

Editorial

Juan Poblete*

On Alberto Blest Gana

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2021-0002>

received January 27, 2021; accepted April 13, 2021

As a classic author of Chilean literature, Alberto Blest Gana can be read from above or from below. From above, he can be called – and in fact is often called – the father of the Chilean novel in the nineteenth century. From this perspective, as in many other nineteenth-century Latin American liberal projects, what Blest Gana reacts to is the challenge of creating a national (Chilean) literature. At stake is how to write literature that would not only entertain readers but also inculcate in them the kind of knowledge and moral discipline required by the liberal champions of the new republics. This is the program explained in Blest Gana's famous 1861 speech “La Literatura chilena. Algunas consideraciones sobre ella” [Chilean Literature: Some Considerations]. There he proposed the development of a national “novel of customs” in which the reader could relate his or her own life to the text he or she was reading, in such a manner that the effect would prove not only socially productive but also personally entertaining and transformational. That is to say, the subjective experience of reading fiction would thus become an act of constructing the nation. This process had three main actors in the Chilean nineteenth century: the state, the Catholic church, and the actual reader-citizens. Each one of them developed at different times and in multiple ways their own practices and discourses in order to constitute, participate in, and re/direct the national cultural sphere.

The state and the church created different and diverging cultural policies and reacted in more or less systematic ways to the discourse of the other and the practices of citizens or faithful publics they were attempting to conquer. The latter, it goes without saying, responded in myriad ways to such efforts, and, above all, as publics, they placed new demands on, and introduced new forms of cultural production and consumption into, the agenda of the public sphere. This long process of social reorganisation can be conceived as a dynamic of formation of national publics as much as a process positing the existence and definition of what is public for the nation. This development is often referred to as the process of secularisation and slow modernisation of Latin American societies. As a social process, it involved, among other things, discourses and practices that became crucial to the shaping of the subjectivities of those citizens and Catholics. It also involved a long discursive struggle that manifested itself, above all, in countless articles and texts published in magazines, periodicals, newspapers, penny leaflets, etc.

The development of what at the time was called an appropriate (and therefore, nationalised) sociability involved a long process of formation of the citizens' subjectivities, grounded in a rigid economy of the social. It also concerned the access of new social subjects to objects, discourses, and practices that were themselves also new. The reading of multiple and different texts was indeed one of these new social practices. For the governmental and pastoral powers of the state and the Catholic church, respectively, the codification and regimentation of these emerging dynamics of cultural circulation in a widened market ended up being much more difficult to control, and they were less effective at it than they had been in the past. This was a reflection of the extent to which things had changed: spaces (now not only the classrooms and confessionals, but the market itself, open air places, the opera and theatre, the street and fashion, popular libraries, etc.); actors (not only elite masculine youth but women and artisans too); and, finally, objects (not just the occasional French book but, instead, a vast number of all kinds of printed matter and textual objects, including penny leaflets, novels, serialised novels, newspapers, almanacs, etc.).

* **Corresponding author: Juan Poblete**, Literature Department, University of California-Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, USA, e-mail: jpoblete@ucsc.edu

From below, Blest Gana can be seen, in this context, as the first Chilean author proto-massively capable of crossing the cultural lines separating high from popular culture, the expensive book and the common newspaper, the culture of the elite and that of the emerging working and middle-class Chilean people. From this perspective, what Blest Gana did better than any of his contemporaries was to marry his narrative talent to a very precise program for the constitution and exploitation of a Chilean reading public to which he was also reacting and responding. In the novel of the same name, *Martín Rivas*' negotiation of his respect and admiration for the lower class Edelmira and his love for the higher-class Leonor can be read as a doubling of Blest Gana's own careful exploration of a middle ground for Chilean writing and reading practices, what later, and in part thanks to him, would be called a mesocratic Chilean culture, or, to use a Gramscian expression, an eventually national-popular culture.

The nationalisation of the nineteenth century novel in Blest Gana, then, can be deemed complex and deeply social, as it occurs on at least three different levels. First, at the level of the narrative, the language, and the settings, and then at the level of the market and product circulation. But both those levels depend on a third one: the readers. Only when the readers accept the pact being proposed by the authors through their choice of language and plots; only when they identify with the protagonists and settings; only, finally, when they translate collective imagination through the novel into market purchases and circulation, can we talk about a national and nationalised novel. Such a point is only reached when a new nationalised form of reading is proto-massively practiced, across multiple formats and textual objects, by much more heterogeneous reading publics. That is the triple process of secularisation, diversification, and nationalisation of the nineteenth-century Chilean reading process, to which Blest Gana's narrative practice decisively contributed.

The excellent essays that follow, as edited and introduced by the thoughtful curation of Patricia Vilches, explore and discuss in great detail such contributions from a series of interesting angles, including serialised novels, medical themes, the sensorium of elite life in Santiago, realism as a style and mode of representation, crónicas as one of the new forms of writing in the culture of newspapers at the time, and some of the least and most studied texts by Blest Gana such as *Mariluán*, *Los Transplantados*, *Martín Rivas*, and *El Ideal de un calavera*. This special issue of *Open Cultural Studies*, a rare case of a volume in English about a single nineteenth century Latin American writer, will undoubtedly allow Alberto Blest Gana to be better known in the English speaking world. It will also serve as a stimulus for renewed critical approaches to this author and, equally important, to the crucial national cultural formation issues he confronted and responded to.

Juan Poblete, Professor of Latin/o American Literature and Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, United States of America. Author of *Hacia una historia de la lectura y la pedagogía literaria en América Latina* (Cuarto Propio, 2019), *La Escritura de Pedro Lemebel como proyecto cultural y político* (Cuarto Propio, 2019), and *Literatura chilena del siglo XIX: entre públicos lectores y figuras autoriales* (Cuarto Propio, 2003). All three books are available for free access at: <https://ucsc.academia.edu/JuanPoblete>; editor of *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power* (Routledge, 2017) and *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and co-editor of *Piracy and Intellectual Property in Latin America: Rethinking Creativity and the Common Good* (Routledge, 2020), *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Non-citizenship* (Rutgers University Press, forthcoming), *Sports and Nationalism in Latin America* (Palgrave, 2015), *Humor in Latin American Cinema* (Palgrave, 2015), *Andrés Bello* (IILI, 2009), and *Redrawing The Nation: National Identities in Latin/o American Comics* (Palgrave, 2009).