

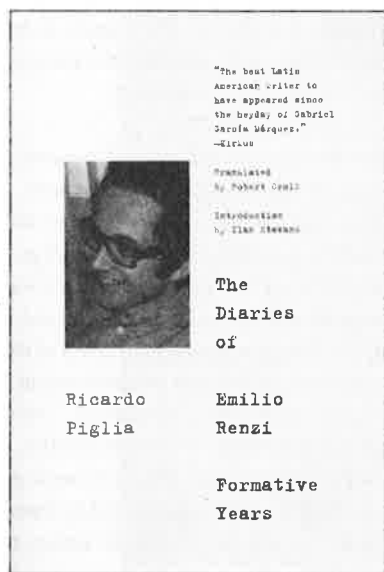
THE DIARIES OF EMILIO RENZI

Formative Years

Ricardo Piglia

Translated by Robert Croll

Restless Books (\$19.99)



When its first volume appeared in 2015, *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*—a fictional work derived from the private journals of Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia—prompted readers to reconsider the author’s other works, in light of its revelations concerning his methods, characters, and plots. Now, with the English-language publication of *The Diaries of Emilio Renzi: Formative Years*, translator Robert Croll has given readers lacking Spanish an opportunity to catch up on a writer of world significance.

The bohemian Buenos Aires book reviewer and cub reporter Emilio Renzi drifts through Piglia’s novels and stories, often pausing to light a cigarette, drink a beer, do a line of cocaine, write in a notebook, talk literature with a stranger, or make a pass at a woman; in the *Diaries* we discover that the character is largely autofictional. As Piglia describes him in a 1989 interview with the *New Orleans Review*,

Renzi aestheticizes everything. Renzi is like that part of me that I control. I would

like to operate freely in a world of literary references and quotes. There are times when I think all that matters is style, or literature, and the rest is unimportant. Then, in order to control my temptation to see everything in terms of literature, and to think that ultimately the only important thing in life is style, which is my natural tendency, I put all that in Renzi, a sort of young aesthete à la Stephen Dedalus or Quentin Compson.

Joining the rest of the author’s work as a major component, *Diaries*, spanning the years 1957–2015, shifts this aesthete to the center of Piglia’s fictional universe; formerly a charming and pretentious member of an ensemble cast, as it were (he’s described in *Money to Burn* as “really only a curly-haired boy, wearing his press pass on the lapel of his corduroy jacket”), the alter ego Renzi now becomes the writer of Piglia’s books and provides us with a vantage from which to survey that world. What interests this author more than the originality of a concept is the tendency of literary culture to circulate and propagate in conversation—“my idea is to think about literature as a social practice,” he declares—where the exchange of theories generates inspiration for the artist.

So, in the same way that “in the *Quixote*, there are constant discussions of literature, discussions that form part of life,” as Piglia reminds us in an interview with *Latin American Literature Today*, Renzi and the Polish exile Tardewski, in the drunken café banter that makes up the second half of *Artificial Respiration*, for example, elaborate their interpretations of Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka as writers who draw inspiration from individuals in their own lives: Renzi’s Borges sees in the French-Argentine writer Paul Groussac a model for his character Pierre Menard, and Tardewski’s Kafka gleanes the zeitgeist from Adolf Hitler, with whom the young Ashkenazi writer crossed paths in Prague while the future Führer was busy dodging the draft. If we infer from such passages that this author and his characters agree, at least to an extent, that writers derive their material from their lives, then perhaps we will be justified if we adopt the same viewpoint to reinterpret Piglia’s work.

How does Piglia source his fiction from *The Diaries of Emilio Renzi*? First, he takes material

from it directly: the Renzi of the short story “The End of the Ride” in *Assumed Name*, for example, scrawls a passage in his notebook that quotes the *Diaries*; the prostitute in *Artificial Respiration* visits Renzi’s boarding house in the *Diaries*; and so on. Second, and more important, Piglia’s use of the conventions of crime fiction originates not only in his admiration for the work of Roberto Arlt, but also in his real-life friendship, recorded in the *Diaries*, with a thief named Cacho, whom Renzi abets, but who doesn’t snitch on him under torture (“Every time I visit him, he’s the one comforting me.”). Third, and most important, the monumental figures of his novels, those grand and solitary ones who take on the legendary proportions of classical drama against the backdrop of Argentine history—the writer Macedonio Fernández in *Absent City*, Inspector Croce and the inventor Luca Belladonna in *Target in the Night*, Professor Maggi and the Senator in *Artificial Respiration*, the Blond Kid “Gaucho” Dorda in *Money to Burn*—emerge from a reading of the *Diaries* as personages that Piglia created in the image of his grandfather, a World War I veteran wounded in the trenches whom Piglia loved dearly and who funded his university education, but who also turned his house into a kind of private museum full of war relics, endlessly rearranging the rooms in a lifelong mania to clarify, evoke, explain the conflict. If we examine the themes that Piglia transposed out of his life and into his diaries, and then out of his *Diaries* and into the novels and short stories, and if we pay particular attention to the isolated visionaries that he based on his grandfather, we can learn an important lesson about composing fiction of the highest ambitions.

Creative writing in any language depends upon foreign influence to challenge its authors and prevent it from going sterile. As one by one the works of Ricardo Piglia appear in English translation, cohering into an oeuvre within the main of Anglophone literature, we, his readers, come more and more to resemble the clientèle of the Chantecler Cabaret in *The Absent City*: enchanted by a legendary chanteuse, this clientèle remain devoted followers even after she enters a convent, and on Sunday mornings “travel to Córdoba just knowing, they say, that Ada Falcon is singing there, lost and anonymous in that choir of nuns.”

— Erik Noonan