



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

[rmst202.arts.ubc.ca](http://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca)





THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

*Mad Toy: Roberto Arlt*  
on Picaresque  
Betrayal and Rebirth

[rmst202.arts.ubc.ca](http://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca)





THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

## *Mad Toy: Roberto Arlt* on Picaresque Betrayal and Rebirth

with Jon Beasley-Murray

[rmst202.arts.ubc.ca](http://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca)



The novel is new in that it sets out to depict Argentina's rapidly modernizing capital city as it is transformed by mass migration and industrialization.

But this story is also a traditional one, in that its structure and themes draw on the genre of the picaresque, as the tale of a mobile rogue who gives us a close-up view of the underbelly of a society in rapid transformation.

The book acknowledges the past, but at the same time betrays it, as Arlt outlines (and enacts) an affirmation of treachery, no longer as negation but as the condition of possibility for the new to emerge.

Arlt's prose registers the multivocal cacophony of immigrant Buenos Aires, infected by the linguistic "mistakes" and "errors" of this tumultuous contact zone.

Arlt takes up the mantle of “bad writer”: unscrupulous, but also irreverent towards the norms of what “good writing” should be.



*Mad Toy* both pays homage to and tries to burn down the institution of literature, simultaneously returning to the idea of literature as an ever mobile, dynamic, “mad toy” of innovation and invention, that cannot or should not be hamstrung by notions of fidelity or truth.



# **THE PICARESQUE, PULP FICTION, AND NEW FORMS OF REPRESENTATION**

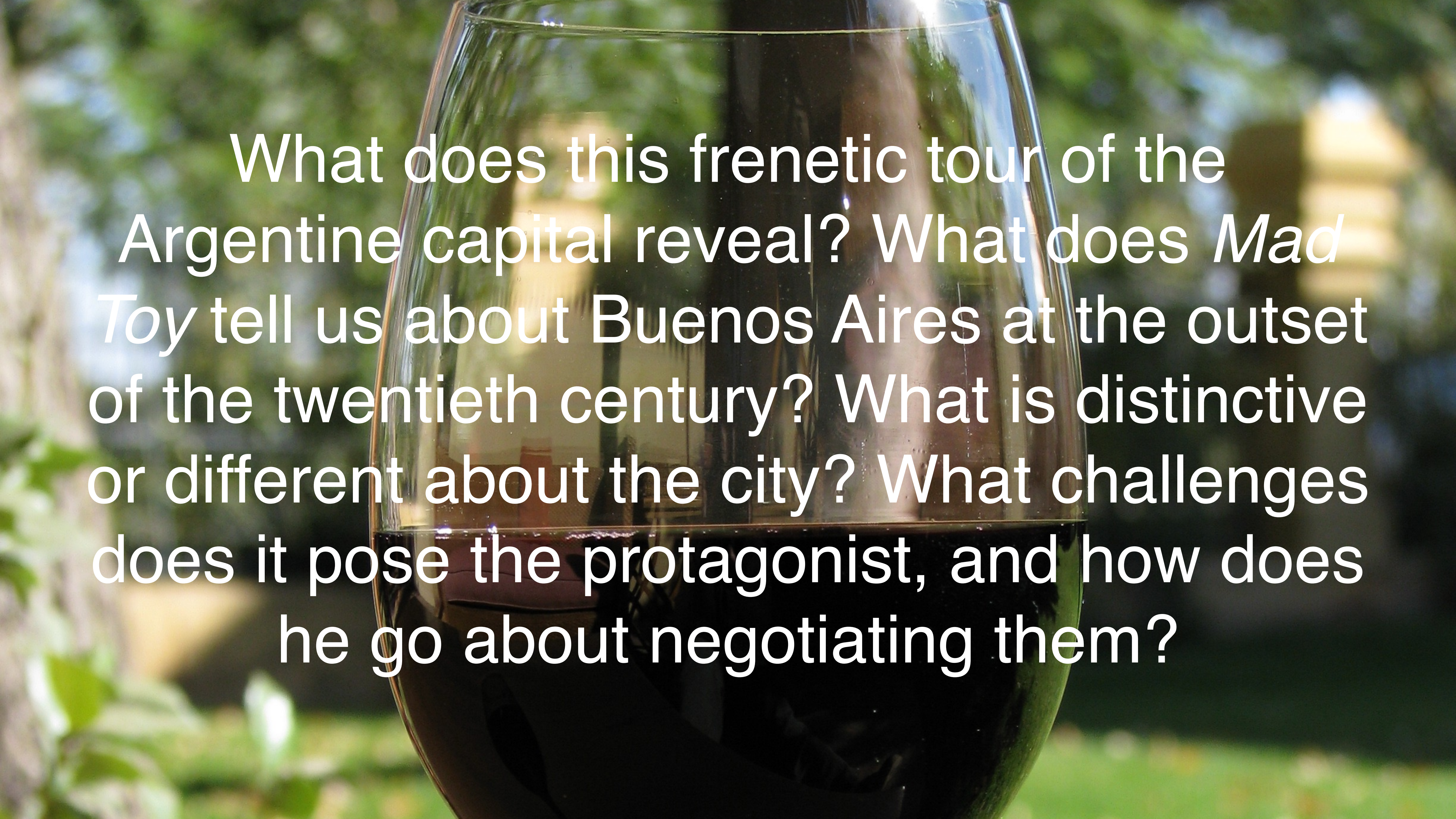
“Picaresque: ‘Belonging or relating to rogues or knaves: applied esp. to a style of literary fiction dealing with the adventures of rogues, chiefly of Spanish origin.’ *OED*”  
(Harry Sieber)

The tale is told in the first person, by the *pícaro* or rogue himself, and the *pícaro*'s journey is defined by movement, between social roles or professions, thus showing us the underside of the many institutions and spaces that comprise a particular social world.

“This picaresque *tour d’horizon*—hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes—[. . .] is that of colonial Mexico.” (Benedict Anderson)

in Arlt, the *pícaro*'s progress takes us through streets and schools, shops and markets, boarding houses and barracks, immersing us in a polyglot (and multi-accented) Babel that includes Andalusian Spanish, Italian, German, and French, as well as *lunfardo*, the working-class slang of immigrant Argentina itself.

What does this frenetic tour of the Argentine capital reveal? What does *Mad Toy* tell us about Buenos Aires at the outset of the twentieth century? What is distinctive or different about the city? What challenges does it pose the protagonist, and how does he go about negotiating them?

A close-up photograph of a wine glass filled with red wine. The glass is the central focus, with the wine's surface reflecting light. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with foliage. The text is overlaid on the glass, centered horizontally and vertically.

What does this frenetic tour of the Argentine capital reveal? What does *Mad Toy* tell us about Buenos Aires at the outset of the twentieth century? What is distinctive or different about the city? What challenges does it pose the protagonist, and how does he go about negotiating them?



Each chapter in Arlt's book is a new episode in its narrator's voyage of discovery and struggle for advancement.

“Robbery was a noble  
and beautiful act.” (29)

“I would so much rather that you had  
the time to write.” (56)

The literary forms through which he is viewing the world are out of date, inadequate, and *he* might be the one to invent new ways to represent the world around them.

“Who will paint the sleeping worker  
who smiles as he dreams because he  
has burned down his master’s  
den of thieves?” (82)

“The honking of automobile horns stretched out in a hoarse proclamation of joy.” (82)

“I thought of the heroes in my favorite books—especially of Rocamboles who, wearing his visored cap and a twisted smile on his rogue’s mouth, appeared before my eyes, spurring me on to glib speech and a heroic pose.” (91)

**“An automatic signaling device for shooting stars and a typewriter that takes dictation.” (91)**



Say, this guy wouldn't be an anarchist,  
would he?" (93)

“We don’t need smart brutes here, just dumb brutes who can work.” (99)

For all their rhetoric of creativity and freedom, in practice all that matters is discipline and subjugation to an established hierarchy.

“Why did you betray your friend? And for no reason. Aren’t you ashamed to have so little dignity at your age?” (149)

“I don’t know whether other people will experience the force of life as I do, but inside me there is joy, a full, unconscious kind of joy.” (150)

“I’d like to go south. . . to Neuquén. . .  
where there are glaciers and clouds. . .  
and tall mountains. . . . I’d like to see  
the mountains.” (151)

The narrator has a new career in a new town, and perhaps has finally achieved the distance required to write the book that we have just read, a *Bildungsroman* of the city, in its own Argentine idiom.



# **THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF BETRAYAL**



**“I’ll ruin the life of  
the finest man I’ve known.” (141)**

*“The truth is, I had to confess, I’m a low-down scoundrel who’s half-crazy; but Rocambole was no less: he murdered people. . . . I don’t. [. . .] he killed. Is there anyone he didn’t betray?” (141-2)*

“I’ll be beautiful like Judas Iscariot.  
I’ll carry a pain for the rest of my life . . .  
a pain. . . . Despair will open my eyes to  
great spiritual horizons. [. . .] and I’ll bear a  
wound for the rest of my life . . . but . . . ah!  
life is sweet [. . .] then I’ll be beautiful like  
Judas Iscariot . . . and I’ll be in pain . . .  
in pain . . . Swine!” (142)

“The betrayal becomes Astier’s identity [. . .]  
a unique secret that sets Astier apart  
from others.” (Ben Bollig)

Treachery is a generative force,  
a “force of life” (150).

The *pícaro* has always been an untrustworthy figure: he is, literally, *shifty*; mobile, volatile, refusing to be pinned down.

The *pícaro* has always been an untrustworthy figure: he is, literally, *shifty*; mobile, volatile, refusing to be pinned down.

He is never willing or able to settle, to accept his place in society.

The picaresque constitutes a political critique of the institutions through which the *pícaro* passes, but it is also an *infrapolitical* critique of the capacity of politics to solve the problems it reveals.



The *pícaro* is as likely to betray  
allies as enemies!

Silvio's theft of books from the library and subsequent attempt to burn down the bookshop are an assault not simply on institutions of the state and commerce, but also on the notion of "literary taste."

“It’s said of me that I write badly.  
It’s possible.” (Arlt, qtd. in Piglia)

“The truth is that he wrote like shit. [. . .] He wrote as if he wanted to make a mess of his life, to destroy his own prestige. [. . .] No doubt he has one undeniable merit: it would be impossible to write worse. In that respect he is unique and without rival.” (Piglia)

“He wrote badly, but in the moral sense of the word. His is *bad* writing, perverse writing. [. . .] His is a criminal style. He does what one is not supposed to do, what’s wrong; he wrecks everything that for fifty years had been understood to be good writing in this pallid republic.” (Piglia)

Arlt breaks the “laws” of “proper” writing,  
much as Silvio breaks the laws regulating  
property as well as propriety.

Arlt steals from the literary tradition, but he also turns his back on it, betrays it, gives it a figurative middle finger, by opening up his text to the cacophonous demotic of the Buenos Aires streets.

“We find in Arlt a proposal that a writer should be thief, traitor, inventor, *poète maudit* [accursed poet] [. . .] who is beyond the good and beyond reason.” (Piglia)



Arlt puts a torch to the very notion of Literature itself, in the hope that new forms of speaking and writing will emerge, reborn from the flames.

**“Good artists copy; great artists steal.”**

“In the double game of the cited texts (the story of the robbery, the story of Rocambole), text within text, story within story, the possibility of writing itself is born. In this sense, one would have to say that in this book the mad toy is nothing other than literature.” (Piglia)

“With his betrayal, Astier is simply  
doing literature.” (Piglia)

Arlt exposes and revels in the treachery of words, not least as found in the argot of immigrant Buenos Aires, a language in flux under the pressure of new arrivals and the new uses to which it is put to describe novel experiences, unheralded encounters, and their unanticipated consequences.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



This video is licensed under  
Creative Commons.

You are free to **share** (re-use,  
copy, redistribute) and/or **adapt**  
(re-mix, transform, build on) it.

But you must **attribute** (give  
appropriate credit), and you may  
only use it for **non-commercial**  
purposes.

CC-BY-NC, 2024



# PRODUCTION

[jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca](mailto:jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca)

CC-BY-NC, 2024





Made in Vancouver, BC

CC-BY-NC, 2024