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RMST 202

Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present

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

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

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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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.

Genre is one way in which we, as readers, categorize and distinguish between texts.

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.

“Genre fiction,” such as much crime fiction, science fiction, fantasy, or romantic fiction, tends to follow genre “rules” particularly closely.

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*, Argentine author Ricardo Piglia, 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.

“Ricardo Piglia’s thoroughly hard-boiled novel *Plata quemada* [. . .].” (Gisle Selnes)

“What is robbing a bank compared to founding one?” (Bertolt Brecht)

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.

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.

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”).

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,
things change.

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things change.

Not everything is as it seems, and
the story as it emerges has undergone
significant modifications.

It has also become 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.

In the Battle of Liberaij, what is at stake—
and is briefly but shockingly betrayed—
is our collective belief in that
most fictitious of things: money.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

“This novel tells a true story.” (204)

“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)

“The remaining significant source for this book was the transcript of the secret recordings made by the police department on Herrera and Obes Streets.” (206)

“I owe a further debt of gratitude to my friend Dr Aníbal Reynal, a judge of the primary courts, for granting me permission to consult and index this mass of material.” (206)

“In Buenos Aires, the lawyer Raul Anaya permitted me to consult records of the interrogations of Blanca Galeano, Fontán Reyes, Carlos Nino and others implicated in the case.” (206)

“Thanks to the generosity of my friend the sculptor Carlos Boccardo, who lived in Montevideo throughout the events described on the corner of Herrera and Obes Streets, I was able to orchestrate the different versions of this same story from a variety of descriptions and evidence.” (207)

“In those days I still considered that a writer had to go everywhere with his journalist’s notepad.” (209)

“In the summer of 1995, I began writing it all over again, giving it a complete overhaul in order to be absolutely faithful to the facts.” (209)

“according to the daily papers” (23);
“according to the report by Dr Bunge” (52);
“according to sources” (125);
“this remains unconfirmed” (28).

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“according to the report by Dr Bunge” (52);
“according to sources” (125);
“this remains unconfirmed” (28).

If the book’s genre is true crime,
Piglia emphasizes its truth.

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.

Like Walsh, Piglia dramatizes a historical crime, giving face and personality to victims of violence.

“‘The Mousetrap’ in Shakespeare constitutes an attempt to reframe and thereby seize authorial control from a corrupted state in respect of the narrative of a crime.” (David Conlon)

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 who traditionally have not had access to self-representation through writing.

In readings of *testimonios*, the veracity and reliability of subaltern representation is crucial for the political effect that they seek.

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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, it is less clear that our solidarity is incited.

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that our solidarity is incited.

We are not asked to seek justice
for the dead gunmen.

In Piglia, it is less clear that truth is at stake in quite the same way.

For all his assurances, Piglia often plays somewhat fast and loose with the truth in *Money to Burn*.

In this, 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.

Readers familiar with Piglia's other work will also be tipped off by the appearance 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 lad was really only a curly-haired boy, wearing his press pass on the lapel of his corduroy jacket, which clearly read Emilio Renzi or Rienzi.” (66)

“Of particular usefulness were the accounts and additional notes signed simply E.R., who 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.

“In *Plata quemada*, Piglia picks up where Borges leaves off, and takes literary falsification to a new level.” (Herbert Brant)

We may start to become suspicious about what other elements of this “true story” may turn out to be fabrications.

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.

One lawsuit was on the basis that he told the truth too openly.

The other alleged by contrast that the book made up details.

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.

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Uruguayan journalist Leonardo Haberkorn claims that “nothing that the book says” about the four principal gangsters “is true.”

Piglia entirely invents their backstories and key characteristics!

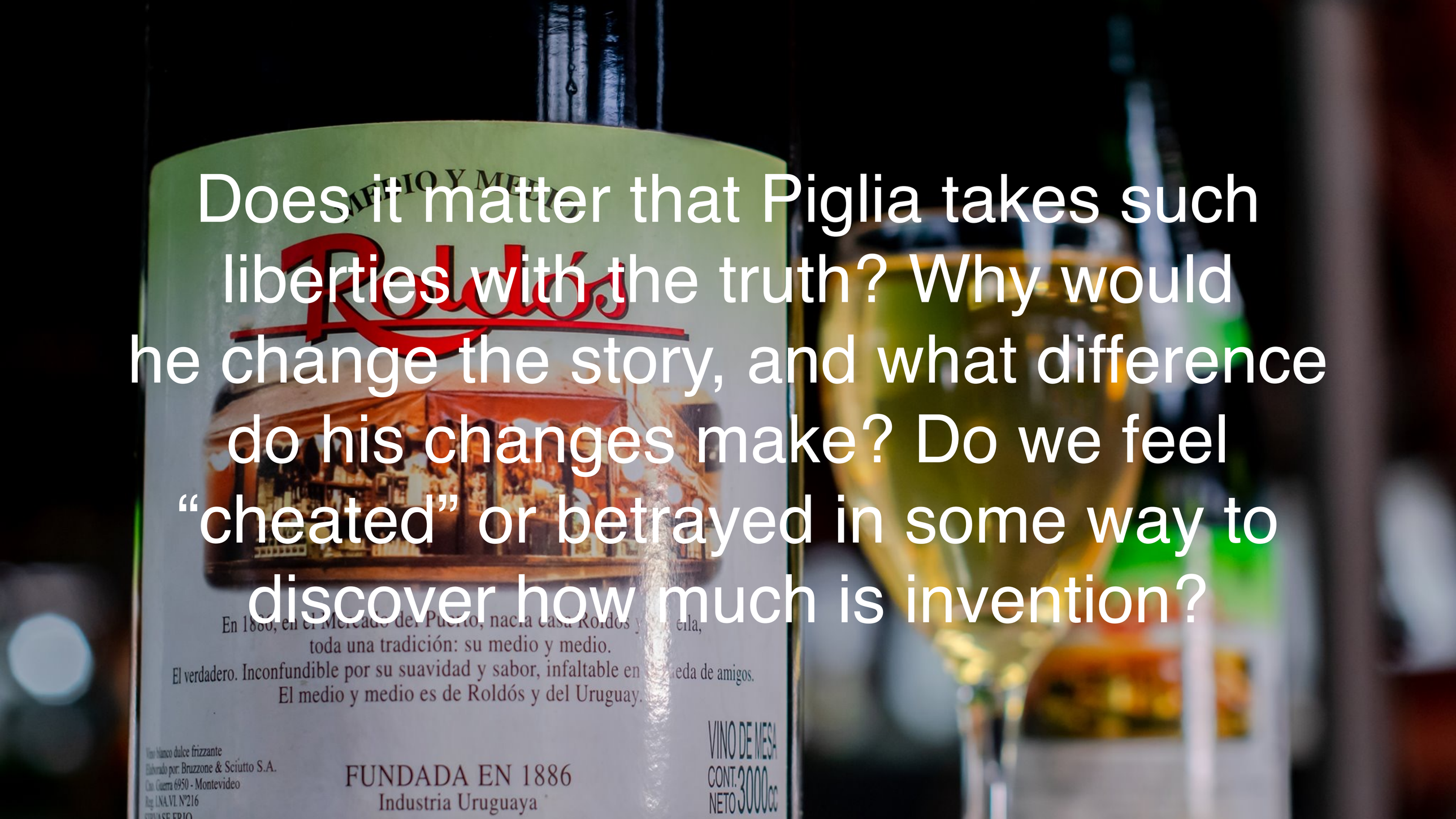
“The money was not burnt.”
(Leonardo Haberkorn)

At best, Piglia elaborates this central strand of his novel around a rumoured possibility.

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?



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?

Our attention is drawn to the elements that Piglia changes in the story.

“Finally Dorda came level with the Kid and pulled him up against the wall, out of range, raising him against his body, holding him close, embracing him, half-naked.” (180)

“The Kid was dying. The Blond Gaucho wiped his face and tried not to cry.” (181)

“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.” (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.

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

For all their depiction as semi-educated hoodlums, the gangsters are also readers.

“It was in jail I 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.” (74)

“I 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)

“Malito was then, like every true gangster, an avid reader of the crime pages of the daily papers.” (41)

“At times, the savage pleasure with which
he read the police news convinced him
of the impossibility of excavating the moral
root of the facts of his life, because
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)

“This was 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, 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.

“His mind was running on like a translation machine.” (63)

“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)

“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.

The feedback loop between reality and representation in the gunfight at the Liberaij is particularly intense.

“The crowd of journalists registered the conversation on their microphones pressed to the wall surrounding the intercom.” (133)

“The TV cameras [. . .] had begun a live broadcast, covering events as they enfolded. 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 it was possible to transmit it all live, without censorship.” (135)

“For hours the entire population of Montevideo was tuned in to the momentous events that were shaking the country.” (133)

“The Argentine version of
a Greek tragedy.” (208)

“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.” (157)

“A buzz of indignation rippled through the crowd.” (157)

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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.

In fact, the thieves show, it is very easy to burn the stuff. 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.

“The Uruguayan philosopher Washington Andrada signalled that [. . .] such an action, a kind of innocent potlatch let loose on a society with no memory of such a ritual, an act absolute and free in itself, a gesture of sheer waste and sheer outpouring, would in other societies have been taken as 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.

This sacrifice, however, is seen as sacrilegious.

“It’s a sin. *E peccato*.” (156)

“Filled with indignation, the citizens gathered to observe the scene, offering shouts of horror and loathing, looking 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)

“None the less he had ended well, whole, without betraying anyone.” (183)

“None the less he had ended well, whole, without betraying anyone.” (183)

Yet he has in fact, by betraying money, betrayed society *en masse*.

“Armed robbery [. . .] is a crime that only confirms the value of money to a society organized around it. [. . .] The criminals effectively attack the very fabric of society.” (Joanna Page)

“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)

Devoted to their servitude, however, the onlooking Uruguayans are shocked and angry.

In the end, fiction wins the day.

“The bloody mass that was once Dorda was subjected to a hail of blows from every side, kicks, punches, spitting, insults—every kind of vulgarity and brutality.” (202)

“The ambulance siren retreated, and was lost as it turned the corner of the crossroads and Herrera Street was at last empty once more.” (203)

“I, standing on the empty station platform, watch her recede into the distance.” (209)

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.

MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”

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