

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Mad Toy: Roberto Arlt on Picaresque Betrayal and Rebirth

There is something very new but also strangely traditional about Roberto Arlt's novel, *Mad Toy* (*El juguete rabioso*, 1926), written and set in 1920s Buenos Aires. 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. Everything here is up for grabs, on sale in a maelstrom of social mobility in which almost anything is possible. The plot tells the story of its protagonist's trajectory as he tries to leave poverty behind and get ahead in life, driven both by his auto-didactic enthusiasms and by his willingness to sell others out. 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, and his writing is infected by the linguistic "mistakes" and "errors" of this tumultuous contact zone. Arlt takes up the mantle of "bad writer": unscrupulous like his novel's (anti-)hero, Silvio Astier, 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.

1. The Picaresque, Pulp Fiction, and New Forms of Representation

Both the theme and the style of Arlt's novel point to a venerable tradition in Spanish (and Latin American) letters: the picaresque, that is, a "style of fiction dealing with the adventures of rogues" as critic Harry Sieber puts it (*The Picaresque* 1), quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The origins of the picaresque are almost coterminous with the origins of prose fiction in Spanish, going back at least as far as the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* of 1554. The *Lazarillo* established some of the conventions of the picaresque style, which are followed also by *Mad Toy*: for instance, that the tale is told in the first person, by the *pícaro* or rogue him- (or, less often, her-)self; and that the *pícaro*'s journey is defined by movement, between social roles or professions, which involves him "flit[ting] from one master to another" (Sieber again [2], now quoting Frank Chandler), thus showing us the

underside of the many institutions and spaces that comprise a particular social world. As Benedict Anderson puts it in a comment on what is generally accepted to be the first novel written in Latin America—José Joaquín de Lizardi’s *El periquillo sarniento* (*The Mangy Parrot*), published in Mexico in instalments from 1816—the result is what he calls a “picaresque *tour d’horizon*.” If in colonial Mexico, this encompasses “hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes” (*Imagined Communities* 30), in Arlt’s early twentieth-century Buenos Aires the *pícaro*’s progress takes us variously 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.

So what then 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? Pause the video here, and write down some thoughts. While you do that, I’ll have a glass of Malbec, but I’ll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Malbec

At one point, just over half-way through the book, Silvio is offered a vermouth, but he politely declines: “Thank you very much, but no, Señor. I don’t drink” (92). Indeed, almost every time that the narrator describes himself as “drunk,” it is a metaphorical intoxication: he works up a “drunken exuberance” from “a conviviality cool as a glass of wine” (82); elsewhere he is “drunk with anguish” (111); when he finally makes a sale as a paper salesman he is left “quivering with joy [. . .] wander[ing] the streets in a daze” in a “drunkenness” of “astonishing Dionysian joy” that he compares to that of his literary heroes, drawn from the Italian poet, Gabriele D’Annunzio (117). For Silvio, literary inebriation is perhaps better than the real thing. But that should not stop us from drinking a glass of Argentine wine. The “obscure” and “humble” Malbec, originally simply one of the half dozen grape varieties that go into a Bordeaux blend, has come into its own with its transplantation to the New World. In Argentina, which wine-writer Ian Mount calls the “vineyard at the end of the world,” it has become an icon of national identity.

Each chapter in Arlt's book is a new episode in its narrator's voyage of discovery and struggle for advancement. At the outset, Silvio Astier is fourteen years old and still living at home, with his mother and sister (the only mention of a father comes when we are told that he "killed himself when [Silvio] was little" [93]). Inspired by reading tales of banditry, and convinced that "robbery was a noble and beautiful act," he forms a "thieves' club" with like-minded friends. Their first target is a school library, from which they steal both lightbulbs and books (two different vehicles for enlightenment?), keeping some of the more interesting volumes for themselves. For Silvio is a voracious reader of everything from technical scientific manuals to poetry, but above all of the pulp fiction adventures of characters such as Rocamboles, from the pen of nineteenth-century French writer, Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail. When, in the second chapter, at age fifteen, Silvio is told by his mother that he has to go out to work, she interrupts his reading to do so. Moreover, even she regrets her injunction, in that she is aware of her son's ambitions to move from reading to writing: "I would so much rather that you had the time to write," she tells him (56). It is as though she recognized that the literary forms through which he is viewing the world are out of date, inadequate, and that *he* might be the one to invent new ways to represent the world around them. As Silvio himself muses later in the same chapter, when he has tried to start a fire in the bookshop in which he has been working, by throwing a lit coal into some papers: "Who will paint the sleeping worker who smiles as he dreams because he has burned down his master's den of thieves?" (82). Both his environment and his gleeful attitude towards the liveliness of its urban modernity ("the honking of automobile horns stretched out in a hoarse proclamation of joy" [82]) require new stories and new story-tellers.

It is this spirit of invention that carries Silvio to his next adventure, in which (now aged sixteen) he signs up with the armed forces. Against perhaps the typical image of the military as the site of regimentation and order, here it is portrayed as seeking new ideas and keen on experimental technology. Silvio prepares himself for his interview by thinking of "the heroes in my favorite books—especially of Rocamboles [. . .] spurring me on to glib speech and a heroic pose," and he goes on to combine imitation and innovation as he outlines ideas for "a signaling device for shooting stars and a typewriter that takes dictation" (91): cosmic communication and mechanized writing. This goes down well enough with the officers at first, though on hearing of his literary interests they briefly

worry about his politics—"Say, this guy wouldn't be an anarchist, would he?" (93)—but his undoing ultimately comes when a more senior commander determines that "We don't need smart brutes here, just dumb brutes who can work" (99). Thus the army as well as Argentine society more broadly stand accused of hypocrisy: for all their rhetoric of creativity and freedom, in practice all that matters is discipline and subjugation to an established hierarchy.

In the book's final chapter, then, Silvio cynically decides to play both sides, informing on a friend who had tried to persuade him to join in on a burglary. The homeowner who would have been the victim of this criminality is equal parts grateful and shocked that there should be such little honour among thieves: "Why did you betray your friend? [. . .] Aren't you ashamed to have so little dignity at your age?" (149). But Silvio tells him that any sense of regret is outweighed by a feeling of "joy, a full, unconscious kind of joy" (150). Refusing a monetary reward for his act of betrayal, he accepts instead the offer of a job in the south of the country ("where there are glaciers and clouds. . . and tall mountains" [151]). With that, the novel ends: 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.

2. *The Politics and Aesthetics of Betrayal*

Silvio justifies his betrayal of an erstwhile friend—indeed, of somebody that he calls "the finest man I've known" (141)—by thinking back, once more, to his literary models and heroes: "*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). Such treachery is thereby reclaimed as positive and productive. The title of the book's final chapter is "Judas Iscariot," and Silvio muses to himself, in part debating but ultimately affirming the fate he is choosing: "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). Embracing betrayal is also an aestheticization of suffering. Pain is no longer to be avoided—the novel's clear-eyed realism suggests that this would be impossible, in any case—but instead is to be accepted, perhaps even celebrated. Betrayal loses its negative connotations: as critic Ben Bollig comments, it "becomes Astier's

identity [. . .] a unique secret that sets Astier apart from others” (“One or Several Betrayals?” 412). Or rather, betrayal is what enables Arlt’s protagonist to become something other than the roles to which he is otherwise apparently predestined: loyal worker or member of the criminalized underclass. It is betrayal that allows Silvio to construct his own destiny. Treachery is a generative force: only by turning his back on past loyalties can he imagine alternative futures, or even a future at all.



Figure 1: Boys playing on the street in 1930s Buenos Aires

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. He either wants too much (too much freedom, too much autonomy) to be satisfied in any one place, or he bristles at the fact that too much (too much application, too much energy and devotion) is asked of him by the various would-be masters whose tutelage he tries and tests and forever finds wanting. He slips through the cracks both of colonial order (in the case of Lizardi’s *Periquillo*) and of postcolonial nation-building (with Arlt’s Silvio Astier). 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: there is no class solidarity here, no organized social protest. The *pícaro* is as likely to betray allies as enemies!

The Argentine critic and writer Ricardo Piglia (whose novel, *Burnt Money*, is similarly concerned with treachery and betrayal among thieves, who ultimately sacrifice even what their thievery has got them, simply because they can) points out that Arlt's betrayal is literary or aesthetic as much as it is political or infrapolitical. Piglia sees Silvio's theft of books from the library and subsequent attempt to burn down the bookshop not simply as an assault on institutions of the state on the one hand, and commerce on the other, but also on the notion of "literary taste" ("Roberto Arlt" 24). Moreover, he underlines the fact that Arlt unabashedly owns up to the charge that he writes "badly": "It's said of me that I write badly. It's possible" (22). Or as Piglia has a character say of Arlt in another of his novels (*Artificial Respiration*): "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" (131-2). But it is not carelessness that accounts for Arlt's errors, his mangling of language, grammar, syntax, and semantics: "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" (132). 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, as with his theft of elements of the picaresque, 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.* For Piglia, what "we find in Arlt [is] a proposal that a writer should be thief, traitor, inventor, *poète maudit* [accursed poet] [. . .] who is beyond the good and beyond reason" ("Roberto Arlt" 27). Taking aim at the institutions of taste, education, and commerce that are fundamentally exclusionary (why do Silvio and his friends have to *break in* to a library in the first place?) or that reduce everything by commodification to cost, value, and profit (it is no accident that Silvio becomes a seller of paper), 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.

Yet Piglia also suggests that all literature is theft or betrayal. (There is an echo here of the quip attributed to various modernist artists in different genres—T. S. Eliot, Pablo Picasso,

and Igor Stravinsky, among others—that “good artists copy; great artists steal.”) With Arlt’s patchwork of quotations and influences from writers consecrated and otherwise, both classics and “pulp,” “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 text the mad toy is nothing other than literature.” So, with “his betrayal, Astier is simply doing literature” (26). Inherent to the literary endeavour is betrayal, or even multiple betrayals: larceny and theft from a canon whose limits and enclosures have always to be over-run; but also investment in a project of (mis)representation that necessarily involves guile, illusion, and deceit. 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.

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Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Buenos_Aires_-_Niños_jugando_al_fútbol_en_la_calle.jpg

Song: Carlos Gardel, "Mi Buenos Aires querido"