

Research Article

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New Problems of Realism in *Martín Rivas*

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Abstract: This article discusses a central feature in the poetics of *Martín Rivas* (1862): its realism. It describes the way in which the particularisation of experience and the breakdown of the old theory of the levels of discourse – two main components of realism – are embodied in the novel. Like its models in French realism, *Martín Rivas* focuses on the unique experiences of singular subjects. This particularisation, however, rarely acquires an interclass dimension, as it did in French forms. The “ideas of realism” are misplaced in *Martín Rivas*. The novel represents times, spaces, and people in the dramatically reduced frame of the times, spaces, and people of the oligarchy. It signifies a return to the same old rule that European realism had broken from. Blest Gana’s realism could be considered, therefore, as an example of the Chilean *modo de ser aristocrático* [aristocratic way of being], that is, a set of cultural operations which allow the oligarchy to live their privileges as natural, far from the bourgeois ethos. This insight can be a point of departure for an international discussion as we think about how these transformations might enter into dialogue with similar phenomena in other parts of the world.

Keywords: Realism, *Martín Rivas*, Alberto Blest Gana, misplaced ideas, Chilean novel

Introduction

This article discusses the social and political projections of *Martín Rivas* (1862) and demonstrates how they are a feature of the novel’s poetics and mode of representation, which we can partially describe as realist. To read *Martín Rivas* as a realist novel is to think about how the national imaginary was constructed in nineteenth-century Chile, an assembly whose validity lasts until the first decades of the twentieth century. *Martín Rivas* also serves as an example for *novelas de costumbres*, loosely translated as novels of manners, a relevant set of fictional works published during the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, the outcomes of this study may be useful for the reading of other novels by Blest Gana, such as *La aritmética en el amor* [Arithmetic in Love] (1860) or *El ideal de un calavera* [The Ideal of a Rogue] (1863), and may be useful to our understanding of texts by other authors of the same period, such as *Alberto el jugador* (1860) by Rosario Orrego de Uribe, *La diversión de las familias*, *Lances de Noche Buena* (1865) by Moisés Vargas, or *Los misterios de Santiago* (1858) by José Antonio Torres.¹

1 In *La narrativa chilena. Desde la Independencia hasta la Guerra del Pacífico 1810–1859* by Foresti et al., there is a valuable registry of fictional narratives published during the nineteenth century in Chile. Readers interested in mapping this period could start there. The novels mentioned above are classified in the aforementioned text as “narrativa costumbrista de ficción” [costumbrista fictional narrative] (65–136).

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There are two reasons why a realist reading of *Martín Rivas* should be considered a partial reading. First, because realism describes only incompletely the text's hybridised mode of representation: *Martín Rivas* is woven from threads that are not completely amalgamated from romance and the modern realistic novel. Second, because *Martín Rivas* "twists" or amplifies its French model in a particular and characteristic way; as we see, instead of talking about "realism" we will have to talk about a local and particular assimilation of that form of aesthetics.

This essay will explore how this particular transformation of realism should be considered an adaptation which in part constricts its power. Realism's capacity to represent is limited because it is forced to go back in time, resulting in a pre-modern function for a literary development that, by definition, is considered modern. This "pre-modern" function involves singing the praises of a social class that considered itself as naturally privileged, that is, an oligarchic bourgeoisie that dreams, in literary fiction, of being an aristocracy.

Realism as a Technology of Literary Writing

The notion of literary realism can be understood in four different but complementary ways: As a long-term development that shaped the modern fictional narrative from the fifteenth century onwards, an equivalent of what is known in the English-speaking world as a *novel*.² As a specific mode of representation that crystallises in the European nineteenth century, during a period that is known in histories of literature as "realism," especially as it pertains to France. This is considered to be the basis of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative programs, among which Naturalism and Socialist Realism stand out. Finally, realism is conceived as a technology of literary writing, a set of pieces and compositional rules that Latin American writers imported from Europe and used for their own purposes.

Realism's enduring feature is a general trend in Western narrative that goes right along with the progression of modernity and capitalist expansion (Gramuglio 17–19). It is distinguished by its preference for particular aspects of the lived experiences of individual subjects. It finds formal expression in devices such as a proper name, a precise situation of the narrative in time and space, a causal sequence of events, and the development of a critical and original spirit in the narrator (Watt 9–34). These operations, which Ian Watt describes as a way of understanding the world, will be considered by Roland Barthes as a rhetorical code, the "concrete detail"³ that produces an *effet de réel* (Barthes 220–221). In terms of novelistic construction, this kind of realism is identified with the modern novel, since it implies the emergence of a personal narrator and the progressive incongruity of a direct and indirect means of representation (Kayser 64–65).

In its second sense, we identify literary realism with the *école realiste*, that is to say, the trend that took place in France during the nineteenth century, and which counts among its cardinal names those of Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers. Thinking of it as a mode of representation that evolves over time, this trend will gradually add five features: a historicist setting in the present time (Stendhal); a necessary correlation between the material environment and the subject (Balzac); ruthless objectivism (Flaubert); a grotesque aestheticism (Goncourt); and an overt political orientation (Zola) (Auerbach 443–498). Within the wide scope of Western culture, nineteenth-century realism implements a definite breaking down of the old rule of styles: it executes a "complete emancipation" (554); that is, realistic narratives interrupt a millenary tradition and consider the vicissitudes of subjects that are "low" or even "worse" than us to be worthy of sublime or elevated representation.

² N.B. In Spanish *novela* means both "novel" and "romance," indistinctly.

³ Translation mine. All translations from Portuguese and Spanish to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Quotations of Blest Gana are given both in Spanish and English.

In a third sense, the realistic mode of representation is a starting point for at least two aesthetic programs that, originating in Europe, had a strong influence in Latin America. I am referring, in the first place, to Naturalism, especially as it is formulated in *The Experimental Novel*. Using the experimental method of the natural sciences as a starting point, Zola legitimises the knowledge of the novel, in keeping with Claude Bernard's use of medical knowledge (Zola 41). Socialist Realism, an aesthetic project that originated in the Soviet Union, sought, for its part, the heroic construction of a popular subject. Heir to a certain romantic idealism (Zhdánov 76; Clark 28), it moves to link realistic aesthetics and revolution, that is, it proposes that social classes that advance politically and become mobile tend to use realism as a literary expression, which would explain the bourgeois realism in the nineteenth century as well as twentieth-century proletarian realism (Lunacharski 58–59).

Starting from these three historical incarnations of realism, an operational definition of the procedures that define narrative realism as a technology of writing can be attempted, that is, as a series of operations that can be exported to other contexts. Its cardinal features are particularisation of characters, times, and spaces; breakdown of the old rule of literary styles; historicism; originality; incongruence of direct and indirect narrative; and a personal narrator. This essay will explore a further feature which we should conceive of as a productive object, an imported technology like many others that have been imported throughout the history of Latin America. Its contours reveal themselves in a displaced and hybrid way; hence, displacement and hybridity will be the object of this analysis.

Romance and the Modern Novel

The world represented in *Martín Rivas* appears, at least, under two modalities or representational regimes. Critics have called the first melodrama or romance, and this corresponds, in general, to the love plot of the novel, which follows a more or less fixed scheme, with more or fewer variations: mysterious birth, prophecies, adoptive parents, separation from lovers, incessant adventures, and final marriage (Frye, *The Secular* 4–5). Within this mode, we witness the arrival of Martín at the Encinas' house, his overwhelming love for Leonor, the various obstacles that their love must overcome to achieve marriage, and their final union. In the background, Rafael San Luis's fondness for the young Matilde Elías can be counted, his slip with Adelaida Molina, the unrequited affection that Edelmira Molina feels for Martín, and even Agustín Encina's marriage to Matilde, towards the end of the novel. Much has been written, and very accurately, about the political meaning of these erotic strands. In his 1972 essay, "*Martín Rivas* o la formación del burgués" [*Martín Rivas* or the Making of a Bourgeois], Jaime Concha proposed that these romances had an allegorical character, symbolising a formulation for class consciousness in the Chilean oligarchic bourgeoisie (46). Doris Sommer, for her part, expanded this allegorical formation towards the project of nation building, encoded by pairs of lovers who represent "particular regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like" (Sommer 5). The Latin American scope of her study allows us to discover similar structures in the contemporaneous fiction of a variety of different countries and oligarchies.

The relationships between romance and the modern – that is, realist – novel are intimate and conflictual. For Northrop Frye the novel tends to constitute a parodic displacement of romance, which remains as a structural core of a narrative fiction (*The Secular* 37–38). And, there is a relevant fact that makes them oppose each other. As I pointed out before, the realistic novel is transitive, that is, it violates the old rule of styles that prevented the representation of subjects "equal or worse than us" in sublime genres, and allows them to be "subjects of serious, problematic and even tragic representation" (Auerbach 529). Romance, on the other hand, clings firmly to its characterisations; the romance hero is just one degree below deity and is "better than we are" and our environment. Although this hero identifies as a human, his or her actions are always wonderful (Frye, *Anatomy* 33).

In *Martín Rivas*, the cohabitation of novel and romance has a dynamic that does not follow or, rather, that complicates Frye's genealogy. Although *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), its French model, could be

described as a realistic displacement of a previous, nuclear romance, in Blest Gana's novel the love thread is much more naïve than in Stendhal's novel. In fact, it lacks the parodic distance that Frye recognises in a realistic narrative.⁴ It is as if, in the hands of Henri Beyle, the novel moves the same distance away from romance as it covers when returning to Blest Gana's hands. This new approach will imply the restoration of the superhuman or almost superhuman quality of its protagonists, which has relevant consequences for our reading. I will return to this later.

The Particularisation of Oneself

Among the features that define realism as a technology of writing, there are two in *Martín Rivas* that differ – and are displaced – from its European model: the particularisation of experience and the end of the rule of classical literary styles. The following section will examine these two evolutions.

The particularisation of experience is probably the central feature, the most proper tendency, and the condition of possibility of all kinds of realism. During the 1960s, Ian Watt described it as a rejection of abstract and universal ideas of time, space, and characters, in favour of real and recognisable things and spaces, dated and articulated moments (logically or causally), with subjects framed within a given context (18–27). The following fragment of *Martín Rivas*, which is the first description of Leonor Encina, can be read this way:

La belleza de esta niña produjo en su alma una admiración indecible. Lo que experimenta un viajero contemplando la catarata del Niágara, o un artista delante del grandioso cuadro de Rafael, 'La Transfiguración,' dará, bien explicado, una idea de las sensaciones súbitas y extrañas que surgieron del alma de Martín en presencia de la belleza sublime de Leonor. Ella vestía una bata blanca con el cinturón suelto como el de las elegantes romanas, sobre un delantal bordado, en cuya parte baja, llena de calados primorosos, se veía la franja de *valenciennes* de una riquísima enagua. El corpiño, que hacía un pequeño ángulo de escote, dejaba ver una garganta de puros contornos y hacía sospechar la majestuosa perfección de su seno (20).

[The beauty of this young woman produced in his soul an unspeakable admiration. What a traveller experiences contemplating Niagara Falls, or an artist in front of Raphael's great painting, 'The Transfiguration,' will transmit, well explained, an idea of the sudden and strange sensations that arose in Martin's soul in the presence of Leonor's sublime beauty. She wore a white robe with a loose belt like that of the elegant Roman women, over an embroidered apron, at the bottom of which, full of exquisite lacework, the *valenciennes* fringe of a very rich petticoat could be seen. The bodice, which made a small angle in the neckline, revealed a throat of pure contours and made one suspect her breast's majestic perfection.]

The romantic, idealistic part and the realistic part are here juxtaposed and concomitant. The first half of the fragment makes an open allusion to the aesthetics of beauty and the sublime. What does a traveller experience when contemplating Niagara Falls? If we pay attention to Kant, the final result of the judgment of the sublime is, on the one hand, admiration for a natural force and, on the other, the insufficiency of what is natural when exposed to reason and ideas.⁵ That is to say: the elevation of an object as a natural thing,

⁴ Raúl Silva Castro offers this very significant piece of information: Blest Gana might have been in fact a reader of Stendhal during his first trip to France, between 1847 and 1951 (405). Comparing both novels, Silva Castro clearly shows a close relationship between *Martín Rivas* and *Le Rouge et le Noir* regarding the plot and the characters, to such an extent that in the critic's opinion, "had Blest Gana not read *Le Rouge et le Noir*, he either would not have written *Martín Rivas*, or he would have given the novel a very different movement and development" (402–403). For a more detailed analysis of the relationships between Blest Gana and Stendhal, see Torres-Pou, 61–65.

⁵ I refer to the definition in §29 of the *Critique of Judgment*: "We may describe the Sublime thus: it is an object (of Nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas*" (Kant 80).

and then elevation of the percipient as a rational subject.⁶ Since, in this case, perceiving and perceived are members of the same social class, the Chilean oligarchy, we can say that the narrator elevates his social class at both ends: as a natural thing and as a rational subject. The episode of the Transfiguration, the supernatural glow that Christ's face and clothes take on in his encounter with Moses and Elijah, as alluded to in Rafael Sanzio's painting, can be read similarly. It is a sublime but ultimately natural episode, characteristic of divine nature, which the observer can, after the initial impression, explain in theological terms.⁷

The second part, that is, the description of Leonor's dress, is properly a particularisation. Its theme, women's clothing, may seem irrelevant compared to the classic descriptions of *costumbres* that are usually cited when talking about *Martín Rivas* – the *tertulia* and the *picholeo*⁸ – but it is interesting precisely because of its eccentricity. It is not that the practices of Chileans are particularised. It is that almost exclusively the practices of the oligarchic bourgeoisie are particularised, as we shall see; also, it seems necessary to particularise the objects that surround their daily life. Being a strong chronicler of war scenes (the famous *Motín de Urriola* occupies chapters LVI to LVIII) and a committed painter of patriotic scapes (for example, the celebrations detailed in chapter XXIX, regarding national holidays), the narrator of the novel reveals himself as a delicate specialist in women's fashion. There is a very precise vocabulary that distinguishes the different garments – *bata*, *delantal*, *enagua*, *corpiño*, that is, gown, apron, petticoat, bodice – and above all a specific encyclopaedic knowledge: whoever distinguishes Valenciennes lace, which is the one used by Leonor, knows that it is different from Chantilly, Brussel – both very popular – and especially Alençon, the most precious of all at the time (Lembré 49). It is not the material that opposes desire and that frustrates it: in this description, there is a soft material that meekly obeys the desire that summons it.

Other observations in the same vein are, for example, those that date Martín's outfit when he arrives at Dámaso Encina's house – “Sus pantalones negros, embotinados por medio de anchas trabillas de becerro, a la usanza de los años de 1842 y 43” [His black trousers, tucked in with wide loops that were made of leather, in the style of the years 1842 and 43] (5) – or this violent setting of Leonor with all the luxury goods that surround her:

Magnífico cuadro formaba aquel lujo a la belleza de Leonor, la hija predilecta de don Dámaso y de doña Engracia. Cualquiera que hubiese visto aquella niña de diez y nueve años en una pobre habitación, habría acusado de caprichosa a la suerte por no haber dado a tanta hermosura un marco correspondiente. Así es que al verla reclinada sobre un magnífico sofá forrado en brocatel celeste, al mirar reproducida su imagen en un lindo espejo al estilo de la edad media, y al observar su pie, de una pequeñez admirable, rozarse descuidado sobre una alfombra finísima, el mismo observador habría admirado la prodigalidad de la naturaleza en tan feliz acuerdo con los favores del destino. Leonor resplandecía rodeada de ese lujo como un brillante entre el oro y pedrerías de un rico aderezo (11).

[The luxury made a magnificent frame for Leonor's beauty, the favourite daughter of don Dámaso and doña Engracia. Had anybody seen that nineteen-year old girl in a poor room would have accused Fortune of behaving capriciously for not providing a frame corresponding to such beauty. So to see her reclined on a sofa lined in magnificent light blue brocade, to

⁶ In 1865, only 3 years after having published *Martín Rivas*, Blest Gana actually visited Niagara Falls. His article “De Nueva York al Niágara,” found in the compilation *Costumbres y viajes*, presents his reactions to the site. His impressions are consistent with the above reading, it seems to me, provided that we consider religious discourse as an idea form: “[A]quel cuadro, en fin tan imponente por sus dimensiones, tan magistral por la belleza indecible de cada una de sus partes, tan vigoroso en sus expresiones de ruido y movimiento en unos puntos, de silencio relativo y de quietud en otros, tan lleno de misterio por la hora en que lo contemplaba [Blest Gana hizo su primera visita de noche], me hizo salir violentamente de la conciencia de la vida material, y lanzarme en alas de una fantasía caprichosa al través de un mundo imaginario, en que lo real y lo ideal, los recuerdos y los antojos del cerebro se combatieron por algunos instantes el dominio de mi espíritu” [that painting, all in all, so imposing because of its dimensions, so masterful because of the unspeakable beauty of each of its parts, so vigorous in its expressions, in some points, of noise and movement, while in others of relative silence and stillness; so full of mystery because of the time I was contemplating it (Blest Gana made his first visit at night), it made me violently leave the consciousness of material life, and launch myself on the wings of a capricious fantasy through an imaginary world, in which the real and ideal, the memories and the cravings of the brain fought for a few moments for the dominance of my spirit] (285).

⁷ The episode appears in Mark 9: 2–13, Luke 9: 28–36, and Matthew 17: 1–13.

⁸ For the *tertulia*, see chapters VI and XI; for *picholeo*, chapters XII and XIII.

see her image reproduced in a pretty mirror shaped in the style of the Middle Ages, and to observe her foot, of an admirable small size, carelessly caressing a Persian rug, the same observer would have admired the bounty of nature in such happy agreement with the favours of destiny. Surrounded by that luxury, Leonor sparkled like a diamond among gold and precious stones.]

We see here a kind of inverted Balzacian *milieu*: if in Balzac things and people form a unit whose final meaning is anthropological, in Blest Gana that meaning leans towards things. Concha, commenting on the aforementioned passage, states that Leonor has become one more object among the other objects in the Encina house: “In the midst of superabundant wealth, Leonor is one more object among the decoration and jewellery. There exists thus an unbroken continuity between the painting of the heroine and the refined contours of her class” (48). In the spirit of my proposed interpretation, we can say that in Blest Gana’s novel particularisation becomes so radical in its focus on the oligarchy’s possessions, that even the heroine ends up reified, considered only in her material dimension.

In summary, particularisation in *Martín Rivas* includes some practices and customs of the oligarchy but reveals its true purposes when it focuses on those objects which define class identity, especially objects of extreme luxury. Members of the oligarchy even come to identify with them at times.⁹

The second realistic procedure that the novel problematises is a breakdown of the literary styles’ classical rule. The rule, which goes back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, prescribed that those who are “better than we are” should be represented through sublime genres such as epic and tragedy and that those who are “worse” should be represented through comedy (Aristotle 3–7). Only once in the history of what Auerbach calls Western Literature was this rule broken, when telling the story of Christ, but medieval epic re-established its validity (530). From this perspective, “[w]hen Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation” (Auerbach 529) they turn the realistic mode of representation into a device, by definition, that comes into contact with different social classes. In its fundamental structure, as it were, nests the concern of a bourgeois narrator for a subject who is inferior in terms of dignity, education, or social class. It is Flaubert, the intellectual, concerned about the provincial and self-deluded Emma Bovary; it is Balzac lengthening the description of the dirty and smelly Pension Vauquer in *Le Père Goriot*; it is Zola describing with documentary precision the way of life of the coal miners in *Germinal*. The transitive feature of a realistic particularisation, as seen in this brief series of examples, ends up acquiring a sense of political denunciation, of a call to action, of transforming urgency.

Anybody acquainted with episodes of Chilean history understands that *Martín Rivas* separates itself from a realist corpus, re-adhering to the Aristotelian ideal and focusing almost exclusively on the representation of the subjects of the oligarchy, with very few moments of social transitivity. Cedomil Goic records this fact, but does not find it problematic, concerned as he is in demonstrating that it is, indeed, a modern novel.¹⁰ On the other hand, the way in which Blest Gana describes the romance between Leonor and Martín, read by several generations of readers as if there were a class difference between the lovers, suggests a social gap that did not really exist, since we already know that they represent two faces of the same bourgeoisie: Martín the northern, mining and liberal, and Leonor the agricultural, commercial, and financial aspects of Santiago (Concha 49).

We have not explored enough, it seems to me, the consequences of this. Instead of representing a “low” subject, instead of being moved by the tragedies of those who are “worse” than we are, the novel’s narrator uses particularisation to represent, with overwhelming preference, the very practices and objects that make

⁹ As Grínor Rojo points out, this feature will reach its peak and perhaps its mannerism a little more than 40 years after *Martín Rivas* in the novel *Casa Grande* (1908) by Luis Orrego Luco. See chapter “*Casa grande. Escenas de la vida en Chile,*” pp. 36–41, from *Las novelas de la oligarquía chilena*.

¹⁰ Goic solves this conundrum, in fact, by turning to a certain opposition between realism and naturalism: “The morality of this literature [the novel of *costumbres nacionales*] establishes content limitations for Blest Gana, which systematically determines a rejection of naturalistic preferences” (48). In my opinion, Goic’s reading of realism is a bit more rigid than that allowed by Auerbach, which explains the formal way in which he integrates the dissonance we are commenting on. All in all, it is interesting to note that 60 years ago there was already awareness of the problematics in Blest Gana’s representations.

him proud of who he is: luxury consumption, some forms of socialisation such as the *tertulia*, and even the failure described in its most ideologised segment, the heroic and failed liberal *Motín de Urriola* [Urriola uprising]. More important than what he “paints,” however, is his inability to talk about really “low” subjects. That inability, that glaring omission is recorded in the text itself, when it finds it impossible to describe a maid from the Molina family, someone who is below *medio pelo*:

Dar una idea de aquella criada, tipo de la sirviente de casa pobre, con su traje sucio y raído y su fuerte olor a cocina sería martirizar la atención del lector. Hay figuras que la pluma se resiste a pintar, prefiriendo dejar su producción al pincel de algún artista: allí está en prueba el ‘Niño mendigo,’ de Murillo, cuya descripción no tendría nada de pintoresco ni agradable (*Martín Rivas* 64).

[To give an idea of that maid, a type of poor house servant, with her dirty and raggedy dress and her strong smell of cooking would torture the reader’s attention. There are figures that the pen is reluctant to paint, preferring to leave such a task to an artist’s brush: Murillo’s ‘The Young Beggar’ is proof, since its description would not have anything picturesque or pleasant.]

There are figures that the pen is reluctant to paint. As a new *criollo* Aristotle, with that short sentence Blest Gana proposes a little poetics for his art. The *novela de costumbres nacionales* cannot paint the popular world, but Spanish baroque painting can. As if confirming this prescription, the few appearances of the popular world re-establish the old convention of styles. Members of other social classes become objects of laughter, comic characters: “La criada se entretenía mirando los santos de los altares, y ocupada, como lo está generalmente la gente de nuestro pueblo bajo, en no pensar en nada” [The maid amused herself by looking at the saints on the altars, and occupied herself, as the people of our lower *pueblo* generally do, in not thinking about anything] (*Martín Rivas* 284).

Not for the Chilean pen, but for the Spanish brush. This partition also implies the construction of a new elevated discourse, as Erich Auerbach would say, a new exclusive discourse, made however with pieces that, in Europe, work the other way around. It is a realism that continues to be a mirror, but not Stendhal’s mirror, which reflects the sky and the mud of the road, but Narcissus’s mirror, forced to repeat itself like an echo. Blest Gana’s oligarchy can only speak of itself, and its world seems to be populated only by oligarchic subjects. The same class writes, is represented, and, we suppose, reads. A perfect seal.

I would like to return now to a question posed at the beginning of this section: in what ways is realism extended or assimilated in Blest Gana’s national novel? These are some of its characteristics: Reducing its distance from romance, its narrative core, which involves rebuilding lofty characters; describing them not only as almost superhuman subjects but comparable to the sublime; fixing their particularisation in the practices and especially in the luxury goods that define the identity of the oligarchy; expelling low people from representation, the same low people that had entered the European realist novels. In the French model, the realist novel implied an openness to a diversity of social classes. In its Chilean version, however, it seals itself off and behaves like a type of epic, triumphantly praising a bourgeoisie that wished, via these means, to be understood as a version of the aristocracy.

A Way of Wanting to Be

Blest Gana uses a cultural product, realism, in an openly ideological way, which originally had another use, also ideological. It works, to use the famous expression of Roberto Schwarz, as an *idéa fora do lugar*, a misplaced idea.¹¹ Over the course of its long duration, the realist novel expressed the values of the

¹¹ Schwarz describes how misplaced ideas work through the example of liberalism: “It is clear that freedom of work, equality before the law and, in general, an idea of universalism were part of European ideology too; but there they corresponded to appearances, covering up the essentials – the exploitation of labour. Among us, the same ideas would come across as false within a different, as it were, original context” (12). Tangentially, there is a long debate on the notion of “misplaced ideas” that

bourgeois individual and allowed for a bourgeois exploration of a world beyond.¹² In *Martín Rivas*, the novel's mechanisms become displaced in the way that we have just seen. So, what is this new ideological use, this new impropriety?

The first thing that should be noted is what remains. It is a realistic novel, that is, it continues to serve the bourgeois interests of the Chilean oligarchy. Martín, above all, embodies utility – in various places, it is said that he *sirve mucho* [he is very useful] – a classic value of the realist novel which, in this case, means drive and energy for business at the same time and a certain skill and discretion necessary for the clandestine affairs of the upper classes (Moretti, *The Bourgeois* 35–39; Concha 57).

But the nineteenth-century Chilean oligarchy is not purely bourgeois, or it is so in a way that is different from the European bourgeoisie. Until 1830 it was a group whose wealth had an agrarian base, the hacienda, which from this date on, understood the importance of properly modern mercantile and mining elements (Pinto et al. 34). The shifts in a realistic mode of representation feed an aristocratic fantasy that is recognised by historians of different stripes, and one from which some of them cannot escape.¹³ According to that fantasy, the Chilean aristocracy would in fact be “better than we are,” like the heroes of a romance, sublime even, like Leonor.

More interesting than this observation, however, is to consider the very displacement of the realistic mode of representation, whose misplaced use we can now appreciate in all its flagrant impropriety. This entails a technology of writing that is at the heart of bourgeois modernity, used by this social group for ends that are diametrically opposed to the ends for which it was conceived. Instead of an interclass portrait, we have a narcissistic painting. In part, this displacement restricts the powers of realism, since it limits its capacity to represent. The world becomes smaller in Blest Gana's novels, and since the author assigns pre-modern functions to realism, he makes it go back in time. Indeed, this type of modern novel wants to fulfil a function similar to the epic's in heroic societies, that is, the praise of a group that has naturalised its privileges. In this case, however, we have an oligarchic bourgeoisie that can only imagine itself as an aristocracy – which it is not, or at least not completely.

Authors such as Luis Barros, Ximena Vergara, and Manuel Vicuña have described with detail and intelligence the material grounds, ideas, and practices that characterise this bourgeoisie that seeks to be aristocratic. Such an aspiration could be imagined as possible because a substantial part of that social group had leisure time due to their rentier condition (Barros and Vergara 64). This allowed them to create a certain mythology around their own lineage, which usually went back to a conquistador or *encomendero* (98). Regarding social practices, Vicuña accurately describes the preponderant place of the *tertulia*, which favours inbreeding and allows the teaching – and control – of a code of conduct and a repertoire of gestures and expressions that was called *buenas maneras*, good manners (28–29). An important source of this repertoire is, precisely, *Martín Rivas*.

It seems more or less clear to me that Blest Gana's use of realistic aesthetics is part of those practices, albeit on a much more abstract level than that described by these authors. This should compel us to look for other intellectual constructions similar to those of realism and read them from this perspective. I am thinking, for example, of the debate on historiography held by Andrés Bello, Jacinto Chacón, and José

is not entirely relevant here but is worth taking into account when using this concept. In this regard, it seems to me that Eduardo Vergara Torres offers excellent arguments to clarify the concept of “idea” as pertaining to “second-order ideologies.” See Vergara Torres 69–76.

¹² As is known, the relationship between capitalism, the novel and the bourgeoisie has been explored by Ian Watt through the figure of Robinson Crusoe, a classic figure of modern individualism: see *The Rise of the Novel* 60–61. More recently, Franco Moretti has made a very incisive exploration on the same topic. See *The Bourgeois* 29–35.

¹³ Alberto Edwards Vives, author of *La fronda aristocrática*, is a critic but at the same time a prisoner of the oligarchy's very same illusions: “From this mixture of bourgeois and feudal elements our former ruling class drew its extraordinary vigour, and, at the same time, some of its weaknesses. A love for work and economy, a good practical sense, and with that a lack of imagination, [and] narrow-mindedness, are essentially bourgeois traits. A lust for power and domination, independent pride, a spirit of *fronda* and rebelliousness, instead, have always been aristocratic and feudal qualities, which denounce this master of servants, a proud lord of the land.” (33).

Victorino Lastarria in the 1840s. The issue under discussion was the way in which history should be written in Chile. Bello was in favour of the *ad narrandum* method, that is, the chronological recollection of past events and their transmission as an objective account, a preliminary step to any generalisation which would always be perceived as premature for a country where, in his opinion, “history has not been made” (307).¹⁴ Lastarria advocated a philosophical history or *ad probandum*, which did not relate the facts but used them “to trace a history of their influence on the society to which they belong” (Lastarria 100), that is, to discover the general principles that shape history (Dager Alva 99). Bello’s view is modern, particularising, typical of the bourgeois spirit; Lastarria’s leans toward an idealism that is liberal, certainly, but remains idealistic. Ana María Stuvén points out that, behind his “philosophical history,” one can read in Lastarria a rejection of Providence as an engine of history, a secularising idea that accentuated free will¹⁵ and that put at risk two of the basic consensuses of nineteenth-century sociability: the structure of estates inherited from the colony and Catholic Christianity. Hence, Stuvén conjectures that Bello defended a particular narrative method so as to avoid a religious discussion of unsuspected consequences for that time (241).¹⁶ Just as Blest Gana uses realism for the construction of the aristocratic dream, Bello uses the principles that govern modern experience, in this case, for the maintenance of an oligarchic order.¹⁷

This particular way of understanding realism will eventually lose its validity during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Its last throes can be read in *Casa Grande* (1908), by Luis Orrego Luco, where the members of the oligarchy begin to be “worse” than we are, even capable of very grotesque crimes. The writers of this elite, already put into question, will abandon realism once they discover the avant-garde expression. Without the prestige of the second half of the nineteenth century, without continuing to be a nineteenth-century style of realism but a form once again displaced from itself, realism will be inherited, instead, by authors of the emerging Chilean middle class, such as Baldomero Lillo and Mariano Latorre.

***Fuera de lugar* [Misplaced]: The World**

The way in which nineteenth-century Chilean realism works, as a misplaced idea, as a device at the service of a national oligarchy, is just one of the many possibilities offered by the novel in its worldwide spread. Franco Moretti, interested in studying this long-lasting phenomenon, proposed a simple rule: the modern European novel travels around the globe in the form of a compromise between Western formal influence and local materials (*Distant* 50). A careful reading of *Martín Rivas* allows us to think that this interaction is actually richer and more complex. The local materials in this case are less important than the work that Blest Gana carries out on realistic expression itself. The figure of Leonor, citizen of Santiago, would not change very much were she to be in Paris. It could even be said that the differences between popular subjects in both cities are surely not as great as the radical decision to represent them or refuse to do so.

The problem that this writing sought to solve was the creation of a literature that exalted a modern ruling class as if it were an old aristocracy. This solution surely changes if the problem is different. We can

¹⁴ Bello expressed these thoughts in 1848, in an essay entitled, “Modo de escribir la historia,” available in *Repertorio*.

¹⁵ “To think that human societies should passively surrender to a law that fatally undermines or magnifies them, without giving them any influence either over their well-being or misfortune is absurd and dangerous. As absurd and dangerous as thinking that men must entrust themselves to a power other than the one that nature has given them to carve out their happiness, and, that by submitting their destinies to a fatal order, they must chain their active faculties to inertia” (Lastarria 93).

¹⁶ “I look upon Herder, gentlemen, as one of the writers who has most dutifully served humanity; he has bestowed all his dignity upon history, unfolding in it the designs of Providence, and the destinies of what we know as the human species on earth” (Bello, “Discurso de instalación de la Universidad de Chile” (1843), available in *Repertorio*,” 239).

¹⁷ A most appropriate analysis of this debate might not be this one, which thinks of history as discourse, but rather one that places it as a transposition of a dispute between the German and French historicists and the enlightened conceptions of Hegel, which took place in Europe during the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

begin a fruitful exercise if we are able to distinguish the problems realism solves in each of the nations in which it is assimilated. In India, Meenakshi Mukherjee tells us, the problem is that “the characters in the work of these novelists [the authors of realist novels] seemed to lead lives of infinite possibilities, while the life of the nineteenth-century Indian – politically servile, economically deprived and socially circumscribed – seemed to them limited by comparison” (7). Certainly, we can see that there are very inviting possibilities when comparing both situations.

In *Martín Rivas*, there is a character to whom the novel delegates almost all its moments of humour: Agustín Encina, the *afrancesado*. A little cowardly, a little arrogant, he is nevertheless sincere and faithful to Leonor and Martín. The most striking thing about him is his way of speaking. He speaks with Spanish words but uses the French syntax: *soy todo a ti* (125), *la amo de todo mi corazón* (126), *mi toda bella* (131). Would this be a fairly obvious representation of Alberto Blest Gana himself, who had also been in France when he was very young, and who also tried to place Chilean issues under a realist lens, which he had read about in France, in Balzac and Stendhal? Perhaps we should think again about the value of the young Encina, no longer as a comic caricature but as a figure of modernity.¹⁸ He wins the jackpot, in any case: a very advantageous marriage to his cousin Matilde. That should not surprise us so much.

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¹⁸ This is how Roberto Schwarz describes it: “[This is] a caricatured figure of a Westerner, Francophile or Germanophile, whose name is often allegorical and ridiculous. They are the ideologues of progress, liberalism, reason, all the ways of putting forth the modernisation that accompanies capitalism. These enlightened men show themselves alternatively as lunatics, thieves, opportunists, extremely cruel, vain, parasites etc.” (28).

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