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An Author without a Nation: Fictional Renderings of Leopoldo Lugones in Argentine Literature

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Abstract

This article examines three novels that use fiction to revise the figure of the Argentine author Leopoldo Lugones: Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), C. E. Feiling's *Un poeta nacional* (1993), and César Aira's *Lugones* (2020). These three novels present different portrayals of Lugones, which also mirror their opposing views of the Argentine literary tradition. Piglia, Feiling, and Aira look back at the so-called national poet when self-fashioning themselves as writers and outlining a literary project in a (post)dictatorial scenario. In a cultural field marked by the effects of state terror and neoliberal reform policies, these fictional renderings of Lugones become a means of reflecting on the political past and the future of literature. Ultimately, I argue that *Respiración artificial*, *Un poeta nacional*, and *Lugones* devise a figure of the Argentine author decoupled from the mission of consolidating a national identity that Lugones epitomized for nearly half a century.

Keywords: Aira; Feiling; Piglia; Lugones; Argentina

Resumen

Este artículo estudia tres novelas que utilizan la ficción para revisitar la vida y obra del autor argentino Leopoldo Lugones: *Respiración artificial* (1980), de Ricardo Piglia, *Un poeta nacional* (1993), de C. E. Feiling, y *Lugones* (2020), de César Aira. Estas tres novelas presentan retratos divergentes de Lugones, que a su vez reflejan sus miradas opuestas sobre la tradición literaria argentina. Piglia, Feiling y Aira repiensan retrospectivamente la figura del "poeta nacional" al momento de diseñar sus propias estampas autorales y proyectos literarios en un contexto (post)dictatorial. En un campo cultural marcado por los efectos del terrorismo de estado y las reformas neoliberales, estos retratos ficcionales de Lugones son un medio para reflexionar sobre el pasado de la política y el futuro de la literatura. En última instancia, *Respiración artificial*, *Un poeta nacional* y *Lugones* imaginan un paradigma del autor argentino por fuera de la misión de consolidar una identidad nacional, misión que el espectro de Lugones epitomizó durante casi medio siglo.

Palabras clave: Aira; Feiling; Piglia; Lugones; Argentina

> "Si tuviéramos que cifrar en un hombre todo el proceso de la literatura argentina . . . ese hombre sería indiscutiblemente Lugones. En su obra están nuestros ayeres, y el hoy y, tal vez, el mañana"
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, "Prólogo" in *La estatua de sal* (1985)

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Every June 13, Argentina celebrates the Día del Escritor in commemoration of Leopoldo Lugones's date of birth. Although Lugones's works are not widely read nowadays, his status as the "poeta nacional" is still a landmark for literary historians and critics, and numerous fictional works have invoked his foundational figure. This article examines three novels that present fictional renderings of Lugones as the eminent poet of the Argentine literary tradition: Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980), C. E. Feiling's *Un poeta nacional* (1993), and César Aira's *Lugones* (2020). In print media, both Feiling and Aira vehemently challenged Piglia's ascendancy over the postdictatorial literary scene but also engaged in heated polemics between themselves, calling each other's aesthetic preferences into question. Their contrasting fictional renderings of Lugones give novelistic form to this triangular controversy. By rewriting Lugones's legacy, they not only reread the Argentine literary tradition but also outlined three different ways of fashioning themselves as writers and championing their literary projects within the cultural field.

Piglia, Feiling, and Aira go back to the figure of Lugones at a time of civil and political unrest, to the detriment of other foundational writers of the nation such as Esteban Echeverría or José Hernández, due to the association between Lugones's nationalistic convictions and his involvement in the first coup d'état in Argentine history. In a sociohistorical context of dictatorial repression, in the case of Piglia, and postdictatorial and neoliberal order, in the cases of Feiling and Aira, each novel reviews the links between literature and the nation that were instrumental to Lugones's nationalistic authoritarian standpoint. Casting the figure of the national poet in a new light helps us rethink the conditions of the possibility of literature during the 1980s and 1990s, when neither the nation nor the figure of the writer carried its symbolic weight of the past. *Respiración artificial*, *Un poeta nacional*, and *Lugones* deploy procedures that interrogate the Argentine literary tradition by pushing the boundaries of linguistic correctness and standards of the aesthetic state, and by reappraising the impact of translated foreign literatures on the national canon. As I examine in this article, they ultimately outline a figure of the Argentine writer decoupled from the mission of founding or consolidating a national identity that Lugones epitomized for nearly half a century.

Leopoldo Lugones: The national poet

Lugones's status as the national poet is indebted to the rise and fall of the Argentine liberal state. According to Miguel Dalmaroni (2006, 37), around the Centenario of 1910 writers and intellectuals such as Lugones, Manuel Gálvez, and Ricardo Rojas "reclaimed and imagined their own social role in terms of their usefulness for the modernizing state whose demands they followed . . . . They became pedagogues of state-oriented nationalism." As Josefina Ludmer (1999, 12) notes, their works participated in nation-building processes that shaped national traditions, emblems, and rites that were instrumental to integrating and homogenizing an increasingly agitated population marked by immigration, cultural heterogeneity, and class struggle.

In this context, Lugones offered the paradigm of the writer combining modern literary forms and nationalistic pedagogical objectives. On the one hand, Lugones followed in Rubén Darío's footsteps and became a relevant figure of Latin American *modernismo*. On the other, Marcos Mayer (1992, 15) labels the wider political role and social status of Lugones as those of a "thinker of the state," in charge of envisioning "a sphere of action for the intellectual that is not politics anymore but the state . . . . He focused on education as the domain suitable for shaping those citizens who would materialize the convergence of nationhood and the state."

For María Teresa Gramuglio (1993, 6), Lugones's self-fashioning as a writer reflects his ambition of becoming "the guardian of a national cohesiveness that was under threat."

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Nationalism oriented both his positioning in the sociocultural field and his aesthetic choices and themes, which "were instrumental in outlining a powerful image of the writer as the foundational figure of the nation" (Gramuglio 1993, 22). Lugones's self-image contains a superhuman and messianic dimension. He presented himself as a mighty poet presiding over a disdained and chaotic multitude. In this sense, Julio Premat (2008, 19) argues that the myth of the national poet allowed Lugones to situate himself at the center of the Argentine literary system: "[Lugones] develops a systematic strategy to institute himself as the Great Author that the country needs, an omnivorous writer who takes ownership of the language, every genre, and every form of knowledge."

Among the multiple projects sponsored by state institutions, such as the Ministerio de Educación and the Ministerio de Instrucción Pública, Lugones wrote the historiographical essays *El imperio jesuítico* (1904) and *Historia de Sarmiento* (1911), and the poetry collection *Odas seculares* (1910). He worked as *inspector general de enseñanza media* (1900) and helped to draft the Código Nacional del Trabajo (1904). In 1924, he received the Premio Nacional de Literatura, and in 1928, he became president of the newly founded Sociedad Argentina de Escritores. However, his posthumous and enduring presence in Argentine culture is mainly due to the nationalistic stance and concern over the question of a national identity that he displayed in a series of famous conferences.

In *El payador* (1916) Lugones argued that José Hernandez's *Martín Fierro* is a "poema épico" that expressed the true essence of the Argentine identity through the figure of the gaucho. For Lugones (1979, 8), the epic quality of the gaucho lies in being "el héroe y el civilizador de la Pampa." When the gaucho had vanished as a revulsive social actor and was no longer a concern for the oligarchic state, Lugones shaped it as a literary and heroic prototype that embodied the authenticity and virtues of nationhood. Literature was thus the pedagogical pillar for "civilizing" and integrating the immigration wave and disruptive masses, becoming instrumental to the state project of homogenizing a national collective identity. For Lugones, the poet's mastery and intimate connection to language puts him in charge of decoding the homeland's connatural character and giving literary form to this national identity. In his words: "Since language is the greatest asset of our race, since it constitutes the homeland as a spiritual phenomenon, it follows that poetry is the most important matter for every country worthy of civilization" (Lugones 1979, 36). In this way, by celebrating Hernández and *Martín Fierro* as the ultimate and truest exponents of the Argentine identity, Lugones consecrated the utmost social significance of the poet and legitimized the leading intellectual role that he aspired for himself.

Lugones progressively became an influential reference for nationalistic movements that questioned the liberal state, which they judged as antithetical to Argentina's essential values and destiny of greatness. María Pía López (2004, 31) outlines a coherent continuity between *El payador*, *Odas seculares*, and Lugones's role as an ideologue of the 1930 coup d'état by arguing that "his project was based on distinction and hierarchy," adding that his writing style "constantly posits the ideal to which reality must adjust." In his conferences on *Martín Fierro*, as I noted above, Lugones had already adopted the standpoint of the messianic poet who has a constitutive and intimate connection to the homeland. On that occasion, he evoked literature to differentiate himself from the masses and put his poetic mastery at the service of the allegedly and inherently superior political elites: "I congratulate myself for being the agent of an intimate national communication between the poetry of the people and the cultured mindset of the upper class."

Later, Lugones toughened his nationalistic-cum-fascist stance. For example, in the conferences compiled in *Acción* (1923) and the infamous "Discurso de Ayacucho" (1924), political action becomes the continuation of poetry by other means. Although his supposedly innate distinction and superiority previously allowed the poet to shape Argentina's national language and identity, they now impose upon him the mission of counseling military rulers and redesigning the state: "The man endowed with superior

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thoughts, sage, philosopher or artist, has nothing meaningful to do in direct contact with the masses." (López 2004, 118). For Lugones, political turmoil and social distress were a threat that was foreign to the nation, as he believed that only the military could guarantee social hierarchies and discipline. He even advised the military to exert direct and violent action on an unacceptably indomitable population: "This is once again, for the good of the world, the hour of the sword. Just as the sword gave us our only really consistent achievement until now, our independence, it will now impose the necessary order and indispensable hierarchy that democracy has deteriorated" (Lugones 1979, 306).

As the epigraph by Borges to this article exemplifies, some of the most renowned twentieth-century writers invoked Lugones to advance their own visions of literature. Lugones was the national poet for his links to the state and his public recognition, but above all because he devised a grandiose and leading role for himself. Piglia, Feiling, and Aira fictionalized Lugones and outlined a contrasting figure of the writer at a time—the subsequent periods of dictatorial rule and full-blown neoliberalism—when neither the nation nor literary specificity provided strong symbolic paradigms. *Respiración artificial*, *Un poeta nacional*, and *Lugones* rewrite Lugones's self-image to interrogate their contemporary sociocultural contexts and enable renewed literary avenues. They look back at Lugones's leading position in the Argentine literary tradition to devise an authorial stance beyond the ideals of shaping a national language and consolidating a homogeneous national identity, as well as in defiance of the pervasive commoditization of culture that dominated (post)dictatorial Argentina.

Ricardo Piglia: Rereading the Argentine literary tradition

Respiración artificial is usually regarded as a foundational text of Argentine postdictatorial literature because it anticipated the questions faced by writers and intellectuals when reconstructing the public sphere in the aftermath of authoritarianism. By combining novelistic and essayistic formats and juxtaposing intertextual references and temporal planes, Piglia reflects on the channels for contesting official political culture. For the cultural left, political defeat and trauma were inseparable from the perceived loss of literature's social status. Previous role models of the writer, such as the *engagé* intellectual who contributed to promoting revolutionary projects, came to be deemed as anachronistic and no longer offered viable means of combining literature and politics.

In the aftermath of authoritarianism, writers and intellectuals needed to readjust their relationship to the nation-state. As Nicola Miller (1999, 257) remarks, "Whether or not national identity could be debated in cultural terms also came under increasing scrutiny in the face of challenges to state sovereignty." According to David Rock (1993, 244), a nationalistic view of culture supplied "the ideological weaponry for the military's violent confrontation with 'subversives.'" Rather than a simplistic adherence to national symbols, Idelber Avelar (1999, 36) detects a paradoxical dimension in dictatorial nationalism: "the dictatorships, by submitting inconditionally to *international* capital, turned the *nation* into the crucial battlefield for all political action."

On the one hand, reexamining the figure of Lugones entails engaging with the works and influence of Borges. Besides displaying an intense and ambivalent relationship with the legacy of Lugones throughout his career, Borges's "El escritor argentino y la tradición" has become an unavoidable reference for any ensuing reflection on Argentine national culture. In the essay, Borges (1981, 267) evokes Lugones's celebration of *Martín Fierro* as the national poem that "should be for us what the Homeric poems were for the Greeks." However, Borges takes distance from Lugones's exclusionary nationalism and claims that "our tradition is all of Western culture . . . . [W]e can handle all European themes, handle

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them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences" (272–273).

Being an Argentine writer, then, does not imply limiting oneself to Argentine themes. On the contrary, given Argentina's strong cultural heterogeneity, it entails belonging to—and also irreverently manipulating—a universal tradition. Borges thus provides Piglia, Feiling, and Aira with a notion of cosmopolitan nationalism useful for revising the figure of the Argentine author in opposition to authoritarian nationalism. In this vein, Gonzalo Aguilar associates Borges's standpoint with the emergence of Latin American avant-gardes in the 1920s and 1930s, which deployed a continuous concern over the problematic links between local identities and cosmopolitanism. For Aguilar (2009, 17), such a cosmopolitan bias does not entail a derivative relationship but interrogates both local and global traditions, challenging metropolitan and universalized models of modernity: "It allowed them to link modernity with the territory without giving in to an automatic and false association of the local as their own territory and the universal as a foreign modernity."

During the 1960s and 1970s, political upheaval and the modernization of the culture industry had given authors unprecedented visibility and audience. Such disparate personalities as Julio Cortázar, David Viñas, and Piglia himself had been prompt to seek connections between their literary projects and revolutionary activism and had participated in widespread debates regarding the period's political urgency. While Lugones's self-image as the national poet and the role model of the 1960s and 1970s politically committed intellectual represented radically opposed ideologies, they both shared a high regard for literature's intrinsic political prerogatives. However, as Jean Franco (2002, 12) notes, dictatorial violence and neoliberalism put an end to these influential role models: "repression, censorship, and forced exile ended the utopian dreams of writers and projects of literature and art as agents of 'salvation and redemption.'"

At the time of publishing *Respiración artificial*, Piglia was already an important figure of the iconic magazine *Punto de Vista* (1978–2008) alongside intellectuals like Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano. Its first issues revisited the Argentine past in light of the defeat of revolutionary utopias, focusing on the revision of intellectual paradigms of thought and the social role of culture. Sofía Mercader (2021, 66) notes that *Punto de Vista* reread established consensuses on literary icons such as Sarmiento, Borges, *Martín Fierro*, *Contorno*, and *Sur*, aspiring "to insert itself into this intellectual lineage and to re-evaluate national identity." Such a revision led to a renewed intellectual role model apt to reclaim the seemingly lost political potential of literature. *Punto de Vista* rethought the links between society and culture through a political and conceptual reappraisal of the ideals of mediation and specificity. Rather than aiming for immediate revolutionary effects, the magazine advanced a figure of the intellectual that operated within the relative autonomy of the cultural field. As Sarlo (1984, 7) put it, the literary critic must act as a "social bearer of mediation" capable of "distributing knowledges" between authors and readers: "oscillating, a bit hysterically, between these two poles, he flirts with one and the other."

In *Punto de Vista*, Piglia advanced several views on national literature that he later explored in *Respiración artificial*. The novel gave fictional form to both his review of the tradition and his wider repositioning in the post-1976 cultural field. As Sarlo (2000, 2) argues, Piglia's works display a strong metaliterary character, providing readers with a theoretical angle suitable to interpret his entire oeuvre: "his critical strategy consists of outlining the interpretative guidelines of his own oeuvre, and, while doing that, he rearranges the rest of literature . . . that is how he shaped his fictional writing, not only his essays." The fictional rendering of Lugones in *Respiración artificial* facilitates a counterexample to which the novel opposes its own role model of the writer. Piglia thus fictionalizes Argentine literary history and makes room for his aesthetic and politico-intellectual stance.

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Respiración artificial narrates an investigation by Emilio Renzi, Piglia's lifelong alter ego. Initially aiming to elucidate the mysterious life of his uncle Marcelo Maggi, Renzi finds himself involved in Marcelo's research on an apocryphal, allegedly forgotten nineteenth-century politician and intellectual who participated, "with the rest of the generation of Argentine romantics in founding the principles and bases of what we call the national culture" (Piglia 2000, 33). The novel thus looks back at the past to rethink the Argentine literary tradition and, in that way, renovates the ways writers can respond to their discouraging social role in a (post)dictatorial context.

Renzi meets some of his uncle's acquaintances and gets involved in a lengthy discussion on the Argentine literary tradition. After claiming that "Argentine literature no longer exists," Renzi links the idea of a national literature to the cultural and political project of the early 1900s liberal state, arguing that "The autonomy of literature, and the correlative notion of style as a value to which the writer must submit, is born in Argentina as a reaction to the impact of immigration" (136). Renzi portrays Lugones as the "guardian of the purity of the language," the first writer to assume a political mission solely through literature's aesthetic specificity: "[Lugones] performs a political function in society exclusively as a writer … dedicated to erasing any trace of the effect, or better still, of the confusion, that immigration produced in the national language." (137).

Renzi's opinions still feature Lugones as the self-proclaimed founder of the national identity but situate him at the center of a literary system that is no longer operational. Renzi characterizes Lugones as a "bureaucratic functionary" and mocks his authorial stance: "was of course a teetotaller, practiced fencing, wrote nonsense about philology …. A truly ridiculous figure this Lugones, in fact: the very model of the National Poet" (121). Renzi's satirical statements mirror Lugones's grandiose posture as the national poet only to demonstrate its retrospective nonsense: "He wrote in such a way that now one reads him and one realizes that he is one of the greatest comic writers in Argentine literature" (121).

Lugones's role as ideologue of the first coup d'état in Argentine history links him to the context of Renzi's investigation. Lugones's nationalistic ideals reveal their lasting significance when reread next to the 1976 Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, as he retrospectively embodies the politico-cultural goals of the absolutist state. In search of an authentic Argentine essence, he envisioned literature as blending into the state, serving as the pillar of a homogeneous national collective. Piglia's derision of his personality thus amounts to a critique of totalitarianism. Renzi envisions an Argentine literary tradition that sabotages any essentialist standpoint. His redesigned lineage places at its core the parody of European influences and the language of immigration. He recalls the erroneous quote that opens Sarmiento's *Facundo*, echoing a statement that Piglia had already posited in "Notas sobre Facundo," originally published in *Punto de Vista*: "Argentine literature begins with a phrase written in French, which is a false, mistaken quotation" (132). Moreover, Renzi argues that Roberto Arlt put an end to the Argentine literary tradition because he "he wrote badly: but in the moral sense of the word …. 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" (135). Opposed to Lugones's idealized and immaculate "national language," Renzi opts for a peripheral figure to the Argentine tradition, Arlt, whose authorial program he defines as "writing badly." Rather than social and linguistic purity, the influence of immigration and foreign translated literatures give rise to a contaminated and pluralistic—therefore ultimately modern—literary form.

The contrast between Lugones and Arlt reveals the insurmountable literariness and artificiality of any national literature and dismantles the nationalistic cultural bases that lie at the heart of the dictatorship. Brett Levinson (2001, 65) argues that for Renzi, literature "seals the logical impossibility of the absolutist state, meaning that dictatorship is determined by the state's violent quest to overcome its own insurmountable

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contradiction: borders." However, Lugones's counterexample allows Piglia to fictionalize and advance his own image as a writer. When interviewed about *Respiración artificial*, he declared that the novel narrates "Renzi's education, the education of a man who looks at the world through literatura and who experiences a rite of passage" (Piglia 2001, 110). For Premat (2008, 236), Piglia shapes a "figure of the author in the position of the reader," envisioning writing as "the relationship with the already written." *Respiración artificial* turns Argentine literary history into fictional matter by presenting Lugones as an omnipotent—thus ridiculous—demiurge aiming to shape an essentialist Argentine identity through literature. By contrast, Renzi privileges reading over writing and creating. He is the paradigmatically competent reader, apt to continue Marcelo's research. Before vanishing to join a clandestine political group, Marcelo bequeaths Renzi his notes and documents "not only because they will be useful (to anyone who knows how to read them properly), casting a light on the past of our unfortunate republic, but also in order to understand some things that are happening in our time." (Piglia 2000, 74).

In this way, Lugones's almighty and messianic self-image gives in to a politics of literary mediation. In a context that is detrimental to the sociopolitical relevance of literature, *Respiración artificial* invokes Lugones to enable a renewed model for the Argentine intellectual. Renzi outlines the writer as a self-referential allegory of the literary critic capable of dismantling the nationalistic cultural values that support authoritarianism. As he "knows how to read properly," the figure of the writer as a competent reader, which Piglia opposes to Lugones's demiurgic standpoint, turns the Argentine literary tradition into the subject matter of his fictional world, rearranging and interpreting it through the equally local and cosmopolitan lens designed by Borges in "El escritor argentino y la tradición."

C. E. Feiling: Lugones in translation

C. E. Feiling published three novels and a collection of poems between 1992 and 1996 and contributed regularly to the renowned magazine *Babel* (1988–1991) and the cultural supplements of the newspapers *Clarín* and *Página 12*. His works have attracted scarce academic attention, but small and independent presses have republished his long-unavailable novels in 2020 and 2021: *El agua electrizada* (1992), *Un poeta nacional* (1993), and *El mal menor* (1996). Therefore, it is vital to reexamine Feiling's poetics and his broader positioning in the 1990s literary scene. In a 1997 interview, Feiling introduced himself as an Anglo-Argentine writer: "I was named Charles Edward Anthony Keith . . . . Everybody knows me as Charlie, but I have a detector of populist nationalism which are those who insist in calling me Carlos" (Sabat 2017). He was a relative of the British author Anthony Hope, from whom he said he inherited "the idea of the adventure novel," outlining an inseparably familiar and literary predecessor: "After the Second World War my family made a living from the royalties of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, and that certainly weights on me" (Sabat 2017). Feiling delineated his image as a writer in translation. He intervened in the Argentine scenario by evoking his readings of the British literary tradition and his blood ties to British culture. His works participated in discussions on the Argentine tradition by drawing on foreign genre fiction.

Feiling was part of a cohort of writers like Daniel Guebel, Alan Pauls, Rodrigo Fresán, and Martín Caparrós generally linked to *Babel* magazine. Patiño (2006, 5) has defined *Babel* as a "magazine of the aesthetic avant-garde" published by "left-wing dandies." In the postdictatorial landscape, following the failed hopes intellectuals placed in the democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín and amid a soaring economic crisis, *Babel* aimed to reconfigure the relation between literature and politics. Moreover, *Un poeta nacional* was published in 1993 by Editorial Sudamericana, which, under the direction of a writer and

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editor close to *Babel*, Luis Chitarroni, promoted these young or "new" writers as a means of renovating the Argentine literary scene. As opposed to *Punto de Vista*, Paula Klein (2014, 12) argues that the magazine performed "a productive oblivion of the literary tradition," allowing its writers to "position themselves against those writing styles that invoked the notions of memory and exile and assumed an hegemonic role within the framework of Argentine literature during the democratic transition." According to Adriana Rodríguez-Alfonso (2021, 102), *Babel* championed a "politics of literature" based on the autonomy and specificity of formal experimentation, distanced from both the morals of political commitment and "the guidelines of clarity, massiveness, and market profitability."

In *Babel* and other periodicals, Feiling launched a series of attacks against the most renowned figures of the Argentine cultural field. He vehemently opposed the ideal of political commitment and influencing public opinion: "Unfortunately, many writers of the 1990s still pursue the role model of the writer as a carrier of the moral consciousness of his society, whose most typical and paradigmatic example in Argentina is Sabato" (Feiling 2005, 67). He also initiated a polemics with Osvaldo Soriano, one of the most widely read Argentine writers of the 1990s. Feiling (2005, 44) attacked Soriano's ambition of "painting with indelible colors the Argentina of the 1990s" and argued that "there's no commonplace or stereotype capable of escaping his narrative machine." In contrast to Sabato's moralistic seriousness and Soriano's populist progressivism, Feiling asked himself "whether it's not the time to be a bit more frivolous, pedantic or ironic" (44).

Literary specificity and frivolous detachment reinforce Feiling's self-fashioning as a writer in translation. Feiling shaped a paradoxical stance: decidedly adopting the locus of the Argentine writer, he reaffirmed the need to go beyond the national tradition. Feiling (2005, 64) questioned the centrality of Piglia in the "new official history of Argentine literature" that "raided the University of Buenos Aires and the cultural supplements." He claimed Piglia was the perpetrator of an "official history" in which "everything revolves around Sarmiento in the nineteenth century and the Borges-Arlt dialectic in the twentieth, and every Argentine text supposedly gives a response to the dilemmas and problems aroused by books such as *Facundo*" (64). Feiling refuted the fictionalization of literary history seen in *Respiración artificial* for generating a literature that limits itself to retelling its own tradition: "the official history usually generates a suffocating literature, which gives everything for the chance to insert itself in that same history, and exclusively refers to it" (65). He upheld his literary inclination for "pleasure and enjoyment" and outlined his project of writing as a "a genre trilogy" (65). Genre fiction granted Feiling a way out of an academic consensus that, in his view, restricted literature to endogamic quoting and rewriting. He evoked the term *escribir mal*, echoing Piglia's appraisal of Arlt to the detriment of Lugones, but now meant to challenge the centrality of Piglia himself in the postdictatorial Argentine literary field: "I have the intention to continue writing badly, that is, against the grain of the prevailing views of Argentine literature" (Feiling 2005, 66).

Before publishing *Un poeta nacional*, Feiling (2005, 90) had already addressed Lugones in two essays that sought to "find out who was L. L. and thus use him for the only thing that literature is good for: to produce a new one." Piglia invoked Lugones as a challenge to nationalism, but his rearrangement of the national canon still rethought itself from the inside and according to its allegedly intrinsic guidelines. On the contrary, Feiling deems it imperative to "decapitate" from Lugones "his tedium, jingoism, and the antiques of school handbooks" (91). Provocatively, he recognizes in Lugones a certain "reclaiming of [literary] forms" that anticipates his own fusion of formal experimentation and translation: "Lugones knew that good poems always seem written in a foreign language" (93). Epitomizing Piglia's allegory of the writer as a literary critic, in *Respiración artificial*, Renzi regarded fiction as an explicitly metaliterary rewriting of literary history. Instead, Feiling fictionalizes Lugones as the protagonist of an adventure novel.

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Feiling (1993, 9) opens *Un poeta nacional* by quoting a passage from Julio Irazusta's biography of Lugones: "Towards the end of 1902, minister Fernández ordered inspector Lugones to travel to Neuquén, from whose penitentiary a dangerous Chilean murdered had escaped . . . . He commanded him to capture the fugitive." Taking this biographical fact as a departing point, Feiling renames Lugones as Esteban Errandonea and reimagines his adventures in the apocryphal Patagonian island of Puerto Taylor. The novel adheres to an aesthetics of exoticism in novels celebrated by the *Babel* group, such as Aira's *Una novela china* (1987), Laiseca's *La hija de Kheops* (1989), and Guebel's *La perla del emperador* (1990). Graciela Montaldo (1993, 260) notes that the genre of adventure fiction did not have a significant presence in Argentine literature until its introduction by the *Babel* group: "they transposed a genre but also a way of intervening into the literary tradition; they sought to legitimize a different poetic for Argentine literature." These novels "propose a fiction disengaged from interpretation, . . . turning their ability to fable into the drive of the only worthwhile literature" (262). Exoticism thus propels fictional inventiveness, moving the plot beyond the self-referential interpretation of literary history. While Guebel and Laiseca recall distant locations like Malaysia and Egypt, Feiling redraws the Argentine territory as an exotic landscape, whose English name defamiliarizes its national belonging. *Un poeta nacional* adopts generic tropes from adventure fiction and casts the Argentine tradition through exogenous aesthetic values. Feiling portrays Lugones/Errandonea as the national poet for having experienced an adventure that predates and gives rise to his public stance. Instead of relying on Lugones's well-known nationalistic poems or conferences, Feiling rewrites a rather irrelevant official commission and launches an exciting plot.

Set in 1904, the novel portrays Errandonea as an aspiring young writer who visits a government minister to "beg for public office . . . . Everything revealed his ambition of being the greatest, the oracular bard of a country lacking a literature" (Feiling 1993, 12). However, the minister does not commission any literary project, telling him instead: "The Republic needs you, Errandonea. I'm aware that you know how to handle guns, and that you've won some fencing trophies" (16). The future national poet will acquire such a status because of his skills as a man of action. His contribution to the fatherland is not to give poetic form to any kind of national language or values. He is sent as a state official to a southern island where "there's nothing more than snow, sheep, criminals, and Indians" and where "anarchists are very active among laborers and miners" (18). Feiling rewrites Lugones's trip to Neuquén as a journey into the historically recognizable landscape of Patagonia, which witnessed anarchist activism, sociopolitical upheaval, and military repression in the 1910s and 1920s. He must capture a fugitive anarchist, condemned for murdering the British citizen James Askew, "the owner of thousands of acres and figurehead of the British crown, . . . who puts laborers to death and treats workers cruelly" (49). Then, he must persuade the reluctant Elizabeth Askew to return to England. As the minister tells Errandonea, fulfilling his task would represent a major contribution to the nation, as putting an end to insurgence "will bring reassurance to investors" and Elizabeth's family "has stakes in Baring Brothers, and Baring Brothers has stakes in the country" (162).

Errandonea accepts the proposal because, in his own words, he is keen on going on adventures: "he had always wanted to become a man of action. The Wars of Independence, the struggle against the Indian, the Civil Wars . . . . I accept: I've read too many novels by Walter Scott to decline this opportunity" (Feiling 1993, 18). This initial scene encapsulates Feiling's strategies for rewriting the origins of Lugones's literary career. Errandonea is no longer the public speaker who retells *Martín Fierro* as an epic poem but a parvenu mimicking the imaginary of British adventure novels. Moreover, Feiling depicts Errandonea's preference for genre fiction and desire for adventure as inspiring one of Lugones's most renowned pieces of nationalistic literature, the poem "Dedicatoria a los antepasados." As Errandonea travels to Patagonia, the poem's verses spontaneously come

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to his mind: "he embodied the decision to revel in danger, with the prestige of having fought and won. It might be his last chance to emulate his predecessors . . . 'Might our land save us from oblivion,/for these four centuries that we've served in her'" (92).

Adventure fiction propels Errandonea's actions and gives shape to his literary calling. During the boat trip to Patagonia, he feels impelled to narrate to his companions a mystery tale he heard at a tavern. It revolves around a "gentleman from Providence" who arrives at the Canadian woods looking for hunting locations: "There he finds a mestizo guide and delves into the thickness . . . Let's give them names, stories are made with names: Ashton Smith, Clark Ashton Smith, him; his guide, Joseph Défago" (Feiling 1993, 58). They eventually find the remains of a fire and the corpse of an old Indian next to a mysterious inscription. After deciphering and reading it aloud, the guide runs away and "a second shadow of amorphous contours seemed to run behind his shadow" (108). When the two shadows converge, Défago kills himself. Years later, haunted by the memories of this apparition, Ashton Smith also commits suicide. The ship's captain tells Errandonea that he has heard this tale before, as it belongs to a collection of short stories of which Elizabeth has a copy.

As soon as they arrive at the Askews' residence, Errandonea pays a visit to Elizabeth's library and finds the book. It is Algernon Blackwood's *The Double Shadow and Other Tales.* Errandonea identifies his new adventurous identity with it: "he felt that only *The Double Shadow* achieved the timid feat of preserving his identity. He decided to translate the story as a means of celebrating the preservation of this existence" (Feiling 1993, 106). Elizabeth reads Errandonea's translation and asks him why he changed the characters' names and episodes. He replies: "Someone told me the story as veridical, I assumed it was part of Canadian folklore and retold it myself making certain adjustments" (113). Feiling not only situates Errandonea's adventures at the origins of Lugones's nationalistic poetics and self-image as a writer. He also presents him as an anachronistic translator of British genre fiction. The tale he narrates and rewrites broadly mirrors Blackwood's veridical "The Wendigo," first published in 1910 in *The Lost Valley and Other Stories*. Moreover, he renames the main character as Ashton Smith, whose empirical counterpart published the collection of horror stories *The Double Shadow* in 1933. Errandonea thus translates and adapts British stories still unpublished by the novel's timeline. He tells Elizabeth that these stories anachronistically move him to write *Las fuerzas extrañas*, Lugones's veridical and renowned short story collection originally published in 1906: "I've been meaning for a while to write a collection of short stories . . . fantastic stories" (113).

As a formal technique, anachronism also structures the novel's core conflict. In his essays on Lugones, Feiling (2005, 78) argued that "Borges's omnipresence owes much to his complex relationship with L. L." He linked Borges's project of "replacing the history of Argentine literature" to the need of "eliminating the obstacle of the first writer of our language . . . . It was necessary to bypass his interpretation of *Martín Fierro* too" (89). Borges not only reconsidered Lugones's account of the *gaucho* as an epic hero as a "deserter" but also supplemented *Martín Fierro* with short stories like "El fin" and "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)." Feiling (2005, 89) points out that 1874 is "by perfidy of coincidences the year in which L. L. was born." In *Un poeta nacional*, the fugitive is named Tadeo Cruz. The novel transforms Borges's gaucho into "a cultured person" whose family background reveals the social impact of immigration and who devoted his life to spreading anarchism: "He was of a considerable height, and his hat could not conceal his whole hair, long and blonde, . . . nobody would have thought he was a laborer" (Feiling 1993, 125). Feiling combines Borges's rewriting of *Martín Fierro* and Lugones's juvenile experiences through the tropes of adventure fiction. In this way, Borges and Lugones's clashing views on Argentine tradition do not produce a meta-literary reflection but become the motif that carries the plot forward. When recalling his youth friendship with Tadeo, Errandonea

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states: "I was his friend. We edited an anarchist periodical, *Sol Libertario*, a while ago . . . I later changed my ideas" (Feiling 1993, 145).

As Errandonea falls in love with Elizabeth but discovers she loves Tadeo, the chase progressively mirrors *The Double Shadow*. On the one hand, Errandonea's shadow pursues Tadeo to capture him and fulfill his mission. On the other, Tadeo's shadow reminds Errandonea of his past as an anarchist, affecting his goal of becoming the national poet. Errandonea overhears a conversation between Tadeo and Elizabeth and learns that Tadeo is also jealous of him. The novel's climax involves a series of disputes between them. Their mutual jealousy over Elizabeth reflects the confrontation between the state official and the anarchist, between the man of action who reads genre fiction and the one who kills an exploitative landowner. Tadeo confronts Errandonea: "I thought you didn't like weapons, that you're going to change the world only through verses . . . . You've always been a clown, Esteban. Silly posts in the government, prison guards . . . What else are you missing?" (Feiling 1993, 203). Errandonea finally kills Tadeo and reveals the vengeful motivations behind his official duty. Killing his former friend connotes killing his own shadow, that is, his juvenile anarchistic morals.

By the end of *Un poeta nacional*, Errandonea reads a cultural supplement and finds his short story: "The Other Shadow. By E. Errandonea." As a reward for killing Tadeo and forcing Elizabeth to return to England, he received state recognition and a permanent position in the newspaper. The British ambassador, on behalf of "my compatriots, profoundly thankful for your unerring and efficient work," gives him a pocket watch carved in gold, matching the ones given to the mayor of Puerto Taylor and its most eminent landowners. It reads: "E. ERRANDONEA FROM THE BRITISH RESIDENTS: 'FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW'" (Feiling 1993, 120).

In conclusion, Feiling rewrites Lugones's empirical travel to Neuquén as a coming-of-age story, intimately linked to foreign culture and economic powers. Rather than echoing Lugones's grandiose project of unveiling an essentialist and authentic Argentine identity through literature, Errandonea becomes a national hero for appeasing social unrest and securing British interests in Patagonia. Generic tropes not only model Errandonea's journey but also underlie the writing process of some of Lugones's most renowned pieces. The novel thus presents Errandonea as a translator adapting British mystery stories to an Argentine regional context. By inserting foreign genre fiction as the source of inspiration for Lugones's early literary projects, Feiling dismantles the sublime ideal of the national poet and puts together, instead, the image of a writer in translation. Mirroring Feiling's controversial arguments against Piglia, *Un poeta nacional* dismisses any self-referential or essayistic reflection on the Argentine literary tradition. As he wrote in *Babel* about Sergio Chejfec's *Lenta biografía* (1990), Feiling (1990, 5) combines the figure of Lugones and British genre fiction not to "write Argentine literature" but to carry out "the much more important task of writing a good novel in Argentina."

César Aira: A playful avant-gardist

In 1981, Aira published a controversial article claiming that the contemporary Argentine novel was "a rachitic and failed species" for making an "opportunistic unpolished use of the available social-mythical material" (55). He attacked the most renowned writers at the time for not showing any interest in inventiveness, particularly slamming *Respiración artificial*. Aira (1981, 57) anticipated Feiling's invective toward Piglia, arguing that he wrote "one of the worst novels of his generation" and questioning the literary lineage he postulated: "In fact, Piglia doesn't follow Arlt at all, who was a real novelist, with everything that the term implies about *miliunanochesca* invention." Just as Feiling disapproved of Piglia's fictionalization of literary history, Aira condemned his essayistic

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exhibition of "judgements, reckonings, discussions won beforehand because the author gives himself the opponents he needs" (57). Animosity between them lasted for decades, as Aira declared in a 2004 interview: "Piglia is a serious writer, a highly esteemed intelectual as a profesor . . . With time I've distanced myself from such a serious standpoint, responsible towards society and history" (Alfieri 2004). Aira champions the immediacy of fiction and plot, contrary to Piglia's self-fashioning as a reader-writer capable of mediating between literary and political discourses. While Piglia offers metaliterary and critical allegories of the Argentine tradition and political context, Aira opts for the sheer enjoyment of "*miliunanochesca* invention."

Between 1989 and 1990, Feiling and Aira engaged in a heated polemic in *Babel*. Feiling wrote an acrid review of the playful *Retrato de un Albañil Adolescente* (1988), by Aira's friends and literary peers Arturo Carrera and Emeterio Cerro: "it's not fun *at all*; moreover, it causes me a bit of embarrassment to imagine two people racking their brains to create . . . Dadaist jokes" (1989, 36). In response, Aira (1990, 41) stood for "these little books without feet or head that everyone rushes to dismiss as moronic glossolalia." Aira claimed that Feiling's objections were institutionalized judgments about literature, incapable of acknowledging the relevance of an irreverent and playful poetics: "those making fun of Emeterio Cerro in the name of literature are making a mistake. What is literature for them? Something presentable, serious, which ladies could enjoy?" (41). For Aira, incomprehension is the defining criterion of authentic literature: "The incomprehensible must be the writer, not the work. Incomprehensible for not fitting into the social etiquette of language, like a clown in a wake" (41). While Feiling and Aira both question Piglia's use of metaliterature as a reflection on the Argentine tradition, their privileging of sheer narration and inventiveness displays contrasting connotations. Feiling's use of genre fiction still implies a value judgement respectful for literary specificity. His reappraisal of minor genres is a typical reversal of the regime of value regulating the literary field at a given time. On the contrary, Aira appraises incomprehension and nonsense as constitutive of the radically new. Rather than reversing values, Aira boycotts the notion of value itself: only the absolutely new counts as literature, and only the incomprehensible—thus unclassifiable—counts as the new.

Being constantly out of place defines Aira's self-image as a writer, for which he draws on the notions of the avant-garde and playfulness. For Sandra Contreras (2002, 15), Aira designs a "unique historical fiction" inspired by early twentieth-century avant-gardes: "he positions himself in history as if he was an avant-gardist in the origins of the avant-garde." In his essay "La nueva escritura," Aira argues that, "when art was already invented," the myth of the avant-garde reinstated "the possibility of redoing the path since the beginning . . . and the way of doing it was to reclaim for the process the throne that had been given to the result" (1998, 167). Aira reclaims the legacy of the avant-garde not as an overt attack on art institutions or social discourses, but as an aesthetic strategy that enables the artist to continue making art. The death of the avant-garde has been widely postulated, but Aira adopts its point of view as a simulacrum, as if giving rise to the new was still possible. The survival of art rests on the potential of avant-gardist experimentation for reinventing and relaunching "tales." The product is not as important as the act of narrating itself. In this line, in "Ars Narrativa," Aira (1994, 1) coined the concept of the "flight forward" to define his aesthetic preferences: "what it's about, when one doesn't just want to produce novels like every other novel, is to *continue* writing, to not putting an end to what we had to write in the second or third page."

Aira's inclination for narration and inventiveness distances him from the political dimension of Piglia's metaliterature. Martín Kohan (2021, 171) defines Aira's poetics as "avant-garde without an epic," as it opposes any heroic understanding of the avant-garde: "lightness can certainly become corrosive, . . . can free literature from superior mandates and duties, missions of political redemption and other similar transcendences." For

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Premat (2008, 245), playfulness and superficiality dismantle the ideal of building an oeuvre and produce an "Aira effect" that attaches his "little novels" to a certain authorial myth: the writer as an "idiot" who "doesn't understand" and "spoils a story," because he attempts "a clumsy application of the criteria ruling over the great literature." Aira suggests being able to write the greatest prose but ultimately chooses to let down his readers' expectations. He states that "writing badly" and "without editing" is the privileged way to achieve the most radical inventiveness, devaluing his own works as a means of dismissing the prevailing principles of value in the literary field. Outlining the figure of the writer as a "playful avant-gardist," even "idiot," implies an irreverent stance towards literary history. The concepts of "flight forward" and "bad literature" connote a certain forgetfulness of the Argentine literary tradition, which subsequently enables Aira to pursue his authorial program.

Lugones was published in 2020 by the Argentine press Blatt & Ríos. It is thus a paradigmatic example of the proliferation of small independent publishers in Buenos Aires during the past two decades, a phenomenon that has contributed to revitalizing the Argentine literary field in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis and beyond. However, just as Feiling did in *Un poeta nacional*, Aira added the date in which he wrote the novel in its last page. He dated its writing to 1990, one year after his polemics with Feiling and one year before Feiling himself dated his novel. Aira's fictional rendering of Lugones is thus contemporaneous to Feiling's and provides a novelistic counterpart to their exchange of opinions. Moreover, 1990 was a turning point in his career, as it was the year when he began publishing up to four novels per year. Dating the novel in 1990, therefore, Aira links his fictionalization of Lugones to the most notorious trait of his poetics and authorial stance, that is, the serialized overproduction of "little novels" that saturate the market, rapidly written and published without correcting. I previously argued that Piglia evoked Lugones as a counterexample of Renzi's metaliterary reflections, and Feiling fictionalized Lugones's youth experiences as adventure fiction. Aira rewrites Lugones's posthumous status as the national poet. His narration begins after Lugones's suicide, reimagining the episode and granting him an afterlife as a playful avant-gardist.

David Viñas (2017, 511) remarks that "since its inception, the grandiose and heroic project of Lugones was eroded by the possibility of suicide." Failure and isolation were inherent to his grandiose stance, inevitably split from the people he pretended to guide. Lugones killed himself in 1938 by taking a mixture of whisky and cyanide at a resort on an island in Delta del Tigre. *Lugones* begins by depicting his arrival at the island, but indetermination lurks in the horizon: "One afternoon at the end of last summer, the greatest Argentine writer arrived in our island. Leopoldo Lugones, incognito, without any luggage and a revolver in his pocket. What did he come to do, nobody in the resort knew, and in fact nobody ever came to know" (Aira 2020, 4). The island becomes a self-contained geographical and narrative space, detached from social conventions and governed according to its own rules. Lugones feels overwhelmed by the eventful surroundings and pushy inhabitants: "He ascribed all these disconcerting simultaneites to a certain velocity that seemed to govern the island, a very high velocity" (16). The novel's setting and events are thus governed by randomness and unpredictability. The notion of the error becomes a literary procedure that triggers inventiveness and endlessly recommences the quest for the new. Through Aira's lens, Lugones fails to commit suicide and launches an outlandish narration of erratic events that spans twenty-four hours.

Aira uses motifs and narrative patterns from different genres as instruments for triggering events and moving forward a hasty and disproportionate plot. For instance, Lugones's failure to kill himself is narrated as a slapstick comedy scene. As he arrives at the island, he moves from the boat to the pier and attempts to take his watch out of his pocket but mistakenly grabs his gun. Bewildered, he stumbles, almost falls into the river, and loses control of the gun: "What a fantastic scene: a sixty-something gentleman wearing a sober

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black suit facing the void, the void opened to those who stumble, and the black revolver falls as a ripe fruit from his hand . . . . It fired upon touching the dock's planks, bang!" (5). The stray bullet accidentally hits the resort's owner, Luisa, who insults Lugones and moves him to reflect on "the line that went from the world of the loud crowd to him, the separation. What offended him was that a vulgar word abolished this distance: vulgarity had that nefarious virtue of bringing it all closer" (8). In *Un poeta nacional*, Feiling used adventure fiction to rewrite the origins and motivations behind Lugones's grandiose literary project. In contrast, there is no transcendence in Aira's Lugones. Comedy, melodrama, and crime fiction are the three genres that Aira uses to narrate Lugones's involvement in trivial events, "abolishing distances" and "bringing it all closer," ultimately fulfilling the frivolous and provocative purpose of just narrating a story.

In *Lugones*, the figure of the national poet is nothing more and nothing less than a stereotype. Aira does not deconstruct it from a metaliterary critical angle but uses it as a literary artefact. He recontextualizes it within a "little novel" in the manner of an avant-gardist ready-made. As Aira (1995, 29) argued in his essay "La innovación," "the ready-made is the best option to find the New, which by definition is that which cannot be sought because it has been already found." Rather than dismantling the figure of the national poet as a symptom of nationalistic essentialism, Aira exacerbates and transforms the stereotype into a means of invention. He inserts it in an unpredictable fictional setting and uses it to produce an eccentric storyline. Lugones tries to disguise his identity when registering at the resort, but Luisa rapidly finds out his real identity: "Enough of this farce: you're not a doctor, you're Leopoldo Lugones, the author of *La Guerra Gaucha*, I know you very well from *Caras y Caretas*" (Aira 2020, 21). Lugones's fame is thus indebted to a popular magazine rather than his grandiloquent poems and conferences. Moreover, Lugones himself admits that he travelled to the island after an existential crisis: "If mine is what you call a life, I'll hang myself from the balls in the first tree I find . . . . Having a son who's a policeman, an underage lover, being a fascist, all that and much more are trivialities compared to the really tragic experience I had with literature" (Aira 2020, 62).

The terribly tragic experience he had with literature was realizing that uncertainty and unpredictability would always jeopardize his well-established blueprint for becoming the great Argentine writer: "He understood nor could ever understand nothing because it was a chaos. And not a chaos as a passage, as an aesthetic experience, not even chaos as nothingness, but chaos in time, confusion and hassle" (Aira 2020, 64). The absurd events taking place in the island mirror the "chaos in time" and "confusion" experienced by Lugones. Aira uses the tropes of crime fiction to engage the national poet in a convoluted comedy of intrigue, involving Luisa, her ex-husband Luciano, and her accomplice in illegal business Gálmez. During the novel's most climactic scene, Luciano and Gálmez confront and kill each other using the methods brought by Lugones into the island: the gun and cyanide. Lugones's failure to commit suicide thus leads to an outlandish action scene, and the novel grants him an imaginary afterlife. Luisa tells him: "Listen to me and tell me what you think, in case it's too much like a *feuilleton*. We make the dead pass for you and . . . But that's absurd! Lugones exclaimed. Why? Because . . . because everything. To begin with, they don't resemble me, and also they are two" (91). Manipulating the crime scene, absurdly presenting two corpses and two causes of death, transforms Lugones's existential crisis into the mythical public image he ambitioned for himself. Luisa tells him: "it's essential for the myth, which is always a dubious business . . . . Your biographers will be able to choose between the revolver and cyanide" (91).

Aira turns Lugones into the protagonist of an extravagant plot, ultimately transforming the figure of the national poet into that of a playful avant-gardist. To this end, the novel exposes its own writing process in the words of the narrator. For Reinaldo Laddaga (2007, 112), Aira usually includes a *mise en abyme* in his fiction, portraying the production of literature as an endless work in progress: "the kind of aesthetic production that is tried out

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while it's being written." *Lugones* features its own *mise en abyme* when Lugones finds a *yacaré*, takes him to the resort, and shares his artistic and existential despair with the animal. In a "little voice that didn't sound like a child but as miniature gentleman," the *yacaré* tries to give hope to Lugones. He asks Lugones to imagine the perfect writer as that person who has "exhausted the entire stock of tales and non-tales in his mechanism. And, if he's a true writer, which he must be because we imagined him as perfect, then he has always been, and exhausted his stock since the beginning, and knew that life is useless, and even then he lived!" (Aira 2020, 84).

In an increasingly absurd sequence, Lugones teaches the *yacaré* how to write and forces him to get started: "What can I write? Anything, the first thing that comes to your mind... Anything! What's difficult is just the beginning" (Aira 2020, 85). The *yacaré* decides to write a chronicle about the last twenty-four hours in the island and starts by depicting Lugones's arrival. His first sentence duplicates the novel's beginning—"One afternoon at the end of last summer"—and his writing process reflects the strategy that Aira has defined as a "flight forward." Although every "tale" and "non-tale" has already been told, the playful avant-gardist persists in writing "anything," rediscovering the purpose of literature in the act of narrating itself. After faking the scene of his suicide, Lugones stays at the resort and enjoys his night drinking with Luisa and the rest. Meanwhile, the *yacaré* concludes his narration by adopting the first-person voice and recapping his aesthetic techniques: "I continued writing, writing, faster and faster. In little more than an hour I had completed a good number of pages, and my impulse didn't diminish. I hadn't stopped not even once: I resolved every problem as I wrote" (92). Wrapping up the technique of the *mise en abyme*, the end of his chronicle overlaps with the novel's final sentence: "Right now, as I write, it seems that I've reached the present, the deep midnight" (93).

Conclusions

Piglia, Feiling, and Aira drew on anachronism as an ideal technique to produce fictional renderings of Lugones. Their novels were published in a (post)dictatorial and neoliberal context when writers and intellectuals reassessed the notion of a national literature as a means of reconstructing the Argentine public sphere. Each novel thus fictionalized Lugones to enable renewed literary forms and different figures of the Argentine writer. *Respiración artificial* evoked Lugones as a counterexample that enabled Piglia to outline the figure of the writer as an allegory of the literary critic. However, even when he privileges a pluralistic account of the literary tradition over nationalistic and authoritarian uniformity, Renzi is still in charge of centralizing and assigning value to Argentine literature. In contrast, Feiling and Aira looked back at Lugones to question Piglia's self-image as the competent reader. Instead of giving novelistic form to a metaliterary reflection on the national tradition, they opt for inventiveness, genre fiction, and the enjoyment of storytelling. Feiling and Aira used the motif of traveling to move Lugones to the margins of the national canon. Narrating a geographical displacement thus displaced Lugones's canonical image as the national poet and allowed them to propose innovative role models for the 1990s writer. *Un poeta nacional* transformed Lugones into the protagonist of an adventure novel who also translates and adapts foreign genre fiction to the local context. Combining Argentine history and British forms, Feiling advanced his own position as a writer in translation. While Feiling summoned foreign genres to reverse established values in Argentine literature, though, Aira dismantled the idea of value itself. His novel granted Lugones an afterlife: failing to commit suicide triggers an outlandish plot and Lugones ends up getting involved in a series of increasingly absurd events. In Aira's *Lugones*, the figure of the national poet becomes a narrative ready-made, exaggerated, and recontextualized to elicit a playful and avant-gardist "flight forward."

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