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**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

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## 2 | Allegories of Reading in an Age of Immanence and Uncertainty

The insistent presence of detectives in fiction by Martínez, Cohen, and Piglia serves, as in much postmodern literature, to highlight epistemological uncertainty. The provisional, mistaken, or derailed conclusions of criminal investigations become analogies for a broader failure to read and interpret a tumult of signs in the cultural, social, and material world around us. These authors part company with many postmodern theorists and writers, however, as the failed operations of human logic and the unattainability of transcendent forms of knowledge do not give rise here to epistemological skepticism. Instead, they clear the way for the development of new ways of understanding how patterns may emerge from seeming chaos and how texts may generate meaning and meaningful experience.

In this chapter, I focus on the use of mathematical and scientific theories and models to construct allegories of reading in Martínez's *Crímenes imperceptibles* (2003), Cohen's *El testamento de O'Jara* (1995), and a series of short stories and essays by Piglia, mostly drawn from the *Prisión perpetua* collection (1988). References to chance, chaos theory, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle abound in these texts, employed in part to express a suspicion of metanarratives and to point to the limits of human reasoning. However, in Piglia and Cohen these theories are

not primarily placed at the service of postmodern skepticism but of more utopian visions of the unending self-renewal of literary forms. The failed quest for metalanguages here does not signal the end of epistemology but the potential for new (less transcendent) approaches to knowledge and for new theories of becoming rather than being. If, for Martínez, we are led away from the truth by a simplistic and over-hasty logic that constantly invents meaning when we read, for Cohen no such transcendent truth exists: the act of interpretation blinds us to the immanent nature of the world. It is in Piglia's work that we find a fully developed theory of reading, not just as an exercise that constructs meaning for past experience, but as a form of (future) experience. This theory gives rise to a resignification of science-fiction topoi (virtual reality, psychic transference, memory implantation, and the multiverse) as tropes for the act of reading. If narrating is the art of implanting memories in the reader that can be more vivid than direct experience itself, then the implantation of artificial memories may take on a positive connotation, associated here with the creative work of literature.

## **SERIAL POLYSEMIA: CRIMES OF LOGIC / MARTÍNEZ**

Truth is a kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

While Piglia and Cohen – as we will see – point away from notions of transcendence in questions of truth and literary interpretation, Martínez leaves the principles of scientific rationalism intact: objective truth does exist, although (following Nietzsche) he demonstrates again and again in his fiction our choice to make decisions based on emotion rather than logic. It is not science that has failed us, but we who have failed science, on two counts: by applying its insights with insufficient rigour, or in the wrong context. The tragedies of Martínez's novels are often tied to his characters' deficient grasp

of the mathematical basis of chance and probability: their misinterpretations of events lead to fatal mistakes of judgment.

Martínez chose to set his detective thriller *Crímenes imperceptibles* in Oxford rather than Buenos Aires to bolster the sense of enigma: in Argentina, he explains, if a crime remains unsolved, everyone would immediately guess it was the police officer.<sup>2</sup> The city becomes the scene of a sequence of deaths, each accompanied by the release of a mathematical symbol, which together appear to form a series. A world-famous British professor of logic and an Argentine mathematics postdoc join forces to solve the series and by that means to discover the identity of the killer.

The novel traces similarities between the methods and “aesthetics” of mathematics and those of criminology in order to question the human capacity for logical thought and the limits of logic itself. It testifies to our propensity to search for patterns, analogies, and metaphors and to use them, inaccurately and even dangerously, to shape our understanding of the world. This tendency is also what allows the writer – like the criminal or the magician – to distract the reader with a false story and to surprise him with a final revelation of the real one, which has been developed, undetected, alongside it. Martínez proposes a reworking of the detective genre – in part following lines established by Borges and Piglia – that neither rests on the irrefutable logic of the detective’s reasoning (as in the traditional version) nor abandons intellectual resolutions to insist on the intractability of social problems (as in the hard-boiled variant). Instead, it returns to questions of logic, but with the aim of demonstrating the gap between truth and proof, in crime just as in mathematics, and to suggest that our use of logic is guided more by aesthetic principles than by scientific rigour. And yet, as *Crímenes imperceptibles* makes clear, it is our imperfect reasoning that provides the necessary condition for the storyteller’s artistry: Martínez turns an account of the flawed logic of the reader into a celebration of the creative intelligence of the writer.

## Gödel's incompleteness theorems: the gap between truth and proof

The novel's protagonist is a fictional mathematician, Arthur Seldom, made famous for his work on the philosophical ramifications of Gödel's theorems of the 1930s. Martínez draws on Gödel's incompleteness theorems to suggest that the distinction between what is true and what can be proved in mathematics is analogous to that which governs criminal investigations. The distinction between the true and the demonstrable, Seldom explains, is a common phenomenon in justice: there *is* a truth – someone committed the murder – but it cannot always be ascertained beyond doubt by studying the evidence and drawing logical conclusions. Just as it is not within the scope of axiomatic methods to demonstrate the validity of all mathematical truths, the truth of a crime may also be “undecidable” in this sense of remaining beyond proof.<sup>3</sup>

From an early stage, then, we are warned – in a divergence from the conventions of the traditional detective genre – that there may not be a coincidence between truth and logical proof. The mathematicians of *Crímenes imperceptibles* send themselves and the police on an elaborate wild-goose chase to solve the puzzle of a series of symbols sent to them each time the serial killer appears to strike again. As in Borges's “La muerte y la brújula” – of which Martínez's novel is a conscious reworking – the mysterious symbols are eventually discovered to be a clever smokescreen, veiling the real crime by stringing it together with other murders that are really simulated or the product of chance. Again as in “La muerte y la brújula,” the solution to the enigma – here, the series of symbols is linked to an ancient Pythagorean cult – does not provide the solution to the crime: it does not reveal the identity of the murderer and has nothing to say about the human emotions of love and revenge that motivate the crime or its concealment. Caught up in mathematical speculation, the characters seem momentarily to forget that the symbols are “solamente dibujos, líneas sobre el papel” (only drawings, lines on paper)<sup>4</sup> and are blinded to the rather less tidy human context of the crimes.

The abstract symbols and logical sequences of *Crímenes imperceptibles* fail to account for the unpredictability of chance encounters and the irrational allegiances that might compel one man to kill in order to protect his daughter and another to cover up a murder for exactly the same reason. In an inversion of the Platonic worldview, according to which the everyday world is an imperfect approximation of an unchanging reality, we are led to understand that the logical consistency of axiomatic reasoning can only imperfectly approximate the messy reality of everyday experience. This disjuncture is heightened by Martínez's ironic choice of the series of symbols, given the Pythagorean belief that the cosmos is structured by numbers and that the contemplation of these is the route to understanding the universe. The *tetraktys*, the last symbol in the series, held a special significance as it combines the first four numbers to produce the number ten: it was therefore synonymous with divine wisdom and associated with the oracle. In Martínez's novel, however, symbols and numbers manifestly fail to reveal much of any importance about reality or the future acts of the supposed serial killer.

## Nietzsche on logic, and the “aesthetics” of reason

The creator of the series relies on the fact that, like Borges's Lönnrot, the narrator, the police and the press will be seduced by the possibility of an intellectually coherent solution rather than one in which chance and unruly passions play a large part. *Crímenes imperceptibles* becomes a reflection on how the “aesthetics” of reason affects our formulation of ideas. Martínez makes repeated reference in his fiction to our propensity to believe simple, neat theories, even if they are preposterous from a rational or empirical perspective. We prefer, Seldom claims, “una estética de simplicidad y elegancia que guía también la formulación de conjeturas” (a simple and elegant aesthetic that also shapes how we formulate conjectures).<sup>5</sup> Martínez's first novel, *Acerca de Roderer* (1992), had drawn on Nietzsche's description in *The Gay Science* of the development of human logic as the consequence of a long series of simplifications, necessary for survival but essentially illogical. These rest, according to Nietzsche, on a powerful inclination “to deal with

the similar as the equal,” in order to be able quickly to categorize different animals as food sources or dangerous. Over a long period,

the beings not seeing correctly had an advantage over those who saw everything “in flux.” In itself every high degree of circumspection in conclusions, every sceptical inclination, is a great danger to life. No living being might have been preserved unless the contrary inclination – to affirm rather than suspend judgment, to mistake and fabricate rather than wait, to assent rather than deny, to decide rather than be in the right – had been cultivated with extraordinary assiduity.<sup>6</sup>

Like Nietzsche, Martínez’s protagonist suspects that logic, given its inclination to “tratar las cosas parecidas como si fueran iguales, a desestimar lo cambiante y lo transitorio, a suprimir las fluctuaciones” (treat similar things as if they were the same, to underestimate the changing and the transitory, to suppress fluctuations) is nothing more than “un antiguo malentendido que el sopor de la costumbre no nos deja ver” (an age-old misunderstanding that the torpor of habit does not allow us to see).<sup>7</sup>

Martínez’s fiction often reveals the extent to which our apparently coherent beliefs and actions are not grounded in rationalism at all but in superstition and self-protection. We are unable to apply a properly scientific approach to understanding events that affect us. In a more recent novel, *La muerte lenta de Luciana B.* (2007), the narrator is chastised for thinking that a series of apparently connected deaths must be linked, as they present too great a set of coincidences. Kloster, his literary nemesis, ridicules him for having written a book entirely dedicated to chance (with the title *Los aleatorios*) but never having taken the trouble to toss a coin and to discover that “el azar también tiene sus formas y sus rachas” (chance also has its forms and phases).<sup>8</sup> Later, in a bar, he tosses a coin and is alarmed to discover the length of many of the strings of repeated heads or tails: “Aún la ciega moneda parecía tener nostalgia de repetición, de forma, de figura” (even the blind coin seemed to feel a nostalgia for repetition, form, shape).<sup>9</sup> Chance is not the same as disorder: it sometimes produces, at random, surprising moments of

apparent order or symmetry. A misunderstanding of chance as synonymous with an absence of order or patternings affects the characters' ability to read events correctly and leads in the novel to further tragedy.

Likewise, in *Crímenes imperceptibles*, it is a misuse of mathematical logic to account for the world of human behaviour that directly leads in the novel to suffering and death that might otherwise have been avoided. Seldom explains that his love for mathematics in part stems from the comfort of knowing that a conjecture made in the abstract world of numbers and symbols has no lasting consequences: it can simply be erased. In contrast,

cuando usted plantea hipótesis sobre el mundo real introduce, sin poder evitarlo, un elemento de actividad irreversible que nunca deja de tener consecuencias. Cuando mira en una dirección deja de mirar en las demás, cuando persigue un camino posible, lo persigue en un tiempo real y luego puede ser tarde para intentar cualquier otro.<sup>10</sup>

when you create a hypothesis about the real world you introduce, without being able to prevent it, an element of irreversible action that will always have consequences. When you look in one direction you stop looking in the others; when you pursue one possible path, you pursue it in real time and then it can be too late to try another.

In practice, even mathematical conjectures may produce irreversible consequences in the "real" world. When Seldom publishes in a newspaper his hypothesis about the logical series of symbols, this act of conjecture gives the perpetrator of the final murders an alibi, resulting in the death of ten schoolchildren. Left to remain within the bounds of its own discipline, mathematics may be a harmless and abstract intellectual exercise; wrenched out of context in order to explain a world of flesh and blood, it may lead to catastrophic consequences.

The bloody penetration of theory into reality: Martínez readily acknowledges yet another echo here of "La muerte y la brújula."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is this

idea, more than any other, that embeds his work most convincingly within the broader Argentine cultural context. He himself suggests that his work is shaped by a conviction stemming from a particular national experience of persecution and militancy: “la convicción de que las ideas no son enunciados abstractos o figuritas intercambiables, sino que tienen su áspera terrenalidad y piden cuentas” (the conviction that ideas are not abstract enunciations or collectible toy figures, but have their own rugged earthiness and call us to account).<sup>12</sup> For Martínez as for Borges, the latter writing in 1942, our philosophies may be arcane or abstract but they may also be highly dangerous.

## Towards a new iteration of the detective novel

Thus far, *Crímenes imperceptibles* may seem to offer little more than a re-hash of “La muerte y la brújula,” with the unexpected twist that we assume Seldom to be a dispassionate analyst of the sequence of symbols, and at risk (like Borges’s Lönnrot) of being the murderer’s next victim, when actually he is the author of the series. But Martínez may be credited with adding some original elements to Borges’s reworking of the conventions of the detective story. One of these lies in his use of Wittgenstein’s rule-following paradox as a structuring device for the novel. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein posits that a sequence of numbers can be continued in multiple different ways, each of which can be argued to conform to a rule.<sup>13</sup> Many commentators agree that this paradox is summarized most effectively in an axiom given further on in the text, stating that “no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule.”<sup>14</sup> The final twists of the plot of *Crímenes imperceptibles* acquire a peculiar force by revealing the extent to which our thinking naturally converges on a single solution, holding it to be the only possible one and discounting other hypotheses, when logically there is more than one possible resolution of the plot, just as a series of symbols, as Wittgenstein proved, may be continued in many different ways. The last paragraph of the novel even casts doubt on the solution to which we are eventually led, leaving the ending open and ambiguous: is Seldom’s final confession to be trusted? In a further twist, both murderer and accomplice accuse the narrator-protagonist

of having inspired the crime in the first place and supplied the method of covering it up.

The uncertainty of its ending, together with its consistent undermining of the operations of logic, locate the novel within what Claudio Cid has identified as a third derivation of the detective story in Argentina. Following on from the classic model established by Poe and others, and a period of experimentation in the 1980s with the hard-boiled version, or *novela negra*, Cid argues that there has been a more recent return to the mystery-enigma novel in the work of writers such as Juan José Saer (*La pesquisa*, 1994), Juan Pablo Feinmann (*El cadáver imposible*, 1992), and Pablo de Santis (*Filosofía y Letras*, 1998).<sup>15</sup> This new manifestation takes us back to the scenario of the classic “novela de enigma” but with a different emphasis, this time not so much on the final revelation of truth, Cid suggests, but on the mechanisms of its discovery or construction. The indeterminacy that hovers over the dénouement of *Crímenes imperceptibles* does not lend credence to notions that the truth is either fundamentally unknowable or irrelevant; its effect is to shift the focus from the *revelation* of truth to the *construction* of narrative and meaning.

## The figure in the frieze: allegories of reading and writing

Openly acknowledged as one of the major influences on his writing, Henry James is an ever-present figure in Martínez’s novels. *La mujer del maestro* is in many ways a reworking of James’s *The Lesson of the Master* (1892), tracing similar relationships between literature, marriage, and mercenariness. The protagonist’s desperation to get his hands on Jordán’s manuscript also echoes the obsessive compulsion to uncover literature’s secrets that dictates the destinies of James’s characters in *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896). And yet the allegories of reading and writing developed in *Crímenes imperceptibles* mark a point of significant divergence between James and Martínez. *The Figure in the Carpet* oscillates with radical indeterminacy between two incompatible propositions: that there exists a hidden scheme that binds Vereker’s novels together, “something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet,”<sup>16</sup> or that there is absolutely nothing to Vereker’s claims at all; that the critic’s task is to

unlock the secrets of a text, to plumb its hidden mysteries, or that no such secrets exist and any suggestion of an occult patterning is merely “a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap” to catch the unwary critic.<sup>17</sup> As well as a figure in a carpet, the scheme that may (or may not) link together all of Vereker’s works attracts other metaphorical descriptions, as a bird in a cage, or the string on which the writer’s pearls are strung.

In Martínez’s own choice of metaphor in *Crímenes imperceptibles* for what lies undiscovered in a text, we see the basis of a very different allegory of reading. From the figure in the carpet to the figure in the frieze: in his confession to the narrator, Seldom tells him a story about an artist who hides a sketch of the king severing his daughter’s head in an enormous frieze dedicated to the theme of the king as warrior, with such skill that

Nissam, y después de él generaciones y generaciones de hombres, sólo vieron lo que el artista quería que se viera: una sucesión abrumadora de imágenes de las que el ojo pronto se despega porque cree advertir la repetición, cree capturar la regla, cree que cada parte representa al todo.<sup>18</sup>

Nissam, and generations and generations of men after him, only saw what the artist wanted them to see: an overwhelming succession of images from which the eye quickly peels away because it believes it has discovered repetition, captured the rule, it believes that every part represents the whole.

The story lays bare Seldom’s own technique in hiding a crime by constructing patterns around it that distract the eye. The truth is there, but we cannot see it because our minds are trained to find patterns and repetition, not the crucial variation that holds the secret to the artist’s design. Unlike James in *The Figure of the Carpet*, who is far more ambivalent about the matter, for Martínez there is a single, hidden truth, but our powers of deduction are insufficient to prove it, and indeed lead us merrily into error.

It is the tendency of our minds to simplify and to look for patterns that allows the artist, as well as the criminal, to create illusions and smokescreens.

Martínez holds that the best detective stories are those in which the truth is everywhere present in the text but nevertheless eludes the reader's notice. Martínez's essay "El cuento como sistema lógico" explicitly acknowledges a debt to Piglia's "Tesis sobre el cuento," which in turn closely conforms to theorizations of the structure of detective fiction by Shklovsky and other Formalist critics. Following Piglia, Martínez argues that every short story contains two stories, one overt and the other hidden; the task of the writer is to bring the secret story gradually to the surface, only revealing it in its entirety at the end. This idea, he observes, coincides with the most frequent image he entertains of the storywriter, as an illusionist who distracts the audience's attention with one hand while performing an act of magic with the other.<sup>19</sup> Both Martínez and Piglia clearly echo Shklovsky here, in his perception that "the false or misleading solution is a very common element of either a tale or a mystery novel. The manipulation of false and true solutions is what constitutes the method of organizing the mystery. The dénouement consists in shifting from one to the other."<sup>20</sup> The particular merit of this kind of approach to narratives, as Martínez points out (very much in a Formalist vein), is that "permite mirar al cuento no como un objeto terminado, listo para los desarmaderos de los críticos, sino como un proceso vivo, desde su formación" (it allows us to see the story not as a finished object, ready for critics to dismantle, but as a living process, from the perspective of its construction).<sup>21</sup>

Both Piglia and Martínez cite Borges as a master of the technique of shifting from the initial, "false" plot to the other, more "authentic" one that the writer develops in parallel but is not evident to the reader until the end.<sup>22</sup> For both writers, "La muerte y la brújula" is a paradigmatic example of this technique. Martínez points out, as an example, that Borges uses the euphemism "hechos de sangre" (bloody events) instead of "crímenes" (crimes) in the first paragraph of the story; effectively, not all the deaths turn out to be murders. Martínez uses this device in his own novel, for the same reason carefully referring to "muertes" (deaths) rather than "crímenes" in the first paragraph.<sup>23</sup> There are also plenty of warnings to the reader that the series of symbols is nothing more than a smokescreen: Seldom himself points out that crimes committed for intellectual reasons occur in books but not in real

life,<sup>24</sup> and warns the narrator of the error of ignoring explanations that are “más inmediatas” (more immediate).<sup>25</sup> Another idea to which the narrative returns more than once, foreshadowing the final revelations, is the sacrifice and danger a parent might be prepared to embrace for the sake of a child.

We only later realize that Martínez has done precisely what he was telling us all along that he would do: he has performed a magic trick “con todas las cartas sobre la mesa” (with all the cards on the table).<sup>26</sup> If the novel’s characters misread clues and form erroneous ideas that act to conceal the real truth, we cheerfully engage in precisely the same mistakes, ignoring all details that do not fit our neat theories about the truth behind the crimes, even though we are fully aware that the conventions of the detective genre dictate that we will be deceived in this manner. Interestingly, the reason Borges gives for the need for a story to have two plots is that “el lector de nuestro tiempo es también un crítico, un hombre que conoce, y prevé, los artificios literarios” (the reader of our time is also a critic, a man who is familiar with, and anticipates, literary devices).<sup>27</sup> For this reason, too, Martínez’s magician in *Crímenes imperceptibles* is named as René Lavand, who is one-handed: only a grand master of illusions could hoodwink the reader who already knows all the tricks.

The criminal, the magician, the writer: all have a secret that may be uncovered, but our preference for aesthetic elegance and coherence, even in the application of logic and scientific method, often obscures the truth from us. This commitment to the existence of truth, however much it may elude our grasp, is what distances Martínez’s understanding of reading and literary criticism – and interpretation in general – from that of both Piglia and Cohen, even while he shares their interest in taking hermeneutical failure as a starting-point for a reflexive exploration of the processes of reading and writing, and an experimentation with different modes of textual construction. While it is true, as Matías Eduardo Moscati states, that in *Crímenes imperceptibles* “la aplicación del método matemático se encuentra condenada a la frustración y al naufragio intelectual” (the application of mathematical method is doomed to frustration and intellectual failure),<sup>28</sup> it is also true that the *metamathematical* exercise of reflecting on the use of mathematical ideas *does* produce knowledge, revealing a great deal about our propensity

to search for patterns, analogies, and metaphors and to use them, often inaccurately, to shape our understanding of the world.

Unlike the great majority of novelists and theorists who have cited Gödel's theorem as proof of the inadequacy of our tools of logical analysis, Martínez points the finger of blame not at those tools but at our inability to use them effectively or to apply them in the right contexts. If – as in *La mujer del maestro* – Martínez often draws on the dialectical model of scientific advance in thinking about the processes of literary innovation, in *Crímenes imperceptibles* the relationship is reversed: it is our love of aesthetic elegance that may account for the development (and the impairment) of our mathematical understanding. Although – unlike Cohen and Piglia, as we will see – Martínez retains a belief in the existence of an objective truth, the (Formalist) emphasis in his fictional and critical work on questions of construction rather than interpretation often brings his writing to resonate with theirs, as does a sense that epistemological “failure” is not the end, but the beginning of new kinds of knowledge. Like the painter of the king's frieze, whose life depends on his ability to embed the truth within a successful illusion, the writer – pursued by his critics as a criminal is hunted down by detectives – finds, in their very eagerness to rationalize and perceive patterns, an opportunity to innovate and outwit them. As in the dialectical model, error and the failure of a particular method simply become opportunities for greater understanding and innovation.

## INTERPRETATION AND INTERPRETOSIS IN AN IMMANENT WORLD / COHEN

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth.—Thomas Pynchon<sup>29</sup>

Marcelo Cohen is an incisive reader of Thomas Pynchon, and the central place given to the question of transcendence and certain scientific ideas in

Cohen's texts – chaos and entropy in particular – owes much to Pynchon's own exploration of these themes. Indeed, Cohen explicitly grounds his theory of "realismo inseguro" (unstable realism) in the kind of non-linear, diffusive structures that abound in Pynchon's fiction.<sup>30</sup> It is precisely in this reflexive use of thermodynamic theories to probe the creative processes of writing, however, that we may perceive a key difference between the two authors. If the complex nature of causality in non-linear systems often becomes for Pynchon a metaphor of the difficulty of reading and interpreting the world around us, for Cohen it becomes much more emphatically a model for the endless creative potential of writing and a source of new forms of meaning that derive from a vision of immanence rather than transcendence, a vision less positively embraced in Pynchon's work.

## Paranoia and interpretosis in Pynchon and Cohen

Cohen contests the common description of Pynchon's writing as "paranoid," claiming that the paranoiac's madness is "cohesivo, inclusivo, causal, lógico, jerarquizado, polarizador" (cohesive, inclusive, causal, logical, hierarchical, polarizing), pertaining to a rigid sense of destiny and fatalism, whereas the same cannot be said of Pynchon's novels themselves. These, by contrast, are "hechas de interrupciones e interferencias, clímax múltiples, dispersión, analogías, inverosimilitud" (made of disruptions and interferences, multiple climaxes, dispersion, analogies, improbability).<sup>31</sup> Pynchon's characters – one thinks of Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for example – oscillate between a paranoid sense that everything is connected and has a hidden meaning and the even more terrifying possibility that everything is meaningless. Cohen cites Slothrop's musings on the subject from *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973):

If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. [...] Either They have put him here for a reason, or he's

just here. He isn't sure that he wouldn't, actually, rather have that *reason* ...<sup>32</sup>

Cohen's characters waver in a similar fashion between a paranoid apprehension that everything is significant and an equally uncomfortable, paralyzing suspicion that everything is meaningless.

This anxiety over interpretation is all-pervasive in *El testamento de O'Jaral*. Cohen's protagonist moves through a world governed by shadowy alliances between politics and huge commercial consortiums. He seeks some form of transcendence in an ultra-neoliberal society of proliferating images and messages and tries to find a path of resistance to the logic of the same on which the market's overwhelming power is based. He continually comes up against the painful prospect that neither is possible, and sinks further and further into penury and social isolation, becoming a drug-dependent vagrant. It is only in this position of wretchedness and humility that he is able to access what appears to be a vision of the immanent nature of the world, but as he is unable to communicate it to others, it remains nothing more than a personal glimmer of enlightenment or consolation before a swift and bathetic end.

The confusion produced in *O'Jaral* by the complex codes and messages with which he is constantly bombarded is mirrored in the challenges the novel presents to its readers. A sense prevails in the novel in which nothing is a coincidence, and no meeting is a chance encounter, but that everything may be predestined according to some grand scheme of which we and the characters have little understanding. Nothing is natural, everything seems constructed: O'Jaral wonders, for example, whether his meeting with Yola is really the outcome of chance or whether someone had put her into the story so that he had somewhere to hide for a while. He hesitates between believing that he is caught up in a conspiracy, that "bajo la grasosa acumulación de fenómenos había una fluidez clandestina hacia donde distintos agentes lo estaban guiando con guiños, con señuelos" (beneath the greasy accumulation of phenomena there was a clandestine fluidity that different agents were guiding him towards, with winks, with baits),<sup>33</sup> and thinking on the other

hand that everything is meaningless, that “no hay nada que adivinar” (there is nothing to guess).<sup>34</sup>

This paranoia, we are led to understand, is rooted in a hermeneutical error: the mistaken assumption that signs can be “interpreted” to yield a hidden meaning that lies somewhere beyond them. Deleuze and Guattari identify the belief that meaning or truth exists independently and merely awaits our discovery as one of the chief expressions of “humankind’s fundamental neurosis,” a “disease” to which they give the name “interpretosis.”<sup>35</sup> In their work, this observation forms part of a critique of certain Freudian strands of psychoanalysis, which assume that affects and desires always refer back to an originary trauma or loss. Deleuze and Guattari expose the use of language to interpret language as a serious category mistake: signs lead only to more signs, as “interpretation is carried to infinity and never encounters anything to interpret that is not already itself an interpretation.”<sup>36</sup>

*El testamento de O’Jarl* produces this same vertigo of endless recursion. Cohen’s characters live in a hypermediatized and narcotized society in which they often find it difficult to distinguish between reality and projections. The matter is not usually cleared up for the reader either: we cannot simply attribute the text’s slidings between reality and fantasy to the influence of a drug-induced delirium or the incursion of simulacra into a realm of reality that lies beyond these. No frames or boundaries appear to mark the separation between reality and representation on the city streets, and characters cannot always tell whether what is happening around them is really happening then and there or is a projection from another time or space:

A O’Jarl le pareció que un robot fumigador se detenía en la esquina para meter la manguera en una alcantarilla. Una interferencia arrugó la escena, que era parte de una operación filmada en otro barrio.<sup>37</sup>

To O’Jarl it looked as if a fumigator robot had stopped on the street corner to insert its hose into a drain. Interference wrinkled the scene, which was part of an operation being filmed in another neighbourhood.

In this example, the illusion is exposed for what it is; at other points, it becomes impossible to decide whether what is being narrated is taking place in a material, a virtual, or a metaphorical realm. As O'Jarl's drug addiction deepens, he is described as projecting images of his own onto the images shown on the screens erected around the city. Onto an advertisement for margarine he projects suitcases slowly advancing along the baggage belt of an airport, and onto the features of the president he superimposes a grey-haired cannibal who eats a human arm before running to meet a short woman. What status are we to accord these images, which are described as projections but appear to interfere with other images that seem to exist independently of O'Jarl's imagination? Like O'Jarl, as readers we learn to mistrust our ability to read signs, which may refer to material phenomena or just to more signs, and thus the mental image we build of the novel's world is a multiple and fractured one in which the reality status of events and objects is often undecidable.

## Causality in non-linear systems: reworking the paradigms of detective fiction

As in the famous "butterfly effect," which demonstrates the complexity of causality in non-linear – or "chaotic" – systems, Cohen's world is one in which phenomena are intimately linked in ways that are not always visible, and in which tiny changes at the microscopic level produce disproportionate effects at the macroscopic. The impossibility of predicting such effects, and of tracing the chain of events that produces them, becomes the cause of a particular kind of epistemological anxiety in the novel. Such processes are not random but determined, but it is beyond our ability to predict their outcomes. "En un mundo holístico y no lineal, todo acontecimiento tenía que ser significativo" (in a holistic and non-linear world, every event had to be significant):<sup>38</sup> or, at least, that is the theory O'Jarl assumes to be guiding the actions of Ravinkel, the half-brother he has been contracted to hunt down, and the best way to find him seems therefore to embrace his logic.

If everything is connected to everything else, this has a profound effect on the structure of the detective story, which is thoroughly reworked here.

The traditional methods of the detective, chasing clues and using his powers of interpretation to hypothesize about their meaning, are useless here. O'Jarl rarely goes in pursuit of clues or suspicious people but instead waits for them to come to him, as they invariably do. When Badaraco chastises him for wasting time and forgetting that he is contracted to find Ravinkel, O'Jarl gives as an explanation a description of a Peano curve, a self-intersecting curve that passes through every point of a two-dimensional plane, or as O'Jarl puts it, "una línea que es un plano" (a line that is a plane).<sup>39</sup> He does not have to pass through all those points: they will make their way to him. The conventional approach of the detective, reading signs as clues to a hidden reality, is as radically undermined here as it is in a Paul Auster novel. Just as in Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985–86), for example, surfaces in *El testamento* do not yield to penetration but merely reflect the image of the protagonist back to himself. In the following description of a shop window, what is behind the glass becomes confused with what the glass reflects, defying attempts to separate the two and instead uniting them in a single plane of vision:

estas cosas, que parecen estar detrás del vidrio, se confunden con la suciedad del vidrio y con lo que el vidrio refleja, una pera mordida en la acera, un hombre con un perro en brazos, la charla de dos vendedoras en la zapatería de enfrente, y el brillo de la vidriera de la zapatería y el parpadeo de las cotizaciones en una pantalla y el desfile del tráfico con sus tules de humo, y todo junto, más la cara sorprendida de O'Jarl, forma un mundito completo, inaprensible en su plenitud [...].<sup>40</sup>

these things, which seem to be behind the window, become confused with the dirtiness of the glass and what the glass reflects, a half-eaten pear on the sidewalk, a man carrying a dog in his arms, the chatting of two shop assistants in the shoe shop opposite, and the shine of the shoe shop's window and the blinking of share prices on a screen and the procession of traffic with its veils of smoke, and everything together, plus O'Jarl's

surprised face, forms a complete little world, enigmatic in its plenitude [...].

Objects and images, perceptions and reflections, observed and observer fold together to create a world that cannot be seen and analyzed from any external perspective; there is no vantage point from which tested hermeneutical principles can be brought to bear on the subject in question.

### The problem of the new in a non-transcendent world: metaphors from Gödel and thermodynamics

This, indeed, is the understanding that derives from the many references to Gödel's theorems in the novel. O'Jarial studies a book on the consequences of those theorems, which "discuten si es cierto que ningún sistema formal puede justificar desde adentro todas las verdades que propone" (question whether it is true that no formal system can justify from within all the truths it proposes).<sup>41</sup> Muzzone asks him, "¿Cómo sabe uno que la lógica que aplica es especial, distinta, si para entenderse no tiene más que esa lógica?" (how does one know that the logic one applies is special, different, if one only has that same logic to understand with?).<sup>42</sup> As Gödel proved, no formal system can prove its own coherence using only the terms contained within it. His theorem is appropriated in Cohen's novel to articulate both the logical impossibility of transcendent knowledge and the equally impossible prospect of political change. In both cases, the crucial question with which O'Jarial battles is: where will new ideas and inspiration come from, if we are trapped in an immanent world and cannot gain any kind of external perspective on it?

The question of political change is an urgent one in the hyper-neoliberal world of *El testamento de O'Jarial*, in which big business has consolidated its control over every aspect of political, social, and personal life, including spirituality and art. There is little to differentiate the governments that come and go, forming cabinets that are "planos como dibujos animados" (flat, like cartoon animations) and that simply give the institutions of the weakened state a quick makeover rather than introducing real change.<sup>43</sup> Both these and the powerful consortiums are managed by a murky, sinister force referred to

as “Los de Arriba de Todo” (Those Above Everything), who cleverly manage to exploit all criticism and conflict for their own purposes. Badaraco explains to O’Jaral that his consortium accepts dissenters and opposers with enthusiasm: “son un fermento necesario: de las nociones equivocadas que propaga ese gente nacen inquietudes, de las inquietudes nuevos deseos en el ciudadano [...]. Alentamos la crítica y a veces la financiamos” (they are a necessary catalyst: from the mistaken notions these people spread, anxieties are born, and from anxieties, new desires in the citizen [...]). We encourage criticism and sometimes finance it).<sup>44</sup> Conflict and rebellion serve only to stimulate the market, as business knows exactly how to translate these into higher levels of consumption.

If the system swallows up all criticism into itself, how and from where is resistance to be mounted? The only thing the consortiums fear is indifference and non-participation in consumption and citizenship (like business and the state, the two have become synonymous). Badaraco’s consortium is alarmed to note a decline in social and political participation, and “un rechazo deliberado a la información” (a deliberate rejection of information) that borders on “una indiferencia casi vegetal” (a vegetable-like indifference).<sup>45</sup> Ravinkel’s people, who do perform certain acts of resistance, become of concern, not because they oppose the status quo or propose an alternative to it, but because they appear to have no objectives at all. They do not want to gain anything, not to gather numbers, nor to attack the consortiums, nor to create a new political agenda: in short, they desire nothing that the system could turn into the kind of aspiration that foments consumerism. Ravinkel’s principal method is to introduce uncertainty and chaos by duplicating and fabricating the myriad images produced by the state and the consortiums. The people working with him – “Superficiales” is an apt name for an immanent world – infiltrate the media with a series of falsifications and perfect duplicates, including doubles of well-known actors and fake advertisements for non-existent products. These falsifying operations cannot be assimilated and neutralized by the System, because they appear to have no particular end in sight.

However, Ravinkel’s methods become the object of O’Jaral’s scathing criticism. In effect, O’Jaral accuses him of an insufficient grasp of the

scientific principles behind thermodynamics, chaos, and complexity, marshalled here as analogies for the workings of a social system. If the consortiums have managed to create a total system and maintain it close to equilibrium, O'Jara! rightly presumes that Ravinkel's aim is to introduce greater turbulence in order to move the system away from a state of equilibrium. A system close to equilibrium is subject to entropy, a gradual decrease in available energy, heading towards a stasis described as a kind of "muerte colectiva" (collective death).<sup>46</sup> Beyond a certain level of complexity, on the other hand, a system far from equilibrium is subject to unpredictable alterations and that disorder can create new structures: O'Jara! cites Bénard cells as an example, which spontaneously organize themselves into hexagonal patterns as a consequence of the random microscopic movements caused by convection. Similar processes can be seen, he reminds Ravinkel, in desert sands or snowflakes after a storm.

O'Jara! attacks Ravinkel's logic with two – not entirely compatible – arguments. On one hand, he chastises him for performing acts whose consequences are irreversible and unpredictable: of not taking into account the "arrow of time," which means that one cannot, in non-linear processes, posit a return to initial conditions. In other words, Ravinkel is unleashing changes over which he has no control. In the first place, then, O'Jara!'s objection is that the new structures that will be produced by Ravinkel's actions to introduce greater chaos into the system are dangerously unpredictable. On the other hand, he criticizes Ravinkel for believing that shaking up the old could ever produce the new. Chaotic processes can lead to creativity, says O'Jara!, but in this case they will lead simply to more of the same, in a slightly different guise: "Vino viejo con odres restaurados. El mismo perro con otro collar" (old wine in patched-up wineskins. The same dog with a different collar).<sup>47</sup> Given the impossibility of stepping outside of the system they are in, in searching for new systems they can only draw on the past, which provides "un repertorio de sociedades muy pobre" (a very poor repertoire of societies).<sup>48</sup>

The incompatibility between these two critiques is significant because it points to a bigger question that O'Jara! is not able to resolve: whether the system under discussion – the world in which he lives – is analogous to an

open or a closed system in thermodynamic terms. Closed systems are subject to entropy, while open systems, maintaining traffic across their borders, have a greater capacity to change and evolve, becoming more complex and assuming new structures. Is the world subject to entropy or can new elements from beyond its borders allow it to generate new forms? O'Jarl understands that, imprisoned as he is within this system, he is unable to formulate a genuinely new idea. Believing, however, that he is destined to discover something of great significance, he frequently returns to the same anxiety:

Se preguntaba, y sabía que era preciso decidirlo, si el mundo era *del todo* inmanente. Porque si no había más que lo que parecía haber, si todo era tal cual era, sin ajenos soplos de animación, y cualquier esperanza debía estar en el Aquí, ¿de dónde iba a caerle a él la claridad [...]?<sup>49</sup>

He wondered, and knew that it was essential to decide, whether the world was *completely* immanent. Because if there was nothing more than what there appeared to be, if everything was exactly what it was, without any animating breath from beyond, and any hope had to reside in the Here-And-Now, from where was clarity going to descend upon him [...]?

The inspiration that would permit innovation has to come from outside: “debe caer como un aerolito” (it must fall like a meteorite), he thinks.<sup>50</sup> But where can new ideas and innovation come from if we are trapped in an immanent world, and there is nothing beyond what is visible, no greater meaning or force, no higher being or alternative plane of existence? If there is no transcendence, O'Jarl believes – conflating thermodynamics, chaos, emergence, Gödel, theology, and political theory with giddy aplomb – there can be no possibility of genuine newness in the governance of his world.

## Romanticism, transcendence and immanence

Both Eberhard Alsen and Joel Black concur in finding Romantic roots for Pynchon's sense – articulated most strongly in *Gravity's Rainbow* – of “an animate Earth in which all matter participates in an ongoing process of gestation.”<sup>51</sup> For Black, however, the novel is “post-Romantic” because it is “unable to posit a transcendent source of value beyond itself,”<sup>52</sup> while Alsen, who *does* find a belief in transcendence articulated in its pages, prefers the term “neo-romantic.”<sup>53</sup> The difference is less absolute than it might appear: what Alsen offers as evidence of a “belief in transcendence” is the realization that “God [...] is a force that dwells in all things” and “immanent in nature,”<sup>54</sup> or as Bland says in *Gravity's Rainbow*, “the wonder of finding that Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock.”<sup>55</sup> It seems a little perverse to claim that a realization of immanence is proof of the operation of transcendent knowledge: the conclusions Pynchon's characters reach do not therefore, in my view, fully sustain a belief in a spiritual world that transcends the physical, lending meaning to its transience.

Both “neo-Romantic” and “post-Romantic” are terms that could justifiably be used in respect of Cohen's *El testamento de O'Jarl*. Although the primary frame of reference for Cohen's holistic worldview may be a Buddhist one, the novel's exploration of immanence and of the world as a living, animate entity, in which we participate, also leads us back to certain Romantic conventions. It is left unclear whether O'Jarl achieves any part of the enlightenment for which he has been searching. But he certainly experiences small epiphanies that afford him a glimpse of the interconnectedness of all things, the dissolution of the self within the surrounding world, and the irreducible materiality of objects, which acquire a kind of meaning through a process of intense and unhurried visual observation. Amidst the many reflective surfaces and the superimposed images of the world of *El testamento*, O'Jarl finds a dusty bottle that reflects precisely nothing, “rudimentario y suficiente como un Morandi” (as rudimentary and sufficient as a Morandi), that seems to erase all other images and to announce the possibility of bringing together all the world's fragments to form a constellation.<sup>56</sup> Like a Morandi still life, O'Jarl's bottle is an unremarkable, simple, everyday object that seems to

acquire freshness through patient and intense contemplation, and through its opacity and resistance to abstract interpretation.

Another moment of epiphany comes when O'Jarl is suddenly possessed of the idea that “no hay nada que adivinar” (there is nothing to be guessed) and intuits instead that he simply *is* everything he sees around him, including the lentils at the bottom of the pot, the rust of the pipework, voters from opposing camps, and the barking of a dog.<sup>57</sup> There is no attempt to distinguish here between divine and human creations, the natural world and the products of man-made mechanics: O'Jarl is at one with the urban detritus everywhere around him as well as with what the Romantics would have elevated as Nature. Similar to this vision – this time unambiguously Romantic in its appeal to the fragment – is one in which he understands every part to contain within it the whole, that what had appeared to be a miscellany of meaningless fragments is imbued with the infinite universe:

cada cosa, guinche, pescante, neumático, amapola, pantalla, pierna o nube, guardaba las relaciones que en un momento eran el todo. En su momento, una astilla de vidrio era una familia universal.<sup>58</sup>

every thing, winch, hoist, tyre, poppy, screen, leg or cloud, contained within it the relations that were in that moment the whole. In that moment, a splinter of glass was a universal family.

It is typical of Cohen that this vision is immediately deflated: “Después venía otro momento” (then came another moment). O'Jarl's epiphanies do not provide the certainties that a transcendent perspective on the world might afford but are simply the transitory impressions, intuitions, and modes of being and becoming that are proper to immanence.

The persistence of another Romantic convention can also be seen in the significance accorded in the novel to solitude and withdrawal from society as a necessary condition for receiving inspiration. In O'Jarl's thoroughly post-theistic philosophy, however, that inspiration can come only from oneself, and may well remain elusive. If, as he is only too aware, language is

the measure of our thought, then the only path to renew that thought is by discovering a new language, having previously purged himself of all learned thought-patterns. Inspiration would only come

Porque previamente uno se ha retirado, se ha limpiado hasta el extremo de raspase la osamenta, ha elegido cada uno de sus pensamientos. Ha estado solo, cercenado del circuito, borrado, disuelto. Uno crea un sistema autónomo de realimentación positiva. Llegado el momento, aflorará, germinará o caerá sobre uno el lenguaje diferente, y el pensamiento posible gracias a ese lenguaje. [...] Quizá. No hay ninguna seguridad.<sup>59</sup>

Because one had previously withdrawn, cleansed oneself deeply to the point of scraping one's bones, chosen each thought. Had been alone, severed from the circuit, erased, dissolved. One creates an autonomous, self-renewing system. Come the moment, a different language will flower, germinate or descend upon one, and with it the thought that language will make possible. [...] Perhaps. There is no certainty.

The events of the plot play out this Romantic model of inspiration-from-reclusion with bitter irony. Penniless, utterly ravaged by wasting illness and drug addiction, O'Jarl – like an absurdly hyperbolic version of a Romantic poet – descends to the very depths of misery but does not find the answers he is looking for and would certainly be unable to impart them to anyone else.

O'Jarl himself abhors Romanticism, deploring “la neurasténica exaltación de Shelley pidiéndole a un viento que lo hiciera volar como una hoja, ese mequetrefe de Novalis adjudicándole ingenio a la naturaleza, tanto joder todos con las ruinas y los fantasmas” (the neurasthenic agitation of Shelley begging the wind to make him fly like a leaf, that good-for-nothing Novalis attributing inventiveness to nature, all that screwing around with ruins and ghosts).<sup>60</sup> He also thoroughly demolishes Romantic notions of heroism and revolution, accusing them of drawing too closely on the battles of Classical myths that depose one giant only to replace him with another.

In the end, the only effective means of contesting the system has nothing to do with Romantic individualism but precisely its reverse. O'Jara! understands that the only defence is indifference, to aspire to nothing, and to become "un ciudadano difuso" (a diffused citizen).<sup>61</sup> He receives comfort and stimulation from a book he keeps constantly at his side, with the title *Donde yo no estaba* (the title given to a future novel by Cohen). The book contains in diary form the meticulous and often mundane observations of the owner of a lingerie store. O'Jara! finds the writer both refreshingly rational and utterly bewitching: "Era un ciudadano completo pero aspiraba a no ser nada" (he was a full citizen but he aspired to become nothing).<sup>62</sup> Embracing Romantic immanence but eschewing its belief in divine inspiration and the individual genius, O'Jara! finds a way of being in the world that is more authentic and compassionate and that involves patient observation rather than over-reaching interpretation. He learns that "las alianzas que las cosas pasajeras entablan entre sí son más amplias cuanto menos él las interpreta" (the alliances that transient things strike up between themselves are fuller, the less he interprets them).<sup>63</sup> Meaning does not vanish in an immanent world but is enriched for those who learn to see it in the multiple and continually transforming relations between living and non-living things. Unlike Pynchon's characters, who – like Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* – are condemned to search for a transcendence that eludes them, many of Cohen's learn to live in an immanent world and to participate in the multiple and meaningful encounters with difference that it affords.

## LITERATURE: THE LABORATORY OF THE FUTURE / PIGLIA

Writing has nothing to do with signifying.

It has to do with mapping, surveying, even realms that are yet to come.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari<sup>64</sup>

Like Cohen, Piglia seeks to undermine the quest for meaning and metanarratives and to initiate us in new ways of reading (texts, others, our environment) that do not remove us from the unceasing flux of the material for which we are attempting to account. In constructing the various models and allegories of reading that circulate in his fiction, he frequently draws on mathematical and scientific notions of chance and uncertainty. Gödel's theorems of incompleteness provide a way of exposing the self-referentiality involved in using language to interpret linguistic phenomena. The futility of this exercise is clearly demonstrated in the short story "La isla" (*La ciudad ausente*, 1992). The questions of determinism, probability, and prediction that are central to the mathematics of chaotic systems are enmeshed in Piglia's writing with his understanding of literature – drawing on Bloch – as "una fiesta y un laboratorio de lo posible" (a celebration and a laboratory of the possible).<sup>65</sup> For Piglia, literature does not ultimately derive from (record or comment on) the past experience of the author but creates future experiences for the reader, becoming not so much an archive of the past as a laboratory of the future. It is in this vein that we may best approach Piglia's experiments with science-fiction topoi such as virtual reality, psychic transference, memory implantation, and the multiverse, which are resignified in his work as tropes for the act of reading and its construction of (artificial) experience. In Piglia's texts the implantation of artificial memories represents, not (only) the powerful incursion of the technological state into individual consciousness, but also the work of literature in expanding consciousness and producing a kind of trans-subjective experience. This work is theorized

in “El último cuento de Borges” (*Formas breves*, 1999) and *El último lector* (2005); it becomes a keystone of Piglia’s fictional praxis in *Prisión perpetua* (1988).

## Uncertainty and metalanguage in “La isla”

The island of Piglia’s eponymous story is populated by political exiles and refugees of so many different nations that their native tongues have joined to form a single language, which undergoes a frequent and unpredictable metamorphosis. At the start of each new cycle – which may last weeks or a single day – all the inhabitants have an instant and complete grasp of the new language and immediately forget the old one. On the island, no one is a foreigner; indeed, no fixed notion of identity can be constructed as the erratic, rapid cycling through languages renders cultural transmission impossible and erases all personal and collective memory.

The extent and speed of linguistic transformation on the island refer hyperbolically to the constant evolution of language and meaning in our own world. In the complete absence of a stable, durable linguistic system, the transmission of cultural knowledge – always subject to the vagaries of contemporary interpretation – becomes unthinkable. The status and interpretation of the island’s few written texts shift continually, and there exists no possible hermeneutical method to establish the veracity of any one view. A fragment found written in the island’s original language is for some inhabitants a religious text, taken from Genesis; for others, it is a kind of prayer or divination game; for the island’s historians it is a paragraph from a suicide note left by an exiled political militant.

The island’s peculiar language system is the subject of intense study by linguists, but their attempt to produce a descriptive linguistics is destined for frustration. Their most valiant efforts have not given rise to a system that can fully account for the uncertainty of language-change. The unpredictability of change has made it impossible, we are told, to construct any kind of external, artificial system of signs that does not itself become subject to constant mutation: “Si  $a + b$  es igual a  $c$ , esa certidumbre sólo sirve un tiempo, porque en el espacio irregular de dos segundos ya  $a$  es  $-a$  y

la ecuación es otra” (if  $a + b$  equals  $c$ , that certainty only lasts for a time, because in the irregular space of two seconds  $a$  has already become  $-a$  and the equation is a completely different one).<sup>66</sup> There is no stable point of reference upon which to construct a signifying system that is not subject to the very same changes for which it is attempting to account: truth lasts only as long as the words with which it is articulated.

Published as one of the narratives of the storytelling machine in *La ciudad ausente*, “La isla” takes its place among a series of explorations of uncertainty and virtual realities inspired by Gödel’s theorems of incompleteness. These demonstrate that “Ningún sistema formal puede afirmar su propia coherencia” (no formal system can prove its own consistency).<sup>67</sup> Gödel’s theorem shattered the formalist project in mathematics to construct an axiomatic system for mathematics, which had rested on the possibility of separating out the language in which theory is inscribed from theory itself; instead, it demonstrated that the tools of analysis are logically inseparable from the object of that analysis.

For this reason, in their study of the island’s language, Trinity College’s best linguisticians only manage to invent “un lenguaje que muestra cómo es el mundo, pero que no permite nombrarlo” (a language that shows what the world is like but doesn’t allow it to be named).<sup>68</sup> This language manifests, in its constant shifts and mutations, principles of uncertainty but cannot with any certainty account for them. It does not enjoy the status of a meta-language but is simply another system for the expression of uncertainty. In the language, we are told, “Existen tiempos lentos y tiempos rápidos, como en el cauce del Liffey” (there are slow times and fast times, like in the course of the [River] Liffey).<sup>69</sup> Language is not outside of time but subject to it, and time does not proceed in a linear fashion but according to the uneven flows of a stream tumbling over rocks, whirling in eddies, or stagnating in pools. Language cannot effectively describe or fix the world because it is part of it, governed by the same uncertainty and experience of time that it attempts to explain or to overcome.

It is unsurprising that the island’s sacred text should be Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, a novel so heterolingual that it can be understood whatever the current state of the island’s language. *Finnegans Wake* becomes “un modelo en

miniatura del mundo” (a model in miniature of the world)<sup>70</sup> that reproduces the transformations and the uncertainties of life on the island itself. No one knows the true origin of the book, but readings of it abound, infinitely: “Las interpretaciones se multiplican y el *Finnegans* cambia como cambia el mundo” (interpretations multiply and *Finnegans* changes as the world changes).<sup>71</sup> This resistance to unitary, stable interpretation is what allows the book to be read as a sacred text on the island: readable by all, usable by all, whatever language they are in and whatever their ideological or religious persuasion. The island and *Finnegans Wake* (re)produce each other; in the same way, it is implied, all literature and critical commentaries are not representations of the world but part of the flux of experience, simultaneously effecting change and being subject to it.

Yet in the impossibility of transcendence lies literature’s peculiar capacity to construct and define everyday experience. If the meaning of a text cannot be anchored in the context of its production, it may be endlessly and creatively transformed: *Finnegans Wake* becomes, not an account of past events and journeys but a map for future ones, multiple and shifting, each yielding a new story, and no one on the island can conceive of an end to its proliferations and transformations. By embracing every alternative, the novel survives them all. This lends it the authority of a myth of origin and the miraculous quality of “un texto mágico que encierra las claves del universo” (a magical text that contains the keys to the universe).<sup>72</sup>

The relativist perspective on textual meaning expounded in “La isla” may initially appear to be of fairly standard (post-)structuralist stock. However, the emphasis is not placed here on the failure of hermeneutics to fix the meaning of a particular text, but on the endless creativity that results from the continually changing relationships between the islanders and their modern “Bible”: as their own use of language changes, different parts of the text acquire legibility or sink into obscurity, and different maps of meaning emerge to challenge or complement previous ones. At every shift, the text is recreated, and so is the experience of the island’s inhabitants. This is what renders the island a utopian space of multiple possible futures. As we will see, other narratives by Piglia radicalize this notion of literature as a map of the future rather than a record of the past.

## Piglia's photographer: reading, between the real and the virtual

The prologue to *El último lector* relates the story of a photographer who keeps a wood-and-plaster replica of the city of Buenos Aires in the attic of his house in Flores. When the narrator sees the replica with his own eyes, he perceives that “lo que vi era más real que la realidad, menos indefinido y más puro” (what I saw was more real than reality, less vague and purer).<sup>73</sup> He acknowledges that the “objective” viewpoint he is afforded creates the illusion of a coherent whole, transcending temporality. The illusion of divine control is such that the photographer believes that the real city depends on his model for its existence and that what happens in the model city is duplicated in the real. For this reason, the narrator concludes, he is insane.

Thus far, Piglia's narrative would seem to concur with the thrust of Susan Stewart's argument in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, in which the creation of the model or the miniature “presents the desiring subject with an illusion of mastery, of time into space and heterogeneity into order.”<sup>74</sup> For Stewart, the creation of the miniature is bound up with the desire for a kind of transcendent time “which negates change and the flux of lived reality.”<sup>75</sup> It is a perspective that grants a distance, a transcendence and an objectivity that are incommensurate with lived experience and existence within the city. Stewart points to the nostalgia that informs such representations and the reifications they imply. She perceives “the many narratives that dream of the inanimate-made-animate as symptomatic of all narrative's desire to invent a realizable world, a world which ‘works.’”<sup>76</sup>

In contrast, however, the many models and microcosms of Piglia's narratives represent no such desire to tame the messiness of reality. His models are not ideal, perfected abstractions of the real world, but crucially intertwined with it in a complex relationship of mutual unmaking and redefinition. The suggestion that the photographer is insane is followed immediately by another alternative: that this is no mere photographer at all, and that he has indeed managed to alter the conventional relationship between reality and representation, such that the real city is the one hidden away in the attic of his house, and the one outside is nothing but a mirage or a memory. The

narrator does not pronounce a final verdict: we are not told whether he is ultimately convinced, as the photographer is, that damage or modifications to the model are reproduced in the real city in the form of passing catastrophes and unexplained accidents. In any case, our sense of logic might prevent us from understanding this as a serious proposition about the real world. But there is an important way in which the model does point to the transcendence of distinctions between the real and the replica: in its evocation of the act of reading.

The narrator grasps the reason behind the photographer's decision to allow just one visitor to see the model at any one time: "reproduce, en la contemplación de la ciudad, el acto de leer. El que la contempla es un lector y por lo tanto debe estar solo" (he reproduces, in the contemplation of the city, the act of reading. The one who contemplates is a reader and for that reason he must be alone).<sup>77</sup> What the "reader" perceives in the model will be carried with him back to the city outside, existing as a kind of virtual, parallel city alongside the real one. The model, like the act of reading, "trata sobre el modo de hacer visible lo invisible y fijar las imágenes nítidas que ya no vemos pero que insisten todavía como fantasmas y viven entre nosotros" (is about ways of making the invisible visible, and focussing on those vivid images that we no longer see but which assert themselves like ghosts and live among us).<sup>78</sup> The miniscule city is the actualization of the photographer's memory of the real city; through the act of contemplation/reading, this memory takes root in the mind of the visitor and accompanies him in his trajectories through the city itself. Travelling back after seeing the model himself, the narrator sees an image of the model take shape in the darkness of the subway tunnel, "con la fijeza y la intensidad de un recuerdo inolvidable" (with the persistence and the intensity of an unforgettable memory).<sup>79</sup>

The photographer's model maintains a secret connection, we are told, to certain *rioplatense* literary traditions, namely that "como para Onetti o para Felisberto Hernández, la tensión entre objeto real y objeto imaginario no existe, todo es real, todo está ahí y uno se mueve entre los parques y las calles, deslumbrado por una presencia siempre distante" (in the same way as for Onetti or Felisberto Hernández, the tension between real and imagined objects does not exist: everything is real, everything is here and one

moves through parks and streets, dazzled by an always distant presence).<sup>80</sup> To these names we would of course add that of Borges, whose “El Aleph” is the strongest of these presences: the narrator’s description of the model clearly reproduces the language of Borges’s story as well as the moment of vertiginous epiphany produced by the sight of the Aleph within the Aleph.

In the marked difference between the two narrators’ reactions, however, lies the decisive resignifying operation of Piglia’s text, in which the contemplation of “el inconcebible universo” (the inconceivable universe)<sup>81</sup> in the attic of Borges’s story becomes an allegory of the act of reading. Borges’s narrator, who also travels back on the subway after his revelation, fears that what he has seen will haunt him forever and rob him of the experience of surprise and newness. Fortunately, the fear is shortlived, and the cost appears to be only a few sleepless nights. Piglia’s narrator, by contrast, welcomes the intrusion of the virtual into the real and suddenly grasps “lo que ya sabía: lo que podemos imaginar siempre existe, en otra escala, en otro tiempo, nítido y lejano, igual que en un sueño” (what I already knew: what we can imagine always exists, on another scale, in another time, vivid and distant, just as in a dream).<sup>82</sup> The dizzying vision of the city’s replica does not provoke fear or horror but an understanding of the way in which real experience is continually inflected by and infused with the ghostly presence of the imagined, the dreamed, and the remembered. Reading is our portal into this multiverse, which does not always distinguish between the real and the imagined, the visible and the invisible, and in which art is not a picture of a world to be contained and mastered but structures our very experience of that world.

### “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire”: literature as oracle

This role of literature in constructing future experience for the reader – rather than registering the past experience of the writer – is given fuller and more radical treatment in Piglia’s “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire,” a novella published in the *Prisión perpetua* collection. The narrator, a writer, arrives to take up a three-month residency at the *Maison des écrivains étrangers et des traducteurs*. He is keen to meet the previous resident, Stephen Stevensen, who plans to stay on in Saint-Nazaire in a nearby hotel. The narrator

initially assumes that the miscellany of personal objects and documents he finds at the *Maison* has been carelessly left behind by Stevensen. The lengthy enumeration of these dissimilar items reinforces for the reader a sense of the random nature of chance that has brought together a map of Copenhagen, a photograph of John Berger, and a report in *Le Monde* on a counter-attack against the IRA, among other notes and items. Only later does the narrator realize that these objects were deliberately placed and that these remnants and traces do not aid the narrator's attempt to reconstruct something of Stevensen's past life so much as Stevensen's attempt to construct the narrator's future.

He discovers that Stevensen has developed a method of predicting the course of seemingly random events by analyzing his own diary. Stevensen wants to understand what had led him the previous year into a deep depression and to the edge of suicide; he thinks that his diary must contain the answer, "un enigma que tenía que descifrar y que le iba a permitir entender todo" (an enigma that he had to solve and that would allow him to understand everything), and starts searching initially at random to find "una pista que me orientara en la selva oscura de mi vida" (a clue to guide him through the dark forest of his life).<sup>83</sup> He becomes more methodical, constructing long sequences of events and following a single event through "una cantidad casi infinita de variantes y ramificaciones" (an almost infinite number of variations and ramifications).<sup>84</sup> As the network of overlapping sequences grows, he discovers a crucial set of repetitions and a common trait underlying apparently disparate events. He struggles until he realizes that his approach is wrong: instead of returning to the past, he needs to move from the present towards the future, as "El Diario debía ser leído como un oráculo" (the Diary had to be read like an oracle).<sup>85</sup> In those details and events that happen only once and are not subject to repetition, he finds "el jeroglífico donde se cifra el porvenir" (the hieroglyph in which the future is encoded).<sup>86</sup> Eventually Stevensen is able to write a diary entry that predicts a "chance" re-encounter with a blonde fellow traveller, with staggering chronometrical precision. As he grows more adept in analyzing his diary, he is able to predict future events with greater accuracy, including those of the narrator's first days in Saint-Nazaire.

Stevensen attributes to his sister, a mathematician working in air traffic control, the inspiration for the method he develops. She teaches him to understand the future differently: not as the consequence of any “moral decision” whose effects unroll in a linear fashion into the distance, but as a series of complex but calculable events, whose predictability is based on “el grado de exactitud con el que se puedan prever las alternativas cifradas en el presente” (the degree of precision with which it is possible to predict the alternatives encoded in the present).<sup>87</sup> As an example, she points to the power of Kasparov’s version of the Scheveningen Variation of the Sicilian Defence in chess, which in a famous match with Karpov “era tan sutil [...] que uno podía asimilarla a la magia y a la divinación” (was so subtle that it could be compared to magic and divination).<sup>88</sup> It did not merely predict how the game would unfold but produced each and every one of his opponent’s moves, “como si le construyera un oráculo” (as if it were constructing an oracle for him).<sup>89</sup> In a similar manner, Stevensen’s sister shows him the intricate web of lights on a computer screen that represent the trajectories of future flights crossing the airspace overhead. All the unexpected variations are predictable according to the logic of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, she claims: “Llamamos azar [...] a una función elíptica de la temporalidad” (what we call chance is an elliptical function of time).<sup>90</sup>

The suggestion that Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle might be harnessed to predict the trajectories of aeroplane flights is scientifically perverse in more ways than one. This principle, which states that the position and momentum of an electron cannot be simultaneously measured, explicitly points to the *unpredictability* of such values. Further, it describes the behaviour of subatomic particles, not jumbo jets, whose trajectories respond quite obligingly to Newtonian laws of gravity and motion, within a small margin of error for less predictable weather conditions. Equally, there is, of course, no mystery to such prowess in constructing defences in chess: they are based on an exact grasp of the alternative moves available at any point in the game.

Piglia’s impressionistic (or deliberately capricious) use of science in “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire” has the effect of bringing sharply into focus the question of which trajectories – of objects through space, games, or human destinies – might or might not yield their secrets to analysis, acquiring

a degree of predictability. Neither chess moves nor flight paths pose a serious challenge to prediction, given the right computing capacity; however, we naturally balk at the idea that human lives might respond so meekly. Stevensen's computer-assisted analysis of the repeated motifs and patterns of his diary entries suggests that what may appear to be the workings of chance in the insignificant events of our daily lives may turn out to be intricately determined, if only we could discover the laws that govern an apparently random sequence of events. By presenting as unpredictable phenomena that can be fully explained by existing laws, and conversely discovering laws governing phenomena that are apparently unpredictable and the product of chance, Piglia plunges us into the complex world of post-Newtonian physics, in which the deterministic eludes measurement, and the apparently chaotic may produce unexpected patterns. This world, as Prigogine reminds us, locates itself "somewhere between the two alienating images of a deterministic world and an arbitrary world of pure chance."<sup>91</sup> If the first "leaves no place for novelty" and, in the second, "everything is absurd, acausal, and incomprehensible,"<sup>92</sup> Piglia's texts shuttle between the two, dramatizing the uncertainties of interpretation in a probabilistic universe.

The fragments contained in a kind of postscript to the main narrative of "Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire" are presented as what remains of Stevensen's diaries. Grouped under the title "Diario de un loco" (Diary of a Madman), the sections are ordered alphabetically and frequently switch between the first and third persons. This collage of short meditations and micronarratives includes an account of the linguistic research conducted by Stevensen's sister, the capture and killing of a young female IRA terrorist known to her, and episodes that appear to indicate future events in the lives of Stevensen, his sister, and "el argentino" (the Argentine), as Stevensen refers to the narrator. These sections are interspersed with others that make frequent reference to unusual scientific phenomena, mathematical conjectures, paradoxes, and unresolved theorems, such as Lombroso's theories of criminology, Fermat's last theorem, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, Russell's type theory, diffraction in optical physics, and Pavlov's experiments. Many of the sections are linked by common themes and narrative patterns: forms of repetition

and/or exceptionality, on the one hand, and, on the other, the untimely or premature termination of a creative work.

In other words, Piglia's narrative is constructed out of series, plus interruptions to those series. The theme of the unfinished work is perhaps most poignantly developed with reference to "Kubla Khan," the poem Coleridge claimed to have dreamt in its entirety but of which he could write down only forty-five lines before an interruption erased the rest from his memory. It is also pursued in the list of mathematicians, poets, and composers who contribute works of genius at a precocious age, before destroying themselves or sinking into obscurity. The positioning of these fragments at the end of "Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire," following the revelation of the nature of Stevensen's project and his sudden disappearance, encourages us to read them proleptically as narrative prefigurings of Stevensen's own death, foretold in his diaries, according to the method he has developed. This ending is never made explicit in the text, but his failure to reappear after the narrator unplugs the computer in his hotel room strongly suggests that he is no longer alive, as does the last message left on the screen before the flickering green text fades into nothing: "Estoy aquí, en Saint-Nazaire, porque quiero conocer el final de mi vida" (I am here, in Saint-Nazaire, because I want to know the end of my life).<sup>93</sup> Indeed, in one of the diary fragments, Stevensen predicts that the Argentine writer will be the one who truncates his life's work: "Primero irrumpió en la Maison, luego irrumpió en mi laboratorio del Hotel de la République y por fin irrumpió en la vida de mi hermana" (first he burst into the Maison, then he burst into my laboratory in the Hotel de la République and finally he burst into my sister's life).<sup>94</sup>

What the narrative "reveals" is not insight into inner motives, or mental acts that precede and explain external actions, but a set of narrative forms and patterns that seem to transcend the individual and all idea of intentionality. The existence of these patterns becomes the reflexive theme of those fragments that focus on the research carried out by Stevensen's sister into proverbs and aphorisms. Erika treats these sayings as microscopic forms that encode the events and stories of previous eras: "las ruinas de un relato perdido; en el proverbio persiste una historia contada y vuelta a contar

durante siglos” (the ruins of a lost story; in the proverb endures a story that has been told and retold for centuries).<sup>95</sup>

## The ghost in the machine

At a simplistic level, “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire” articulates the Heideggerian “language speaks us” that underpins much post-structuralist thought. We do not simply write our lives in our diaries: our perceptions are shaped by the language we speak, and, if so, then why not also the direction of our lives? But Piglia takes this further to construct a thoroughly anti-psychological theory of reading and writing. One of the segments of Stevensen’s diary refers to the concept of mind developed by Gilbert Ryle:

Había soñado anoche con “El fantasma de la máquina” del doctor Ryle, el distinguido profesor de la Universidad de Oxford. “Todos (decía Ryle) vivimos dos vidas. Una vida real, donde rigen las leyes del destino, y otra que es inconfesable y secreta. Podemos imaginar una máquina lógica que nos ayude a fijar, en una tela invisible, esa experiencia privada.”<sup>96</sup>

He had dreamt last night about “The ghost in the machine” by Dr. Ryle, the distinguished professor from the University of Oxford. “We all (said Ryle) lead two lives. A real life, governed by the laws of destiny, and another that is secret and unspeakable. We could imagine a logical machine that would help us to fix, on an invisible cloth, that private experience.”

Stevensen distorts Ryle’s argument, which is in fact a critique of the “double-life theory,”<sup>97</sup> or the assumption underlying Cartesian dualism that the mental world can be distinguished from the physical one.<sup>98</sup> Ryle exposes the myth of “the Ghost in the Machine”<sup>99</sup> by challenging the idea that a person participates in two parallel histories, the first of which is comprised of what happens in and to his body, taking place in the public, physical world, and

the second of which consists of what happens in and to his mind, taking place in the private, mental world.<sup>100</sup>

Stevensen's misquotation notwithstanding, Piglia's narrative supports Ryle's theory of mind at several points. Ryle maintains that another person's mental acts are not hidden or mysterious to us; motives do not reside in the mind before becoming expressed in behaviour as mental processes are not separable from physical existence. We discover the motives of others through "an inductive process, an induction to law-like propositions from observed actions and reactions."<sup>101</sup> We work with "dispositions," laws that govern tendencies to think and behave in certain ways. As Ryle states, "I find out most of what I want to know about your capacities, interests, likes, dislikes, methods and convictions by observing how you conduct your overt doings, of which by far the most important are your sayings and writings."<sup>102</sup> This procedure is very similar to the one adopted by Stevensen, who studies the text of his own diary to understand the events of his past, to discern laws governing them and thereby to predict future behaviour. He does not need to subject the narrator to psychoanalysis to discover hidden motives and desires, or what Ryle refers to as the "occult causes"<sup>103</sup> that might shape his destiny: he simply needs to observe patterns in his actions.

Piglia uses these insights to critique psychoanalytical modes of reading-as-interpretation and to suggest alternative ways of approaching a text. The text is not a series of external symptoms pointing to a hidden set of motives or states of mind: the understanding a text may yield resides in how its operations are conducted. The diary does not reveal hidden meanings that might explain characters' actions, but patterns of events and actions; in the same way, the "meaning" of a text is to be found by studying the laws that govern its development. As Susan Sontag argues, "it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art," a fallacy we have inherited from the Greek theory of art as mimesis, and that in due course allowed Freudian and Marxist approaches to posit a latent, "true" content beneath the manifest content of the text.<sup>104</sup> Instead, Sontag advocates a different mode of reading the text: "The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show

what it means.”<sup>105</sup> Similarly, for Piglia, the text does not yield the “secrets” of psychological causality; instead, it points to its own construction, and to the narrative patternings that seem to inhere in human experience across time. This idea becomes, as we will see, the primary narrative device of *Prisión perpetua*.

### *Prisión perpetua*: reading, experience, and memory implantation

Many of the characters of Piglia’s *Prisión perpetua* try to interpret potential signs around them with the same paranoia as Cohen’s protagonist in *El testamento de O’Jara*. Like Cohen’s, Piglia’s rejection of transcendence does not bring an end to meaning but reorients it along an immanent plane of potentially infinite connections and resonances. In *Prisión perpetua*, Piglia affords us a clearer sense of how these repetitions and recursions become, not signs yielding a meaning somewhere beyond them, but the principles and materials from which literary texts are constructed.

The ex-prisoner of “En otro país” feels that “Todo se cargaba de un sentido múltiple; las relaciones entre acontecimientos dispersos eran excesivas” (everything seemed charged with multiple meanings; disparate events were linked to a disproportionate degree).<sup>106</sup> Despite his attempts to allow randomness to intervene in his erratic journey to New York, hopping from one mode of transport to another and inventing a different past for himself every time he is asked, “Sabe que lo vigilan, no cree en las coincidencias ni en el azar. Todos los acontecimientos están entrelazados; siempre hay una causa” (he knows that they are watching him, he doesn’t believe in coincidences or chance. All events are interlinked; there is always a cause).<sup>107</sup> His paranoid neurosis produces, and is produced by, the compulsive reading and over-interpretation of signs. This fanatical search for a hidden order or pattern is shared by several characters in *Prisión perpetua*, including the ex-preacher who mans a suicide assistance phoneline and listens again and again to the conversations he has recorded, in an attempt to “captar el centro de la obsesión secreta de Nueva York” (capture the heart of the secret obsession of New York).<sup>108</sup>

In the same way that the second part of “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire” presents fragments that we are led to believe come from the diaries referred to in the first part, the second part of “En otro país” comprises a series of narrative sketches that we presume to represent sections of the unfinished novel mentioned in the first. One of them – the story of the suicide assistance phonenumber – appears to have the status of a paratext, although it is not marked as such: we suspect that the other vignettes are stories told by the phonenumber’s anonymous callers. This is made most explicit at the end of the ex-convict’s story, when we are told that he occasionally makes calls to a suicide assistance phonenumber. The form of “En otro país” therefore reinforces for the reader a sense of the interconnectedness of everything, suggesting the existence of subterranean relationships that link together apparently disconnected events and experiences and allowing us to believe that everyone has a secret and that hidden patterns and meanings are simply waiting to be discovered.

The persistent use of coincidence and repetition in Piglia’s narratives allows him to explore to the full this sense of hesitation between accident and design, the laws of chance and operations of a hidden order or system. Motifs, names, and plots recur frequently in the separate stories that make up *Prisión perpetua* and between that collection and the stories embedded in *La ciudad ausente*. Lucía Nietzsche (whose biography corresponds to that of Joyce’s daughter Lucia) appears in “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire” and “El fluir de la vida,” as well as “En otro país”; she reappears as Lucía Joyce in *La ciudad ausente*. The stories are linked by a whole host of repeated locations, objects, and narrative events, including hotel rooms, trains, psychiatric clinics, photographers, exiled European scientists, rings, recording devices, suicides, and casino games. A substantial section of “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire” is incorporated into the text of *La ciudad ausente*.<sup>109</sup> This teasing sense of repetition has us searching the texts as if they could be decoded in some way to reveal a central organizing idea. As we become implicated as readers in the same activity of deciphering and decrypting as the characters, we may think we begin to glimpse an originary, masked narrative lying behind or beneath these variations, which remains tantalizingly out of reach. But the signs simply circulate, undergoing transformations and

displacements, colliding kaleidoscopically and transiently with other signs before separating again.

Reading becomes, not an exercise in finding a hidden narrative to link the apparently coincidental encounters of the text, but the space, or the act, in which those encounters take place. To use a biological metaphor, the repeated elements of *Prisión perpetua* act like viruses, multiplying themselves and moving through a population by inhabiting a series of hosts. It is narratives that are in movement, while characters often seem to be mere places of transit. For example, the historian in “En otro país” who obsessively collects proverbs and maxims, considering them to be “ruinas de grandes relatos perdidos” (ruins of great stories that have been lost),<sup>110</sup> reappears metamorphosed into Erika Turner in “Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire,” the linguist who is writing a book on proverbs, which she also treats as “ruinas de relatos perdidos.”<sup>111</sup> Rather than a metamorphosis undergone by a particular character, however, it would be more accurate to suggest that the gist or kernel of the narrative leaps from one character to another, as if from one host organism to the next.

Everywhere in *Prisión perpetua*, texts are engaged in the process of generating other texts. Steve Ratliff’s unfinished novel, a subject of fascination for the narrator of “En otro país,” ostensibly provides the inspiration for the text that follows, “El fluir de la vida.” So great is its influence on him that the narrator confesses, “Cuando escribo tengo siempre la impresión de estar contando su historia, como si todos los relatos fueran versiones de ese relato interminable” (when I write I always have the impression that I am telling his story, as if my stories were versions of that unending story).<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the similarities are immediately obvious to the reader: “El fluir de la vida” repeats a number of ideas and anecdotes that had been attributed to Steve in “En otro país.” When, for example, Lucía tells el Pájaro that “El matrimonio es una institución criminal” (marriage is a criminal institution),<sup>113</sup> she echoes the exact words of Steve in a story he had told the narrator.<sup>114</sup>

Neither plagiarism nor intertextuality can adequately account for the transmission of narrative ideas from Steve to the narrator (called Piglia). “En otro país” attests to the power of storytelling to create mental pictures so vivid that they become indistinguishable from real experience in memory.

The narrator recalls a scene described by his author-friend Steve as if he had witnessed it himself, and, to this extent, he states: “La novela de Steve ha terminado por formar parte de mi propio pasado” (Steve’s novel had ended up forming part of my own past).<sup>115</sup> From this confusion between reading and lived experience arises a definition of reading that underpins many of Piglia’s texts. To remember with the memory of another is “una metáfora perfecta de la experiencia literaria” (a perfect metaphor for literary experience), as “La lectura es el arte de construir una memoria personal a partir de experiencias y recuerdos ajenos” (reading is the art of constructing a personal memory from the memories and experiences of others): scenes from books we have read remain with us as if they were part of our own past.<sup>116</sup>

“To write is not to recount one’s memories and voyages, one’s loves and griefs, one’s dreams and phantasms,” Deleuze maintains: if we believe that novels can be created “with our perceptions and affections, our memories and archives, our travels and fantasies, our children and parents, with the interesting characters we have met,” we misunderstand the nature of the novel, “which goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived.”<sup>117</sup> In the same way, for Piglia, we should not read literature for what it transmits to us about an author’s past experience, but for what it reveals to us of literature’s capacity to create new experiences and perceptions in the reader.

This ability of literature to embed itself into the memory of the reader, together with the continual transempodiment of narratives in Piglia’s fiction, leads to a resignification of one of the most sinister tropes of science fiction: memory implantation. Piglia references the common dystopian version of this trope in his account of the clinic in “Los nudos blancos” (*La ciudad ausente*), where dissident citizens are reprogrammed with false memories as a method of control. These operations are carried out against the wishes of patients by doctors whose actions recall those of the military officers whose torture of prisoners during the Argentine dictatorship frequently produced forms of amnesia. More broadly, as Piglia observes in an essay, in the dystopian visions of writers such as Burroughs, Pynchon, Gibson, and Philip Dick, we often witness “la destrucción del recuerdo personal” (the destruction of personal memory), or – more accurately – “la sustitución de

la memoria propia por una cadena de secuencias y de recuerdos extraños” (the substitution of individual memory with a chain of sequences and foreign memories).<sup>118</sup> Personal identity and individual memories are replaced in these paranoid, postmodern narratives with uncertainty about the past and a dissolution of identity and memory into the impersonal or the artificial.

For Piglia, many of the most well-known of Borges’s narratives also revolve around “la incertidumbre del recuerdo personal, sobre la vida perdida y la experiencia artificial” (the uncertainty of personal memory, the loss of life and artificial experience).<sup>119</sup> The function of the surveillance state in stories such as “La lotería en Babilonia,” for example, is to “inventar y construir una memoria incierta y una experiencia impersonal” (invent and construct a false memory and an impersonal form of experience).<sup>120</sup> Artificial memories are also, Piglia suggests, inculcated by mass culture; here again he aligns his insights with those of Borges, for whom mass culture becomes “una máquina de producir recuerdos falsos y experiencias impersonales. Todos sienten lo mismo y recuerdan lo mismo y lo que sienten y recuerdan no es lo que han vivido” (a machine for producing false memories and impersonal experiences. Everyone feels the same and remembers the same and what they feel and remember is not what they have lived).<sup>121</sup> The same idea is considered by Junior in *La ciudad ausente*, who muses that to watch television is to read the minds of millions of people.<sup>122</sup>

However, the implantation of artificial memories is also associated in Piglia’s work with the creative and life-giving work of literature. To write is to implant a false memory into another, to “Incorporar a la vida de un desconocido una experiencia inexistente que tiene una realidad mayor que cualquier cosa vivida” (incorporate into the life of an unknown person a non-existent experience that is more real than anything lived).<sup>123</sup> The power of the storytelling-machine in *La ciudad ausente* – discussed in detail in Chapter 4 – lies entirely in her ability to insert artificial memories into her listeners/readers, “relatos convertidos en recuerdos invisibles que todos piensan que son propios” (narratives that become invisible memories that everyone thinks are their own).<sup>124</sup>

It is to invoke this creative function of reading that texts are often used as divination systems in Piglia’s narratives, and literature is read as an oracle,

a source of private messages to the reader that predict and construct future experience. In an essay in *El último lector*, for example, Robinson Crusoe does not read the Bible to discover a hidden meaning to his existence; he believes in its prophetic power and searches it for guidance, and therefore “la lectura se realiza en su vida” (what he reads becomes fulfilled in his life).<sup>125</sup> A woman in “En otro país” imagines life to be a roulette wheel and that all bets – as in Borges’s “La lotería en Babilonia” – change the real-life destiny for their players. Like the protagonists of Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), she starts to consult the *I-Ching*, the ancient Chinese *Book of Changes*, using it as a divination system to help her structure her empty days spent alone. The difficulty of choosing paths through “la maraña microscópica de posibilidades” (the microscopic tangle of possibilities) is alleviated when she realizes that, rather than decision-making, all she needs to do is decipher directions embedded in the text.<sup>126</sup> She becomes so dependent on it for every aspect of life that “A veces consultaba el *I-Ching* para saber si debía consultar el *I-Ching*” (sometimes she consulted the *I-Ching* to know whether she should consult the *I-Ching*).<sup>127</sup>

Perhaps it is partly our propensity towards what Deleuze and Guattari call “interpretosis” (see the discussion of *El testamento de O’Jara* above) that accords literature its peculiar power to intervene performatively in our lives. Piglia’s perception of the encoding in fiction of “lo que está por venir” (what is yet to come)<sup>128</sup> engages with Bloch’s understanding of the utopian, anticipatory function of literature (see Chapter 1); it also resonates with Deleuze’s declaration that literature creates the future, in the sense of producing new perceptions and affects. Piglia’s affirmation that “lectura se mezcla con la experiencia, busca emociones, sentimientos, formas corporales” (reading mixes with experience, in search of emotions, feelings, bodily forms)<sup>129</sup> establishes literature and the act of reading as a process of (virtual) embodiment rather than something done by an embodied self. For this reason, metempsychosis, transmigration and reincarnation – among other cherished tropes of fantasy, SF, and cyberfiction – are often chosen in Piglia’s essays and fiction as metaphors for the effects of reading. For Piglia, as for Deleuze, texts are not maps for the discovery of existing worlds but for the projection of future ones: “the expression and creation of what is not yet, not present or other

than actual."<sup>130</sup> Reading creates connections that traverse time and space, bridging the real and the virtual, forging experiences that we have not lived in an embodied sense but that cannot be dismissed as false or artificial. For that reason, literature should not be read as an archive of the past or a record of the present, but as a map of the future.