Research Article

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What About Realism? Alberto Blest Gana, Georg Lukács, and Their Chilean Readers

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Abstract: In this article, I analyse Georg Lukács's theories of realism in relation to Alberto Blest Gana's work. For this purpose, I explore two essays that have greatly contributed to locating the Chilean author's novels within the realm of literary realism. The texts chosen for my study are Jaime Concha's prologue to the *Martín Rivas* edition by the Ayacucho Library and Ricardo A. Latcham's essay "Blest Gana y la novela realista" [Blest Gana and the Realist Novel]. Concha and Latcham find appropriate categories for the interpretation of Blest Gana's work in Lukács's essays. In their readings, they accurately apply notions such as the selective principle or the typology of characters. However, while using those insights as a shared critical platform, they arrive at different interpretations of what is meant by realism. The article elucidates the role played by Concha and Latcham in the Chilean intellectual field and shows how literary genealogies inform their critical projects.

Keywords: nineteenth-century literature, Chilean literature, literary theory, realism, Georg Lukács

Introduction

What kind of consensus exists among critics on the category of literary realism? And, for our purposes, what aspects of literary realism have critics deployed to read the novels by Alberto Blest Gana (1830–1920)? Although the question raises a problem of definitions, it aims to discuss the variants – partly circumspect, other times diffuse, and almost always without revealing any theoretical norms – that the very notion of realism tends to signify in literary criticism. In this article, I would like to interrogate some hypotheses regarding Georg Lukács's theories, their limits and validity, in relationship with the study of Blest Gana's work. It is under this premise that I propose to explore two essays that have greatly contributed to placing the Chilean author's novels within the realm of literary realism. The texts chosen for my analysis are Jaime Concha's prologue to the *Martín Rivas* edition by the Ayacucho Library and Ricardo A. Latcham's essay "Blest Gana y la novela realista" [Blest Gana and the Realist Novel].¹ Published for the first time by *Revista Chilena de Literatura* under the title "*Martín Rivas* o la formación del burgués" [*Martín Rivas* or the Making of a Bourgeois] (1972), Concha's work has successively been used in its augmented version to introduce Blest Gana's classic novel in the distinguished collection directed by Ángel Rama (1977). It has also recently been included in Concha's latest volume, *Leer a contraluz: Estudios sobre narrativa chilena. De Blest Gana a Varas y Bolaño* (2012). Latcham's text predates Concha's study and it appeared originally in *Anales de la*

¹ Translation mine. All translations from Spanish to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Quotations of Blest Gana are given in Spanish and English.

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Universidad de Chile (1958). It was later reprinted in book format in Serie Roja by the same publisher (1959), and it was collected finally in *Antología, crónica de varia lección* (1965), Latcham's posthumous work.

Following the principles associated with literary realism, Concha and Latcham's essays arrive at different destinations in their analysis of Blest Gana's work. With Lukács's theories as a common horizon, they end in contradiction. Strikingly, none of this prevents Concha or Latcham from agreeing to define the Chilean author's novels as examples of realism, diluting, in this way, the category's contents of the explicit theoretical framework they chose for their critical approach. The outcomes of this interpretative multiplicity are invigorating from the standpoint that the two critics have approached a literary work from certain shared premises about realism while applying two different versions of the same. Blest Gana's work, as a consequence, still remains situated within the space of literary realism, which results in one and the same critical resolution. In Concha's case, the mode of representation of the realist novel, according to how Lukács framed it, is followed to the letter and applied to the reading of *Martín Rivas*. With Latcham, guidelines become disrupted, a fact which allows him to move towards less limited evaluations of realist aesthetics.

Lukács's theories of realism are a constant presence in the analysis of both Concha and Latcham. Certainly, referencing Lukács in essays that focus on Blest Gana's novels should be considered predictable, especially when taking into account the genealogical status of the Chilean author's work. The anecdotal aspect of the origins of his novelistic passion is well known. In a letter sent to his friend Vicuña Mackenna, Blest Gana confessed that it was while reading Honoré de Balzac that he felt encouraged to abandon his early lyrical production, making a pledge to dedicate himself to the novel (*Epistolario* 14; 36).² Blest Gana was only a generation away from Balzac. Along with articulating a practice that constantly reveals specific aesthetic loans from a Balzacian narrative space, this temporal proximity has established a scholarly refuge for a type of Blest Gana critique that has resorted to rather classical conceptions of literary realism. Accordingly, Lukács and his reflections, deployed above all during the mature phase of the philosopher's theoretical project, have represented a safe haven for those approaches.

Furthermore, some of the aesthetic techniques assessed by the Hungarian philosopher seem in effect to match with Blest Gana's own idea of literature. For Lukács, these techniques are informed by a whole Marxist universe which is extraneous, of course, to mid nineteenth-century Chile. Still, avoiding anachronism, Blest Gana's early reflections on the novel contain certain concepts and procedures, which also play an important role in the Lukácsian definition of realism. Take for instance the selection of details, which merited extensive analysis by Lukács. Seemingly, for Blest Gana not everything that belongs to the order of reality would find a place in the novel. If, as he once deemed it, literary work is "estudio, arte, imaginación" [study, art, imagination], then reality has to pull back (*Epistolario* 29). Rather than a pure and intelligible surface, reality operates as a problem. The novel cannot confine itself to what is ordinary. He wrote on this subject to José Antonio Donoso, in a letter in which he also commented on his friend's manuscript of *Un amor transitorio* [An Ephemeral Love]: "Las condiciones de la vida están bien observadas y siempre que en el dominio de sus incidentes ordinarios se hace algo de interesante, como en tu trabajo, me confirmo en que la literatura debe llegar a este punto" [The conditions of life are well observed and provided that ordinary situations are shaped so that it is possible to make something interesting out of

² Guillermo Araya has alluded to Blest Gana's acute relevancy in manuals on the history of Latin American literature. Araya underscores, for instance, that Arturo Torres highlights that Blest Gana wanted to become "Chile's Balzac" ("Historia" 29). For his part, Araya himself considers that Blest Gana's letter to Vicuña Mackenna is "an express, clear and unequivocal reaffirmation of the enormous significance that the knowledge of Balzac and his work had for the training and projects of Blest Gana" and adds that "undoubtedly, the main realist-novel scheme that Blest Gana tried to adapt for a Chilean reality was taken from Balzac" ("Historia" 39). More recently, Laura J. Hosiasson has studied seven of the Chilean author's novels written between 1860 and 1864. Read as a group, the critic comments, we can sense "with more force the Balzacian impulse that animates them and from which they also distance themselves" (236). She also adds that the methods used by Blest Gana in these novels "went heavily in the direction of what had also seduced Balzac: a fluctuation about the same obsessions, a return to the same themes and human types, adopting different perspectives" (239).

them, as your work does, I confirm that literature must come to this point] (*Epistolario* 19). Only when succeeding at changing the “ordinary” into the “interesting,” can the writer be commended.

Blest Gana claimed on several occasions that reality had to be fashioned through literary creation and craft. Perhaps, the best known of these claims is included in another missive to Donoso. Here Blest Gana argues that inasmuch as he had drawn on reality to write *El ideal de un Calavera* [The Ideal of a Rogue], he had paid particular attention to one aspect: “copiar los accidentes de la vida en cuanto el arte lo permite” [copying the circumstances of life as far as art allows] (*Epistolario* 34). Art dictates the rules of the novel, not reality. Similar prompts also guide the way political reality would manifest itself in literature. To this end, the historical evidence of the 1851 Chilean Revolution is notably incorporated into the plot and structure of *Martín Rivas*. Since the two protagonists Leonor and Martín were placed at a great social distance, Blest Gana “necesitaba de circunstancias muy solemnes” [needed very solemn circumstances] to persuade readers to accept their love (*Epistolario* 29). Independent of the central action of the story, political reality intercedes in the novel to resolve conflicts in the plot. This was clearly not the only reason why Blest Gana chose to describe “El motín de Urriola” [the Urriola riot] in his novel. If anything, it possesses the significance of an alibi.

Lukács, obviously, has not been the only source available for examining the series of novels by the Chilean nineteenth-century author, and to some extent, it is possible to detect echoes of Bertolt Brecht’s pragmatic critique when Latcham appeals, for example, to the notion of Blest Gana’s “critical realism.” The arguments put forward by Brecht in his 1938 essays on realism, which he intended to publish in the magazine *Das Wort*,³ only appeared at the end of the sixties, a fact that surely would have prevented Latcham from having access to them. We are not arguing here that Latcham’s reading was derived from those specific essays; however, they are surprising in their similarities to Brecht’s own arguments. According to Latcham, Blest Gana was never consistent with the premises of a critical realism, a fact which also led to his being a nonconformist. In fact, Blest Gana might have anticipated the manifold ways of expressing realism in a novel. In his famous polemic with the Hungarian philosopher, Brecht attempted to dismantle Lukács’s aesthetic doctrine, replacing it with a series of arguments that sought to pluralise the possible ways of effectuating literary realism. Brecht argued that just as the Marxist theorist recognised the perspective of historical development, he would have to admit that there could not be just one single formula for realism. This was perhaps Brecht’s most incisive provocation, one which bumped Lukács from his ideological perch.⁴ At the same time, Brecht made his own questions unusable for reading the typical operations of the nineteenth-century novel and they became practically unacceptable scholarly tools for studying Blest Gana. After all, according to the recollections of Guillermo Araya, Blest Gana was an author who remained constant in his enduring use of “the formula that he discovered at the beginnings of his maturity” (“Historia” 42).

Brecht was eager to demonstrate that, by the end of the 1930s, any presuppositions about the romantic novel had expired because the very reality of the capitalist development had changed and, with it, so had the society itself. Certain struggles had been replaced by others, thus making a theory of lasting human types obsolete.⁵ Brecht argued that it was necessary to resort to newly available techniques of montage and fragment but also to poetry and theatre, genres traditionally excluded by what were then current theories of realism. Obviously, none of this served Blest Gana critics who needed appropriate categories for the interpretation of the nineteenth-century novels. Concha and Latcham found these tools in Lukács’s essays. They also faithfully applied Lukács’s notions to the reading of Blest Gana’s narrative cycle; in addition, they used those insights as a platform but distorted them along the way. The pages that follow will clarify these critical stances.

³ For an historical account of these essays, see David Pike’s *Lukács and Brecht* (1985), in particular the chapter “The Victim” (195–221). The most important texts of Brecht’s polemic against Lukács are included in Brecht’s “Against Georg Lukács” (68–85).

⁴ For an updated interpretation on this polemic, see Kohan (1–13).

⁵ “For example in contemporary New York, not to mention Moscow, woman is less ‘formed’ by man than in Balzac’s Paris; she is less dependent on him” (Brecht 79).

Jaime Concha: Realism as Ideological Moderation

Lukács appears prominently in a genealogy outlined by Juan Gabriel Araya Grandón (2018) as a central source for Concha's writing as well as for the ordering of his critical and political thought in the mid-1960s.⁶ At that time, Concha was collaborating with a group of poets from the magazine *Trilce*, and it was precisely his work on poetry that eventually made him an unavoidable reference point for national and Latin American literary criticism. For specialised readers, Concha's essays on Pablo Neruda, Vicente Huidobro, and later on Gabriela Mistral gave way particularly to new hermeneutical possibilities. In the words of Paula Miranda Herrera, Concha's theoretical reflections bespoke "methodological triumphs" and "critical brilliance" (39). The significance of these interpretations, developed throughout the sixties and sustained in subsequent decades, has led the editors of a recent anthology of articles published by Jaime Concha to refer to him as "a kind of fictional hero" and to his academic biography as "that of the most talented Chilean critic of the last decades" (Álvarez and Bello 2).

Concha himself has recently acknowledged that his early work was much indebted to Lukács. For more than half a century, he has continued to believe that Lukács "is an author with the greatest existing Marxist-oriented aesthetics," superior even to those produced by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. Even admitting to limitations in Lukács's thinking, Concha praises his reflections for consistency and systematicity, finding value even in any possible negative judgment. In Lukács, he says, "his virtues seem to emerge from those very same recognised defects" ("Palabras" 12). The theoretical reference also serves to ratify here a secure ideological position on his part. At the beginning of the seventies, Concha contributed to Quimantú, the publishing house that the Unidad Popular [Popular Unity] had just nationalised. As is well known, this company aimed to make books available to all Chileans at low prices, according to the democratising programs of the Allende government. Concha has called his time at Quimantú the most enriching experience of that period. This was when he prepared his hypotheses on reading *Martín Rivas*; it should not be overlooked that, later on, when he was setting the editing criteria for the Ayacucho volume, he clarified that his text was following the guidelines that he had already prepared "some years ago, for Quimantú, the State Publishing House during the government of Salvador Allende" (Concha, "Prólogo" xl). It is also worth noting that Concha was in exile when he wrote this statement.

The prologue for the classic edition of Blest Gana's book exhibits one remarkable trait. Almost nowhere does Concha explicitly appeal to the category of realism. This is a curious and striking omission, all the more significant if we take into account the general character of Concha's reading of *Martín Rivas*. He references it only once, towards the end of his study, when he suggests that it is "essentially realist" ("Prólogo" xxxi). Even so, the text itself does not adhere to any specific elements that would allow for the possibility of associating the work of Blest Gana with the currents of literary realism, except when he takes a stand with respect to an allegorical procedure present in the novel. This method allows Concha to advance his interpretation of the capitalist associations represented by the union between Martín and Leonor, whose alliance he defines as an "economic incest." It follows that, when he compares the allegorical incest of *Martín Rivas* with the "proper incest" of *Cumandá* (1879) by Juan León Mera, or with the "semi-incest" of *María* (1867) by Jorge Isaac, he rejects these other two works as non-realist, as if, by pressing verisimilitude, an actual incest could only be recast in a realist novel through allegory. Apart from this brief mention, the category of realism is not used in the prologue as an instance that could codify the reading. This elision is due in part to the critical horizon from which Concha operates, one that traditionally views Blest Gana's text as one of the great Latin American realist novels and that, by virtue

⁶ Recalling a Chilean literature class taught by Jaime Concha during the early 1970s at the Universidad de Concepción, Rodrigo Cánovas explains that the course's focus was the intersection of the literary series with the social series. The novels read by Concha's students were preferably in the realist realm: "Jaime Concha wanted to believe that the theoretical-rich-philosophical model was Lukácsian in character" (Cánovas 25).

of that status, it may have been justified to skim over said singularity.⁷ But it is also possible to postulate that, recognising (as we will further along) the strong link between his essay and the theoretical principles espoused by the texts of Lukács, it may have seemed unnecessary for Concha to insist on the realist character of Blest Gana's work, since, as conceived by Lukács himself, the only possibility available for a novel was to be "essentially realist."

These theoretical borrowings, revealed by various direct appeals and organised in a reading that shows how Concha had broadly digested the procedures specified by Lukács to define the aesthetics of literary realism, are applied to *Martín Rivas*'s narrative operations. In one of the prologue's first notes, the critic refers to "Lukács's ever current reflections" ("Prólogo" x), particularly those included in *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) and which are dedicated to discussing the ideological positions of authors. Building a bridge towards one of Lukács's first books and referring to the specific case of Blest Gana, Concha warns that a typical profile of a Chilean bourgeois supersedes the lukewarm inconsistencies of Juan Montalvo, without coinciding, nonetheless, with the revolutionary extremisms of José Martí, turning Blest Gana's ideological moderation into his "secure balance" as a narrator ("Prólogo" x). I will return to the specificities of this later to clarify how according to Concha the selective principle operates in *Martín Rivas*. To be sure, when establishing whether Blest Gana's literary system is indebted to Stendhal or rather to Balzac, Concha resorts directly to bifurcations signalled by the Hungarian philosopher, recalling how, in Lukács's own reading, the Chilean novelist would coincide with a Balzacian ideological horizon, while positioning himself far from the revolutionary Jacobinism of Stendhal ("Prólogo" xvii).⁸ Maintaining an elusive tone (as I have mentioned above), Concha's manifold critical stances operate in the prologue without specific authorial references. For example, the critic does not directly mention a selective principle in the organisation of details or in the matter of the typology of characters; nonetheless, while he excludes a direct appeal to Lukács's theories, he also recovers both categories and allocates them within his critical work.

I would like to briefly allude to the arguments that make these categories evident, found in one of Lukács's best known mature works, "Franz Kafka or Tomas Mann?" (1957). Lukács recognises the perspective of the realist novel as a disposition that permits a writer to select narrative situations and specify the typology of his characters.⁹ By "perspective" he understands the ideological-narrative direction that the organisation of the work must presuppose, the purpose of which must be to present "an adequate image of objective reality" ("Franz Kafka" 51), that is, a real image of the world. Formal criteria alone do not constitute by themselves a foundation that would permit realist literature to differ from the avant-garde, since for Lukács "all writing must contain a certain degree of realism" ("Franz Kafka" 48). Consequently, he challenges the autonomous character of the avant-garde and reduces modernism to a mere term of opposition to realism in art. Both ideological tendencies coexist not only in the same writer but also within the same work, turning the writing itself into a site of conflict. In this struggle, the selection of details that are used determines the truly realist character of a novel. By way of illustration, in Kafka the harrowing nature of human experience is summoned through a suggestive vivacity of details, where the absurd and the bizarre are presented as probable precisely because of their evocative power. But, in this dialectical process, details end up denying the reality that they try to describe: "The reflection of a distortion becomes a distorted reflection" ("Franz Kafka" 53). Lukács then insists on the mimetic quality of all literature and on the ideological value implicit in the negation or deformation of such a characteristic.

What facilitates the process of distinguishing realism from the avant-garde are not its formal elements, but rather a critical attitude of writers towards the world and their work: "While the modernist writer is uncritical towards many aspects of the modern world, his contemporary, the realist writer can step back from these things and treat them with the necessary critical detachment" ("Franz Kafka" 50–51). One of the

⁷ "Martín Rivas or the Making of a Bourgeois," as noted earlier, serves as the foundation for the prologue to Concha's edition for the Ayacucho Library. In the essay, Concha writes that "Martín Rivas is undoubtedly the most representative work of our nineteenth century literature" (9). For the critic, "our" does not only intend a national context but rather a continental platform.

⁸ Concha makes reference to Lukács's "Balzac and Stendhal," included in Lukács's *Studies in European Realism* (1964).

⁹ The question of typology was previously developed in "The Intellectual Physiognomy in Characterization" (1936), included in Lukács's *Writer and Critic* (149–188).

elements summoned by Lukács to test these possible deviations is the treatment of time in some works from the beginning of the twentieth century. While an author like Virginia Woolf universalises the subjective experience of modern time, making it coincide with reality itself, Thomas Mann recognises that this experience only defines a certain social class and treats it, therefore, in a broader context and in dialogue with other subjects whose perception of time remains homogeneous. In other words, a writer must approach objective reality. Although the choice of elements in a novel is always subjective and depends largely on artists' biographies, their social position, and the historical conditions in which their work takes place, the criterion of objectivity is only given by a dialectical process in which "a creative subjectivity develops, and is expressive of that subjectivity's encounter with the world of its time (or, possibly, of its failure to come to terms with that world)" ("Franz Kafka" 54).

Lukács assigns a determining role to perspective in the selection of details and literary types. Perspective is not conceived by him as an abstract view of history or a compulsive representation of everyday life; neither does it coincide with the prophetic quality of the political. To that end, Lukács explains that Balzac was often mistaken about how future society would present itself and yet managed to fill his work with enduring characters. A perspective that gives rise to a realist representation is closely linked to a belief in social development. Ultimately, the failure of writers does not depend on their technique but on their denial of socialism. It is the "whither" of a work that guides the meaning of all the elements included in it. In the creative process, the realist writer is capable of identifying what is essential from what is irrelevant, and, for Lukács a chaotic accumulation of details does not favour the consolidation of that horizon at all. Rather, he admits: "Art is the selection of the essential and the subtraction of the inessential" ("Franz Kafka" 53). Finally, perspective also decides the other central element of the realist representation: the typology of characters and their durability. What is typical must be considered as a variant of what is essential in literature and as a selective principle that does not depend on the ability to predict the political future. The talent in portraying enduring human types in the novel is the result of a teleological creed. For this reason, for Lukács the characters of Henrik Ibsen have gone out of fashion and someone like Émile Zola has never been able to create truly lasting characters.

As he reflects on Blest Gana's writing practices in his prologue, Concha alludes to two instances where these governing categories are applied. Regarding the author's shaping of characters, Concha writes: "Due to his tropism toward social climbing, Martín relates to Fortunato Esperanzano, the character from *Aritmética en el amor* [Arithmetic in Love]" ("Prólogo" xix). The hypothesis inferring that Blest Gana condensed prominent social types in his novels directly refers to a characteristic of typicality specified by Lukács in his analysis of what he considered to be the best manifestations of the nineteenth-century realist literature. For the representation of historical matter, then, Concha formulates some important reflections based on certain erasures made by Blest Gana. As is known, the action of *Martín Rivas* takes place between 1850 and 1851. These dates are, according to Concha, crucial in Chilean history, especially because during those years a first liberal revolution was conceived and executed, with foci that took off and spread not only in Santiago but throughout the national territory.¹⁰ Of the numerous uprisings, including those that took place in the northern provinces of Chile or the bloody fights unleashed in Punta Arenas, Blest Gana retained only "El motín de Urriola," an event that took place in Santiago, thus redimensioning the size of a prominent liberal uprising. Commenting on the author's choice, Concha emphasises how Blest Gana wrote about revolutionary events separated by more than 10 years, a distance that, far from representing a simple temporal disjunction, implied a properly ideological caesura. Together with refunctionalising a progressive abandonment of revolutionary ideals in Blest Gana's narrative plan, Concha recognises in the author's deletions a type of moderation that was necessary for the embodiment of an era: "It is thus this *system of*

¹⁰ For Lukács, revolution is the *conditio sine qua non* for the rise of literary realism: "Lukács was well aware that realism, although a literary classification and not simply a literary movement, nevertheless flourishes under some circumstances and not under others. Realism flourishes in times of revolution because then the structure of reality and the determinants of human behavior appear in their most extreme form, thus enabling the writer to perceive, more clearly than in 'normal' times, significant types of character, situation, and action." (Anchor 289–290)

exclusions and preferences that fills with full meaning that decennial perspective” (“Prólogo” xx, emphasis mine). Appealing to a need for an exclusive and selective plot – in this case, a revolutionary reality discerned from the multiple uprisings that took place throughout the entire national territory – he points to the hypothesis outlined by Lukács of the production of meaning starting from a selection of events and details. For the Hungarian philosopher as well as for Concha, therefore, the realism of a work does not necessarily depend on the ideological creed of a writer, but on the organisation of materials, the way in which the formal elements intervene in the writing of an author.

The theoretical framework from which Concha prepared his reading of *Martín Rivas* is made explicit in another instance. This stems from the emphasis placed on the work’s outline: “Blest Gana’s novelistic project, his conception toward 1860 of an ambitious historical cycle, strives to capture the present conditions of Chilean life” (“Prólogo” x). Concha’s mentioning of an “ambitious historical cycle” shows evidence of how the nineteenth-century Chilean author contrived a totalising endeavour in his narrative of *Martín Rivas*. The programmatic aspect of Blest Gana’s writing, recalled several times through a Balzacian genealogy and a forceful attempt to carry out a kind of “Chilean human comedy,” has provided abundant reasons for the majority of his critics to appeal to realism in examining the author’s oeuvre. This accounts for a most precious Lukácsian loan; that is, the possibility that a novel can include the whole world. Concha resorts to this at the end of his prologue, deciding to transcribe an extensive paragraph found in Lukács’s *Prolegomena to a Marxist Aesthetic*. While quoting the text, he makes reference to the shaping of typical figures that, in one way or another, must always be interrelated with their counter-types organised according to a hierarchy that supports the composition of the work itself. It is, following Concha, “The best conceptual synthesis that we propose of the reading of *Martín Rivas*.” All the details, all the elements of Blest Gana’s novel, he adds, “have their place in a vivid and compact totality” (“Prólogo” xxxviii). Realism is thus affirmed as a movement in which the elements of the novel try to capture the world’s social dimensions.

Ricardo A. Latcham: From *Costumbrismo* to Realism

As I indicated in detail earlier, Latcham’s article was first published in 1958 by *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*.¹¹ By that time, Latcham had already contributed to the Chilean intellectual field for several decades, and it was precisely in the 1950s that his voice achieved authority in elucidating the type of debates that would obsess the nation’s intellectuals. In particular, essays such as “History of *criollismo*” contributed substantially to guiding academic research in Chile (Ayala Pérez 90).¹²

Latcham’s reading significantly departs from the critical perspectives produced by Concha, who, deploying the category of “what is essential,” linked his interpretations to a Lukácsian theory of realism. For his part, Latcham avoids interpreting Blest Gana’s novels from a viewpoint of essentiality, directing his examination instead to immediate reflections considered by him to be recurring motifs in the Chilean author’s work. As we have seen, Lukács’s essays present an idea of realism that supersedes any apprehension of a literary fact as a mere reflection. The strongly normative component of this selective principle aims to discover in the space of the text a movement that will unravel reality and free it from superficial data of pure appearance, whose layers, according to Lukács, obliterate any possibility of a deeper grasp of reality. Latcham is aware of this normativity, but he uses it to produce an opinion that goes opposite to the one that

¹¹ Founded in 1943, *Anales de literatura chilena* currently holds six periodic series, being one of the oldest academic journals in Latin America.

¹² Latcham’s academic research was always intertwined with a marked interest in his country’s public life. Emulating Blest Gana, his biography describes both a man of letters and a man of politics. Latcham became an opponent of the government of Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, and in 1927 he went into exile in Madrid, where he had the opportunity to study at the Centro de Estudios Históricos with Américo Castro. In 1933, he participated in the founding of the Chilean Socialist Party, and, at the end of that decade, he ran for and was elected *diputado*. A year after publishing “Blest Gana and the Realist Novel,” Latcham moved to Montevideo as a brand-new ambassador to Uruguay.

supports Concha's reading. For Latcham, Blest Gana has often remained in the realm of the simply inessential:

Our *criollo* writer often positioned himself striking a pose of an individual who only captures an immediate, simple, pure reflection, similar to the impression left by a photographic plate or a period daguerreotype. That is why he does not see the internal contradictions that derive from an environment that judges, or reduces a critical action to the representation of class contrasts, without ever resolving them in a synthesis. (Latcham 35)

Latcham becomes convinced, then, that immediate reflections hinder Blest Gana's narration from capturing all of reality, its synthesis; these are aspects that resonate in an obvious manner within the parameters of a Lukácsian doctrine of art.

And yet, literary realism constitutes for Latcham a current whose characteristics go beyond the limits determined by Lukács. In his essay, the Chilean critic promotes an attitude towards the novel that allows him to include very different procedures. Without adhering to a mimetic conception of literature à la Auerbach, Latcham pluralises the notion of realism and clarifies that the nineteenth century exhibited three moments of aesthetics of the real. Blest Gana would only participate in the first of these: "As realism displays at least three stages, we can only inscribe him in the first: the Balzacian" (38). The other two instances of the nineteenth-century realism are marked for Latcham by Gustave Flaubert's poetic impulse and Zola's naturalistic sensibility. It then appears evident – especially by the inclusion of naturalism but also by the rescue of Flaubert's work – that Latcham's proposal is far from coinciding with the rigours expressed by Lukács who, on the contrary, removed any possibility that all that was realism.

At various times and relying on his in-depth knowledge of Zola's work, Latcham affirms that Blest Gana's writing never participated in naturalism. But the fact that Blest Gana never delved in that form, even after resuming his literary work at the end of the century while he lived precisely in Zola's Paris, does not mean that Latcham is promoting a restricted appreciation of the realist phenomenon. The truth is that at one point in his essay he defines naturalism as a "saturation" of realism: "The realism of the writer from Santiago, who remained impassive to a naturalistic saturation, held enough attractive dimensions to inspire narrators emerging from the second school" (46). These considerations, therefore, separate him from Lukács who on multiple occasions had clarified that naturalism, with its static vision of human life (compared to the dynamics of the realist novel), with its version of a reality that is assumed to be immutable, and because of a suspension of the selective principle, differed radically from realism. In "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács rejects the avant-garde, which he considers to be a stylistic continuation of naturalism, among other things because of their unlimited entries on the anecdotal. What distinguishes realism from naturalism is "a 'hierarchy of significance' in the situations and characters presented." For this reason, he does not hesitate to attribute an antirealist thrust to the avant-garde, for having substituted the selective principle with a "principle of naturalistic arbitrariness" ("Ideology" 34).

Latcham promotes a realism with attributes. He speaks, for example, of Blest Gana's "domestic realism," relating it to a type of local detail but also indicating a sense of an aesthetic "domestication:" "he was limited – he says – by a certain modesty and a kind of temperamental shyness." Crowning *La aritmética en el amor* (1960) as "the first organic work of Chilean literature in the nineteenth century," he deems it to portray a "homemade realism." He defines the novel's bourgeois environment as mediocre, but even so considers it to be endowed with "a remarkable verismo" (36). Finally, he also appeals to *costumbrismo*. In Latcham's essay, the aesthetic differences between the rendering of *cuadros de costumbres* and literary realism become dissolved. It is known that any reference to *costumbrismo* on the part of Blest Gana critics are substantially due to the opinion that the author himself held about his own literary work. In a speech delivered in 1861 when joining the Humanities division of the University of Chile, Blest Gana gave a generic rationalisation that, through an apology, upheld the novel as the form that could best fulfil a civilising task for the Chilean letters of the future. First, he preferred the novel over poetry because the latter, at the time he was writing and as he argued, had demonstrated little originality in Chile, and furthermore, it no longer aroused the interest that the novel was beginning to generate among an ever greater number of readers. Additionally, for him the novel's heteroglossia allowed the elitist language of poetry to be exorcised

because the novel was capable of encompassing “el lenguaje de todos [...] lleva la civilización hacia las clases menos cultas de la sociedad, por el atractivo de escenas de la vida ordinaria” [everybody’s language ... it brings civilisation to the less educated classes of society, due to the attractiveness of scenes from ordinary lives] (Blest Gana, “Literatura” 53). Finally, while he admitted that the historical and the fantastic novel held the potential for a blossoming of a national literature, he emphasised that the *novela de costumbres* – because it was best positioned to carry out a civilising task – was truly the one designated to retain “por mucho tiempo la palma de la supremacía” [for a long while the palm of supremacy] (“Literatura” 54):¹³

Por la pintura de cuadros sociales llamará la atención de todos los lectores; por su observación y la filosofía de su estudio, adquirirá las simpatías de los pensadores, y por las combinaciones infinitas que caben en su extenso cuadro despertará el interés de los numerosos amigos del movimiento y de la intriga. Su influencia en el mejoramiento social es al propio tiempo más directa también que la que los otros géneros de novela pueden ejercer, puesto que en su esfera se discuten los más palpitantes intereses sociales. (“Literatura” 55)¹⁴

[Through its depiction of *cuadros sociales* it will attract the attention of all readers; by its observation and the philosophy of its study, it will acquire the goodwill of thinkers, and by the infinite combinations that fit in its extensive *cuadro* it will awaken the interest of numerous individuals that feel kinship toward movement and intrigue. At the same time, since most pressing social matters are discussed within its sphere, its influence on social betterment can be exerted more directly than by any other novelistic genres.]

The sovereignty conferred by the author on the *novela de costumbres* would be confirmed by him a year later when he published *Martín Rivas* with the eloquent subtitle *Novela de costumbres políticos-sociales* [Novel of socio-political customs]. Blest Gana’s multiple discursive inclusions of *costumbrismo*, referencing not just mandates for a future generation of writers, but also articulations and specifications of his literary practice, is what has authorised critics to deploy this notion when studying his work.

Without distinguishing from otherwise proper realist elements, Latcham alludes at various points to the *costumbrismo* attributes in Blest Gana’s work. This conceptual dilution is by no means a theoretical blunder. On the contrary, in arranging his critical discourse, Latcham takes particular care to draw parallels with realism. He writes that Blest Gana’s narrative technique is indebted to realism in two ways: “first, by accumulating detail, in sometimes photographic precision; and then, by concentrating what was observed in a *period frieze*” (39, emphasis mine). Further into the essay, when celebrating the Chilean author’s work as the one that best accounted for an era, he adds that Blest Gana had “a concrete tendency to carry out a reconstructive undertaking of national life between 1836 and 1851, the largest *costumbrista frieze* of the nineteenth century” (42, emphasis mine). Latcham’s insistence on *costumbrismo* possibly also reveals a certain intellectual passion within himself, which caused him to become preoccupied with and nostalgic for what was local. Meditating upon his first youthful collaborations with *El Chileno*, a newspaper from his hometown of La Serena, in Northern Chile, where he began to write at the age of 16, Latcham reminisces:

¹³ For Araya, *costumbrismo* is what allows Blest Gana to weld together citizenship with literature, a synthesis “between daily practical morality and an ethical conception of the novel” (35). Araya also makes explicit the procedures used in Blest Gana’s novels to introduce *cuadros de costumbres*. First, the narrator places characters in all the “traditional situations” that take place in people’s “social life;” then he develops his *cuadros de costumbres*. Finally, he proceeds to compare these *cuadros* “in the various social spheres” that are depicted in his novels (45). For Araya, Blest Gana’s *El ideal de un Calavera* introduces the greatest number of *cuadros de costumbres*.

¹⁴ Juan Poblete has connected this mimetic project to the formation of Chilean sociability in the nineteenth century; he has analysed the place that corresponded to the reading scenes that were convened in *Martín Rivas*: “The reading of novels that depicted national customs, as intellectual practice and formation of customs thus appeared to be a very powerful tool for constituting that national practical sense [...] Chilean sociability had to be manifested in a novel whereby, mimetically representing its avatars, it could transform said sociability by generating the appropriate mimetic patterns for customs and national intelligences.” (29–30)

This was a limited environment, in which local gossip proliferated while faded doctrinal controversies between literate and radical clerics took place in other parts ... I evoke these customs and similar habits because of their local and regional colour, because of the great sense of longing that they provoke in me. (qtd. in Hernández 9)

This is perhaps what Latcham finds in *La aritmética en el amor*: all the flavourful “local gossip” of nineteenth-century Chile.

Latcham is not alone in making *costumbrismo* coincide with realism – and it is true that, due to realism’s superabundant interest in the particularities of daily life, as well as its concern with social reality, during the nineteenth century *cuadros de costumbres* were absorbed by realism much more than by romanticism or neoclassicism. In his study of the historical novel by Blest Gana, Guillermo Gotschlich creates a synthesis similar to Latcham’s, declaring:

From his early productive stage, the author sought to represent historical situations that became integrated into the *costumbrista* world of his works. This characteristic becomes particularly clear starting with *Martín Rivas* and following in almost all of his later production. It is a creative phase that the author himself described as a *realist* one and which was later confirmed by historical criticism. (29, emphasis mine)

To attribute a generalisation between the two terms to Blest Gana himself may seem somewhat anachronistic. Araya follows a similar route recalling the literary contest convened in 1859 by the University of Chile, a competition that Blest Gana won with *La aritmética en el amor* by presenting “the formula of the *novela de costumbre*”; Araya also affirms that “literary realism arose with this novel ten years earlier than in Spain” (41).

In “Narrate or Describe?,” Lukács links *costumbrismo* – or to be more precise its equivalent “picturesque aspects” – with description. This relationship is also implicit in Latcham, although with opposite effect. For the Chilean critic, there seems to be a perfect accommodation between literary realism and the accumulation and autonomisation of details. For Lukács, on the other hand, the comprehensive sum of details is precisely what deflects modern narrative from realist demands. A writer cannot encompass all the nuances and properties that appear when observing an object of representation. The description itself operates in an inverse way to the selection of the essential, and it is for this reason that with it “Representation declines into genre, and the natural principle of epic selection is lost” (“Narrate” 130).¹⁵ This negative assessment, which defines description and *costumbrismo* in opposition to realism, ensues from a rejection of the representation of what is immediate, of empirical observation, and of the production of a mere inventory that pretends to pass for what is real:

Something much worse than mere levelling results – a reversed order of significance, a consequence implicit in the descriptive method since both the important and the unimportant are described with equal attention. For many writers this process leads to genre description deprived of all human significance. (“Narrate” 131)

The description associated with *costumbrismo* (“genre,” “genre description,” and “picturesque diction” in the specific case of Flaubert, etc.) is undervalued because it “contemporarizes everything.” But, since “Narration recounts the past” at all times, the present inherent in a narration becomes false and therefore lacks realism (“Narrate” 130).¹⁶ What in 1861 had seemed effective for Blest Gana, regarding his proposal to

¹⁵ It should be noted that in the Spanish version of Lukács’s “Narrate or Describe?” the word “genre” has been translated as “costumbrismo” (191) and “genre description” as “carácter de costumbrismo” (192). Additionally, “simply picturesquely described” has been translated as “se describa en imágenes” (172). See Lukács, “¿Narrar o Describir?” (1965).

¹⁶ The full quotation reads as follows: “Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial ‘present’ confers a temporal ‘present’ on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past. But the contemporaneity of the observer making a description is the antithesis of the contemporaneity of the drama. Static situations are described, states or attitudes of mind of human beings or conditions of things – still lives.” (“Narrate” 130)

represent a national present – since an author reaches a wide audience more directly by narrating current *costumbres* – a century later would be considered an unnecessary detour by Lukács.

To the extent that Latcham's reading accommodates Blest Gana's own *costumbrista* proposal, it advances a theoretical version of literary realism that exceeds a Lukácsian taxonomy. Contrary to what happens with the reading of Concha, Latcham advocates a less restricted conception of realism. His interpretation also accounts for the heterogeneity of Blest Gana's oeuvre and, therefore, an evolving realism, where an autonomisation of details keeps favouring the conditions for a truthful representation, where naturalism is retained within the boundaries of a filial relationship, and, finally, where *cuadros costumbristas* add great value to a concretisation of reality.

Conclusion

Jaime Concha or Ricardo A. Latcham? In some way, the two essays we have analysed accommodate the famous dispute between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht within the context of Blest Gana's work. Formalist rigour on the one hand and diffuse empiricism on the other. Martín Kohan has suggested that for Lukács "what is involved is a certain system of representation, that is, the mediation of certain forms." Brecht, on the other hand, demanded that "the realistic character of a literary work be resolved taking as a reference not literature but reality itself" (Kohan 3). These two philosophies of realism could well designate the discussions that have been presented here: aesthetic rules and literary models for Concha; a desire for real things for Latcham. Alberto Blest Gana created a unique formula, the Chilean *novela de costumbres*, and this is perhaps the best Lukácsian criterion that we could adopt to define Blest Gana's use of realism: a literary practice aimed at capturing what is conceived as social through a postulation of an original form that emanates from the *costumbres* of a people.

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