

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

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## ***Money to Burn: Ricardo Piglia on Genre, Truth, and Money***

Any text has elements of genre in that it repeats certain formal patterns, follows some general structural models, employs more or less familiar stylistic conventions, and explores recognizable themes or concerns. It may be prose, poetry, or drama, for instance; fiction or non-fiction; journalism, chronicle, or manual; novel, novella, or short story; first-person, third-person, or framed narration; autobiographical, historical, or philosophical; tragic, sentimental, or comic; realistic, fantastic, or melodramatic; and so on and so forth, often in various combinations. Genre is one way in which we, as readers, categorize and distinguish between texts, but it is also a way in which texts set readers' expectations. Nowhere is this more true than with so-called "genre fiction," such as much crime fiction, science fiction, fantasy, or romantic fiction, which tends to follow genre "rules" particularly closely, sometimes to the extent of being relatively predictable: a murder mystery, for example, will open with an unexplained death but end with a resolution as the detective almost always solves their case; a romance novel will begin with an unhappily single young woman, who of the course of the story will almost always find her Mr Right only after several run-ins with superficially charming Mr Wrongs. It is in part the predictability (but also the popularity) of genre fiction that means that it is sometimes disparaged or seen as inferior to "literary" fiction.

With *Money to Burn* (*Plata quemada*, literally "Burnt Money," 1997), however, Argentine author Ricardo Piglia, renowned for what is often philosophically dense and experimental fiction (such as the novel *Artificial Respiration* [*Respiración artificial*, 1980] or the stories collected in *Nombre falso* [1975]), as well as for his astute and innovative literary and cultural criticism, takes on genre fiction. This is a thriller, an account of a heist and its consequences, that draws particularly on the "hard-boiled" detective fiction of US authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler; as critic Gisle Selnes puts it, *Money to Burn* is a "thoroughly hard-boiled novel" ("Parallel Lives" 181). It certainly shares Hammett and Chandler's cynicism (as for example in a book such as Hammett's *Red Harvest* [1929]) about police corruption and murky politics, that questions who the true criminals are. "What is robbing a bank compared to founding one?" as Piglia's epigraph, taken from German playwright Bertolt Brecht, has it. At the same time, *Money to Burn* also reworks or alludes to other genres, particularly as they have been developed

by Argentine authors, such as the social realism of Roberto Arlt, the metafictional trickery of Jorge Luis Borges, and the politically-engaged journalism of Roberto Walsh. In other words, this is a novel that is very aware of its place in a series of literary traditions that range from pop culture and pulp fiction to high culture and even the avant garde.

The tale the novel tells is substantially a true story. It reconstructs events from September to November, 1965, when an armed gang robbed a van taking over \$7,000,000 in Argentine pesos of payroll money—equivalent to somewhere between \$30,000 and \$50,000 US dollars at the time, and in the region of \$300,000 to \$450,000 now—from a bank to the town hall in a municipality on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (killing the courier and a police officer in the process), and then fled across the River Plate to the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo. There they hid out for several weeks until a pair of the gangsters were discovered putting false number plates on a car, leading to another shoot-out, in which a Uruguayan officer was killed, after which the criminals escaped to a flat not far from the city centre. An informant, however, betrayed them and led the authorities to this hide-out, which was then surrounded by up to 350 armed police, “practically the entirety of Montevideo’s police force” (Bengochea, “350 policías, lanzallamas y bombas Molotov”). With the Argentines refusing to surrender, a siege ensued that lasted over fifteen hours, throughout the night of November 5 and on into the following afternoon, in front of a crowd of curious onlookers who made their way to the street outside. Hundreds of rounds were exchanged on both sides, as well as flamethrowers and Molotov cocktails, causing very significant damage to the building. Two policemen died in what soon became known as the “Battle of Liberaij,” after the besieged building, as did two of the three gang-members, with the third, seriously wounded, dying a little later (though there is some confusion as to which of the three survived, and for how long, as with some of the other facts detailed here). The case clearly fascinated Piglia, who wrote about it almost immediately in his diary, where he also records through much of 1966 and 1967 his plans to turn it into a novel, which he starts writing by the second half of 1967, weighing up various possible titles such as *El robo* (“The Robbery”) and *Entre hombres* (“Among Men”). As critic Daniel Balderston notes, the diaries reveal that even almost five years after the events that inspired it, in June, 1970, “he is still working on the novel” (“Piglia’s Diaries” 259). But it gets put aside, and Piglia only returns to the project in the 1990s, for it finally to be published in 1997.

Somewhere along the line, however, things change. Not everything is as it seems, and the story as it emerges has undergone significant modifications. More importantly, it has also become, among other things, a reflection on the relationship between fiction and reality, and on the ways in which fictions sustain our sense of what is real and true. And in the Battle of Liberaij, at least as Piglia portrays it, what is at stake—and is briefly but shockingly betrayed—is our collective belief in that most fictitious of things: money.

### 1. *Based on a True Story*

In the epilogue to *Money to Burn*, Piglia—or his narratorial surrogate—declares that “This novel tells a true story” (204), and he goes to some pains to outline the procedures he has followed to eliminate all traces of fiction or unresolvable speculation: “I have always used original material in the accounts of the words and actions of its characters. [. . .] whenever I have been unable to confirm the facts with direct sources, I have opted to omit that particular version” (203-4). He details the sources on which he has drawn: contemporaneous newspaper coverage; transcripts of interrogations, witness statements, psychiatric reports, and even the “secret recordings made by the police department” of what went on in the besieged flat. He tells us of the people who have helped him with his research: judges who allowed him to consult “this mass of material”; a lawyer who gave him access to “records of the interrogations” (206); and a friend who lived in Montevideo at the time, who helped him “orchestrate the different versions of this same story from a variety of descriptions and evidence” (207). Piglia also recounts a chance encounter, on a train headed to Bolivia, with one of the story’s protagonists: Blanca Galeano, who had a brief relationship in Uruguay with one of the dead gunmen. He tells us he took notes of his lengthy conversations, spanning two days, with this first-hand witness, “for in those days I still considered that a writer had to go everywhere with his journalist’s notepad” (209). Finally, he says something about the process of writing the book, and how when he returned to it over a long lapse and worked on his initial drafts, he gave that first version “a complete overhaul in order to be absolutely faithful to the facts” (209). And indeed, in the body of the book itself, Piglia frequently includes parenthetical asides to indicate the sources of his information, or at least that he has sources—“according to the daily papers” (23); “according to the report by Dr Bunge” (52);

“according to sources” (125)—and even the limits of what they can tell him—“this remained unconfirmed” (28). If the book’s genre is true crime, Piglia emphasizes its truth.



Image 1: The Liberaj Building, close to downtown Montevideo, today

As scholar David Conlon observes, to frame the book as a journalistic enterprise, retelling events from a new perspective, also places it within the tradition established by Argentine campaigning journalist Rodolfo Walsh. Indeed, Conlon argues that *Money to Burn* constitutes a “specific homage” (“Discourse with the Incorporeal Air” 658) to texts by Walsh such as *Operation Massacre* (*Operación masacre*, 1957), which investigates the state’s extra-judicial detention and killing of a group of working-class men suspected of involvement in an attempted insurgency in 1956, and above all *¿Quién mató a Rosendo?*

("Who Killed Rosendo?" 1969), which is about the assassination of a labour-union leader. Like Walsh, Piglia dramatizes a historical crime, giving face and personality to victims of violence in what Conlon calls (pointing out also similarities with the "mousetrap" scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) "an attempt to reframe and thereby seize authorial control from a corrupted state in respect of the narrative of a crime" (660). Walsh's work is often said to be an origin for the specifically Latin American genre of the *testimonio*, which aims to give voice to those (the working class, women, Indigenous people, and so on) who traditionally have not had access to self-representation through writing. And in readings of both Walsh's books and subsequent *testimonios*, the veracity and reliability of subaltern representation is crucial for the political effect that they seek: it is because their revised versions of what happened are true that the reader is invited to solidarity with the protagonists of the histories they recount. In Piglia, however, though we are perhaps invited to empathize with the (anti-)heroes of his narrative, it is less clear that our solidarity is incited. We are not asked to seek justice for the dead gunmen, in part because the very idea of justice is under interrogation. Moreover, in Piglia it is less clear that truth is at stake in quite the same way.

It does not take great analytic acuity to realize that, for all his assurances, Piglia often plays somewhat fast and loose with the truth in *Money to Burn*. This becomes apparent when he provides, for instance, accounts of conversations and even characters' internal thoughts that no amount of research could substantiate; or, for instance, when he seems to claim a gunman who died in the siege as one of his sources ("recalled and recounted the Kid" [60]). In this, however, it is not very different from "non-fiction novels" such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), which similarly deals with a murder case and likewise invents or changes details. But readers familiar with Piglia's other work will also be tipped off by the appearance, as a young reporter, of one Emilio Renzi, who frequently figures in Piglia's fiction as an alter ego of the author himself (whose full name was Ricardo Emilio Piglia Renzi). The novel even toys with us a little when it reveals the name, found on the "press pass on the lapel of his corduroy jacket, which clearly read Emilio Renzi or Rienzi" (66). Then, in the epilogue, the name is coyly reduced to the initials "E. R.," to describe the person who allegedly "covered the assault and served as the Argentine paper *El Mundo*'s special reporter on the spot" (207). The sense of a game suggested by the disclosure and subsequent retraction of literary hints (hints of

literariness amid claims to truth) indicates a debt to the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, famous precisely for such knowing falsifications. Indeed, for critic Herbert Brant, “In *Plata quemada*, Piglia picks up where Borges leaves off, and takes literary falsification to a new level” (“Ricardo Piglia’s *Plata quemada*” 7). We may start to become suspicious about what other elements of this “true story” may turn out to be fabrications.

In fact, the publication of *Money to Burn* led to not one but two lawsuits against Piglia from survivors or relatives of survivors of the events he depicts. Ironically, one was on the basis that he told the truth too openly: Blanca Galeano argued that she had tried to keep quiet about her involvement in the events, and that the book had broken that silence. The other lawsuit, brought by Claudia Dorda, daughter of one of the gunmen (who in the book is called “the Gaucho Dorda”), alleged by contrast that it made up details about her father, specifically by portraying him as homosexual and addicted to drugs. Both suits failed: the first on the basis that the facts of the case were well-known; the second on the basis that this was a work of fiction.

Uruguayan journalist Leonardo Haberkorn has investigated the events himself, and written a book about “the true history of the Burnt Money case.” Among other discrepancies, Haberkorn claims that “nothing that the book says” about the four principal gangsters “is true.” Piglia entirely invents their backstories and key characteristics! Dorda was indeed not homosexual, for instance. And perhaps most strikingly, given that it is this element that gives the book its (eventual) title: the gunmen did not burn the stolen money during the siege and throw the lit bills out the flat windows and onto the street below. Haberkorn is quite definite: “the money was not burnt” (Bengochea, “350 policías, lanzallamas y bombas Molotov”). Other reports are less certain—although all agree that the money was never recovered. At best, Piglia elaborates this central strand of his novel around a rumoured possibility. This is fiction, after all.

Does it matter that Piglia takes such liberties with the truth? Why would he change the story, and what difference do his changes make? Do we feel “cheated” or betrayed in some way to discover how much is invention? Pause the video and write down some ideas. While you do that, I’ll have a glass of Medio y Medio, but I’ll be right back.

### Drinks Pairing: Medio y Medio

Medio y Medio is a drink associated with Montevideo's portside market, and above all with one bar, Roldós, though it can certainly also be found elsewhere. Depending in part on your point of view, these days it is either a style of wine—sweet and slightly carbonated, available from several Uruguayan wineries—or it is a wine cocktail, a “half and half” mix of sweet sparkling wine (usually Moscato) with dry white wine (usually Pinot Blanc), to which rum is sometimes added. According to legend, this mixture is the result of a waiter's negotiation in the late nineteenth century (the Roldós was founded in 1888), an attempt to appease both masculine and feminine preferences. Semi-sweet and semi-sparkling, the result can taste as much like cider as wine, and though it is a popular and perhaps characteristically Uruguayan compromise (drunk ice-cold, especially in the summer and at festivities), it would no doubt have been foreign to the “all or nothing” temperament of the Argentine gang holed up in the Liberaij.

Obviously, our attention is drawn to the elements that Piglia changes in the story. The fact, for instance, that he has invented a homosexual relationship between the gangsters Gaucho Dorda and Kid Bignone is a further sign of its significance—though no doubt it is significant enough in the novel already. It is a moment of deep pathos when Dorda holds Bignone in his arms, “embracing him, half naked” as “the Kid was dying. The Blond Gaucho wiped his face and tried not to cry. [. . .] Then the Kid raised himself up ever so slightly, leaning on one elbow, and murmured something into his ear which no one could hear, a few words of love, no doubt, uttered under his breath or perhaps left unuttered, but sensed by the Gaucho who kissed the Kid as he departed” (180, 181). This is an image of tenderness amid the carnage, a moment of humanization that escapes the official record, just as whatever words may pass between the two gangsters are lost even to the novelist's imagination. However much he goes beyond what we can ever know about what may have happened in the inferno of the shoot-out, Piglia signals a limit even to the powers of fiction to fill in the gaps.

### 2. *Bonfire of the Vanities*

If art does not necessarily imitate life too closely in *Money to Burn*, the book provides plenty of examples of life imitating art. It is notable that, for all their depiction as semi-

educated hoodlums, the gangsters are also readers. The Kid Bignone tells us that he took up reading in prison. It is here that not only is he “turned into a rent-boy, a drug addict, I became a real thief, a Peronist, and a card sharp; I learnt to fight dirty, how to use a headbutt to split the nose of anyone who tried to split your soul from your body.” He also “read every history book in the library, I didn’t know what else to do with myself, you can ask me who won which battle in whatever year you choose and I’ll tell you, ‘cause in jail you have fuck-all to do and so you read” (74). Similarly, the group’s leader, Malito, “like every true gangster,” is “an avid reader of the crime pages of the daily papers” (41). He reads with a “savage pleasure,” in part to see himself and his exploits featured: “in reading about what he himself had done, he felt both satisfied at not having been recognized, and at the same time saddened at not seeing his own photo, while secretly preening himself at this dissemination of his disgrace being anxiously devoured by thousands upon thousands of readers” (40-41). But reading is also “one of his weaknesses, because the primitive sensationalism that cruelly resurfaced in the face of each new crime [. . .] made him think that his brain was not all that strange when compared with those degenerate sadists who gloat over horrors and catastrophes” (41). Identifying as a reader, and with readers’ vicariously sadistic desire to revel in violence and destruction—surely a desire that we ourselves share, at least a little, if we are drawn to a thriller such as *Money to Burn* itself—he realizes that he is a particularly productive part of a literary and moral economy that thrives on the spectacle of criminality. If someone like Malito did not exist, he would have to be invented by someone like Piglia.

Dorda is less of a reader, but is similarly impressionable in his consumption of culture. He is described as a “translation machine” for the way in which he mimics what he sees on the cinema screen: “Dorda could get to see even a whole series of films and translated every one, as if he were on screen, as if he’d lived it all himself. (‘Once we had to take him out of the screening, because he pulled out his willy and began weeing: in the film he could see a child urinating, his back to the audience, urinating in the night, in the middle of the countryside’ [. . .])” (63). In the *Liberaij*, all the gunmen seem to think they are living out some kind of cinematic cliché: “Surely they must have spent their lives watching war films and were now acting as if they thought they were a suicide commando unit fighting behind opposing battle lines, in foreign territory, surprised in their flat by the Russians

the other side of the Wall in East Berlin” (165). They are living out scripts that have already been written for them, plots pre-established by genre films and genre fiction.

Indeed, the feedback loop between reality and representation in the gunfight at the Liberaij is particularly intense. Not only are journalists drawn to the scene of the siege, “their microphones pressed to the wall,” but so are the TV cameras, which begin “a live broadcast, covering events as they unfolded. It even reached the gunmen [. . .] watching television in their room, watching the events of which they were themselves the protagonists” (133). “For the first time ever in history,” we are told, “it was possible to transmit it all live, without censorship” (135). Hence the crowd of curious onlookers, alerted to what is going on, who come down to the site of the action. And more generally, “For hours the entire population of Montevideo was tuned in to the momentous events that were shaking the country” (133). At the centre of this live spectacle, the gunmen are on stage—or rather, on screen, actors in their own movie, tragic protagonists of “the Argentine version of a Greek tragedy” (208), but also anti-heroes of a thriller for which they have been preparing (and been prepared) their entire lives.

Here, however, the gangsters break the script. Literally, they burn the scrip, the stolen money that lies around them. Moreover, aware of the spectacle, of the audience entranced at their every move, “They began tossing burning 1,000-peso bills out of the window. From the kitchen skylight they succeeded in floating the burning money down towards the corner. The bills looked like butterflies of light, flaming notes.” In response, “A buzz of indignation rippled through the crowd” (157). This is not what they have come to see.

*Money is, after all, one of the most powerful fictions that structure social relations.* It is, on the one hand, the fiction of value: that a small lump of metal or strip of printed paper has worth based on collective belief, or a collective suspension of disbelief; “credit” comes from the Latin *credere*, to believe or to trust. But perhaps this is less belief than habit. In fact, the thieves show, it is very easy to burn the stuff—their whole stash goes up in flames in only fifteen minutes—it is just that nobody thinks to do so. On the other hand, there is the fiction of universal equivalence: the notion that everything has its price, anything can be reduced to numbers and exchanged for any other thing via the medium of money. But the thieves’ refusal to negotiate, their (well-founded) distrust of the police and the authorities, steeped in corruption, is also a denial that there can be any fair transactions, any agreement on rates of exchange. They have so much money that it is effectively

worthless. Better a “*potlatch*,” as a Uruguayan philosopher is quoted as saying, “an act absolute and free in itself, a gesture of sheer waste and sheer outpouring, [. . .] a sacrifice made to the gods” (159). Instead of money as trade, the gang trade freedom for money by asserting that they can get free of money itself.

This sacrifice, however, is seen as sacrilegious: “it’s a sin. *E peccato*,” as Dorda himself notes (156). For the watching crowd, it is “like something from a witches’ sabbath straight out of the Middle Ages (according to the papers), they couldn’t bear the prospect of 500,000 dollars being burned before their very eyes, in a move that left the city and the country horror-struck” (157). Later, Dorda, the last man standing in the burnt-out flat, looking back over his life, concludes that “none the less he had ended well, whole, without betraying anyone” (183). Yet he has in fact, by betraying money, betrayed society *en masse*. As critic Joanna Page notes, one of attractions of reading about crime and heists is that, for all that they may glamourize law-breaking, they also buttress some of the most widely-held and engrained beliefs about the principles that undergird our own law-abiding labour: “armed robbery [. . .] is a crime that only confirms the value of money to a society organized around it.” By torching the cash for which they have already sacrificed so much, by contrast, “the criminals effectively attack the very fabric of society” (“Crime, Capitalism, and Storytelling” 35). The gunmen repeatedly mock the futility of wage labour: Dorda, on the point of burning a 1,000-peso note with a Ronson lighter, comments that “a bank-clerk [. . .] would have to work at least a month to get a bill of this size, as he whiles away his life counting other people’s money” (156). Now he and his accomplices are, in a flash of flame, prepared to break the illusion that anchors such monotonous subservience. Devoted to their servitude, however, the onlooking Uruguayans are shocked and angry.

In the end, fiction wins the day. The people take their revenge on Dorda, as he is “subjected to a hail of blows from every side, kicks, punches, spitting, insults—every kind of vulgarity and brutality” (202). All to uphold the moral law and the power of money. Then, as the ambulances and police cars depart, the street is “at last empty once more” (203). The epilogue ends similarly, with escape and disappearance, as the narrator describes himself “standing on the empty station platform,” watching the train carrying Blanca Galeano “recede into the distance” (209). Peace is restored. Yet there is something

sufficiently disturbing about the story he has heard that Piglia will muse over it for another thirty years, seeking the right form in which it can be told once again.

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Song: "Mr Siegal" (Tom Waits)