquierda, casi sobre las últimas estribaciones montañosas, lejos del mundo, de su tumulto, lejos de su lúgubre claridad, hay grandes masas, grandes masas que parecen petrificadas pero que *sin embargo* se deslizan, se mueven, a pesar del reflujo, avanzan, crujen al deslizarse, como los grandes témpanos de hielo.<sup>95</sup>

below, in the frozen plains, to the left, towards the last foothills of the mountains, far from the world, from its tumult, far from

its lugubrious light, there are great masses, great masses that seem petrified but *nevertheless* glide, move, in spite of the ebbing tides, advance, creaking as they glide, like great ice floes.

The higher he flies, the more clearly visible those movements become, but they cannot be grasped from a single perspective. He hopes – knowing in advance that he will fail – somehow to express in words “la cualidad múltiple de esa Idea, de esa concepción que viene desde el fondo mismo de la historia, de esa voz [...] múltiple que viene del pasado y que es tan difícil de captar para un hombre que está solo” (the multiple nature of that Idea, of that conception that comes from the very depths of history, of that multiple voice that comes from the past and is so difficult for one man alone to capture).<sup>96</sup>

If history, in Serres’s vision, is “aleatory and stochastic,” arising from “background noise,” this does not mean that it is disordered, but that the relationship between cause and effect is not linear, and that confluences, systems, and orders emerge in the complex ways that have been described in theories of chaos and emergence. The task of history is “The recognition and description of these emergences.”<sup>97</sup> Crucially, history is not the imposition of order on a chaotic world but the emergence of order from within the chaos. The Senator knows how urgent it is that we learn how to perceive this kind of order, to understand what emerges from Argentine history as “a la vez único y múltiple” (at the same time unique and multiple) and to decipher those deeper movements that will shape the future.<sup>98</sup> As Steven Connor suggests, Serres’s preference for topological to linear time may be attributed to the fact that the latter is “founded on and sustained by violence [...] formed out of the monotonous rhythm of argument, contradiction and murder.”<sup>99</sup> This linear world of “endless conflicts, upheavals and usurpations” – Hegelian, as Connor notes – is very much the world bequeathed to the present by the nineteenth century in *Respiración artificial*, in which Piglia also observes that “los gentleman argentinos eran, sin saberlo, hegelianos” (the Argentine nobles were Hegelian without knowing it) in their eagerness to kill each other in the name of honour and power.<sup>100</sup> The illusion of breaking with the past leads only to stasis for Serres; instead, a topological approach to history leads to greater peace and the potential for creativity. In Connor’s words,

Innovation springs, not from attempting to separate oneself from history, but from maintaining the possibility of rereading historical continuities, of revisiting the uncompleted past and being revisited by it, with new mutations of understanding emerging as the result.<sup>101</sup>

If the (Hegelian) line that Piglia sees extending from history into the future is one of “Aseñatos, masacres, guerras fratricidas” (assassinations, massacres, fratricidal wars),<sup>102</sup> then revisiting the past, perceiving its continual foldings into the present and the future, may also allow new perspectives and alternative ideas to emerge.

## Formalism, testimonialism, and the utopian function of literature

At the risk of passing with too much haste over the abyss that divides chaos theory from Russian Formalism, the vision of history developed in Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* does, I think, permit the cautious suggestion of one or two points of conceptual affinity. Both methods look for the emergence of order and discernible change at a level far higher than that of the individual and aim to theorize the complex interactions between different systems. Eichenbaum, Shklovsky, and Tynyanov were among the Formalists who made the most serious attempt to understand the relationship between systemic change in literature and in other social or economic systems. If they rejected the sociological or biographical modes of literary criticism inherited from the nineteenth century, this was not because they considered social, political, or economic spheres to have no relevance for the evolution of literature but because they approached such relationships as complex and non-linear rather than ones of simple causality. It is in this spirit that Tynyanov denounced as “particularly fruitless” the “direct study of the author’s psychology and the construction of a causal ‘bridge’ from the author’s environment, daily life, and class to his works.”<sup>103</sup>

Piglia's choice of a Formalist framework, with its emphasis on the internal evolution of literary form, might seem extraordinary during the 1970s in Argentina, when the impact of political events on literary and artistic culture, and on the individual lives of writers and intellectuals, was so clearly in evidence. Piglia's interest in Formalism is filtered, as he himself explains, through Brecht's considerable influence on left-wing aesthetic production in Latin America during the 1960s. In the experience of the Soviet avant-garde, in Russian Formalism – and especially Tynyanov's critical oeuvre – and in Eisenstein's cinema, a generation of Latin American writers and artists found the potential for a relationship between left-wing ideology and artistic production that was not fettered to realism.<sup>104</sup> Tracing Piglia's acknowledged debt to Formalist approaches allows us to perceive more clearly the critique of testimonialism implicit in his work. In the prominence given to politics in Argentina of the 1970s and early 1980s, literature risks being reduced to the status of a historical document, a political manifesto or a vehicle for personal testimony; in this context, we might view Piglia as returning to the terms of another battle, waged by the Russian Formalists in the 1920s, to "rescue" literature from a similar fate of psychologism and to assert its autonomy from other spheres.

It would be difficult to overstate the radical difference between the distanced, external, historicizing perspective advocated by Piglia, on the one hand, and, on the other, the emphasis on the immediate, the experiential, and the personal in the testimonial narratives that gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. For Piglia, it is clearly the position of exile rather than direct experience that allows for a greater understanding of the present. In his writing on Ossorio, Maggi explains to Renzi that he tries to remain faithful to the facts but at the same time he wants to "hacer ver el carácter ejemplar de la vida de esa especie de Rimbaud que se alejó de las avenidas de la historia para mejor testimoniarla" (reveal the exemplary nature of the life of that Rimbaud-like figure who withdrew from the avenues of history, all the better to bear witness to it).<sup>105</sup> Renzi admires Maggi's own commitment to such rigorous thought, mistrusting the clichés and conditioned reflexes of immediate responses. As he insists, "Hay que pensar en contra de sí mismo y vivir en tercera persona" (one has to think against oneself and live in the third

person).<sup>106</sup> Indeed, *Respiración artificial* could be read as an exercise in thinking in the third person, with each narrative voice mediated through others in chains of dizzying length. Throughout the narrative, repeated phrases such as “dice Tardewski” (Tardewski says) and “me dijo la mujer” (the woman told me) build into extraordinarily precise formations such as “me dijo la mujer, cuenta Tardewski que le dijo Marconi” (the woman told me, Tardewski says that Marconi had told him).<sup>107</sup> The reductions, recyclings and redirections that result have nothing to do with the “truth” of immediacy and direct, first-person experience that govern the textuality of testimonialism.

In this sense, Piglia’s novel may be read as an intervention into an ongoing discussion with Rodolfo Walsh on the possible forms of political literature in a post-Auschwitz era. Both before and after Walsh’s death at the hands of the military in 1977, Piglia has paid sincere homage to his work, which represents for him “uno de los grandes momentos de la literatura argentina contemporánea” (one of the great moments in contemporary Argentine literature).<sup>108</sup> Piglia’s own literary project, however, in many ways presents a counterpoint to that of Walsh. In a famous interview published for the first time in 1970, Walsh outlines to Piglia his decision to reject fiction in favour of journalistic modes of investigation and denunciation, as “la denuncia traducida al arte de la novela se vuelve inofensiva, no molesta para nada, es decir, se sacraliza como arte” (denunciation translated into the art of the novel becomes inoffensive, it doesn’t upset anyone, that is to say, it takes on the sacred nature of art).<sup>109</sup> If the novel once played an important subversive role, it is now no longer operating in this way, although Walsh clearly leaves open the possibility that it might recover such a role: “tienen que existir muchas maneras de que vuelva a desempeñarlo” (there have to be many ways in which it could take it on again).<sup>110</sup>

Piglia takes up the challenge of finding just such a way. As Laura Demaría observes, if Walsh (according to Piglia’s analysis) takes up a line of Argentine literature that began with Sarmiento’s *Facundo* – in which fiction and politics appear antagonistic – then Piglia’s response is to take forward an alternative line, to continue the work of another literary forebear, Macedonio Fernández.<sup>111</sup> In Macedonio’s vision, fiction enters into a new relationship with politics. As “la antítesis de Sarmiento” (the antithesis of Sarmiento),

Macedonio overturns all his assumptions: as Piglia asserts, “Una política y ficción, no las enfrenta como dos prácticas irreductibles. La novela mantiene relaciones cifradas con las maquinaciones del poder, las reproduce, usa sus formas, construye su contrafigura utópica” (he unites politics and fiction, he doesn’t oppose them as if they were two irreducible practices. The novel maintains encoded links with the machinations of power, it reproduces them, uses their forms, constructs a utopian counterfigure to them).<sup>112</sup> In Piglia’s hands, we see something of the potential in fiction to mimic, distort, and reveal the *forms* of political power in this manner. In a characteristically reflexive move, the novel becomes, firstly, an exercise in Formalist-style critique in its attempt to uncover the forms and the broader dynamics that govern politics and history in Argentina, transcending individual events and articulations; and, secondly, a means of intervening in those spheres by constructing a “utopian counterfigure” to them.

Anachronism, displacement, defamiliarization, refunctioning: these may be the techniques by which literature continually renews itself according to Formalist analysis, but they are also, for Piglia, literature’s most effective tools of political intervention:

la literatura está siempre fuera de contexto y siempre es inactual; dice lo que no es, lo que ha sido borrado; trabaja con lo que está por venir. Funciona como el reverso puro de la lógica de la *Realpolitik*. La intervención política de un escritor se define antes que nada en la confrontación con estos usos oficiales del lenguaje.<sup>113</sup>

literature is always out of context and anachronistic; it says what is not, what has been erased; it works with what is yet to come. It functions as the complete opposite of *Realpolitik* logic. A writer’s political intervention is based more than anything on a conflict with those official uses of language.

Piglia’s thinking is very much aligned here with Ernst Bloch’s understanding of the utopian function of literature and art: its anticipatory illumination



of unfulfilled desires. For Piglia, as for Bloch, literature takes place in the “not yet” and cannot therefore be dismissed in a traditional Marxist manner as engendering the false consciousness of ideology. As Douglas Kellner explains, Bloch understood ideology to contain “errors, mystifications, and techniques of manipulation and domination,” but also “a utopian residue or surplus that can be used for social critique and to advance progressive politics.”<sup>114</sup> In Bloch’s words, “the blossoms of art, science, philosophy, always denote something more than the false consciousness which each society, bound to its position, had of itself and used for its own embellishment.”<sup>115</sup> Piglia follows Bloch in finding in history a repository of potential alternatives for the future, and in literature a wealth of “imaginative ideas” that do not merely describe the world around “but extend, in an anticipating way, existing material into the future possibilities of being different and better.”<sup>116</sup> Literature works with those potential, latent possibilities, and the past is its source of creativity.

Stephen Eric Bronner summarizes the importance of the past in Bloch’s work in ways that reveal a shared conception of the non-linear operations of artistic renewal that – as we have seen – form the central tenet of Piglia’s theory and literary praxis:

Realizing the utopian *Novum* in the future depends upon tapping the potential from the past. And this, in turn, is dependent upon the degree of consciousness generated in the present. The future is thus no mechanical elaboration of the present; nor does it emerge from a series of “steps” or “stages” deriving in linear fashion from the past. The future is open; determining the “horizon” of the present is possible only through unearthing the “anticipatory consciousness” embodied in the cultural achievements of the past.<sup>117</sup>

The multiple, overlapping time-frames of *Respiración artificial* allow us to glimpse a similar vision of history in which the utopian potential of literature can be released, in the perception and construction of proximities and rifts that defy linear organization. The novel’s partial setting in other times is not

primarily an attempt to evade censorship or to conceal, through allegory, its “real” story: it is instead a performative act, constructing new (non-linear) genealogies in the pursuit of literary and cultural renewal. The understanding forged in Piglia’s first novel of history and literature as non-linear, operating in multiple temporalities, together with the utopian dimension of literature, become constants in his fiction and critical essays. Chapter 2 will discuss in more depth Piglia’s experimentation with concepts of chance and complexity, together with his construction of literature as a laboratory of the future, with primary reference to the narratives published in the *Prisión perpetua* collection. It is in *La ciudad ausente* (the focus of Chapter 4, together with *Nocturno blanco*) that Piglia gives fullest development to the depersonalized, displaced and distanced perspective advocated in *Respiración artificial*, exploring a series of associations between the text and the machine to emphasize the importance of artificial, anonymized experience in the survival and regeneration of literature.

