

“The Responsibility is Ours”: *crónicas* and realist novels about prostitution in the work of Albert Londres, Joaquín Edwards Bello and Roberto Arlt¹

“La responsabilidad es nuestra”: crónica y novela realista sobre prostitución en la obra de Albert Londres, Joaquín Edwards Bello y Roberto Arlt



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Abstract:

Prostitution has been a key subject in Latin American literature, but it seems not to have developed the same way in *crónicas*. This paper describes the place of prostitution as a topic in Southern Cone *crónicas* in the twentieth century through a review of the literary and journalistic works of a variety of authors. The paper shows how, in many cases, the same novelists who wrote their fiction presenting the brothel and its characters with a keen eye and in precise detail (such as Edwards Bello in Chile and Arlt in Argentina) did not cover the same terrain in their copious non-fiction. Furthermore, in that context, the study highlights and analyses the literary non-fiction work *The Road to Buenos Aires*,

Resumen:

La prostitución ha sido un tema fundamental en la literatura latinoamericana, pero parece no haber surgido a la par en la crónica. Este artículo describe el lugar de la prostitución como temática en la crónica del Cono Sur en el siglo XX mediante un proceso de revisión de la obra literaria y periodística de diversos autores. Se muestra cómo, en muchos casos, los mismos novelistas (como Edwards Bello y Arlt) que escribían sus ficciones presentando el mundo prostibulario con lujo de detalles, dedicaron su copiosa producción cronística a otros temas y otros ámbitos. Además, destaca y analiza, en este contexto, el relato de no ficción El camino de Buenos Aires, de Londres, como una obra precursora en la

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by Londres, as a forerunner in the region in terms of theme and author's positioning. We suggest that the place of the *crónica*'s authors as character, witness, accuser, and "culprit" turned writers away from addressing in their non-fiction works a world they knew all too well. In light of the development of the Latin American *crónica* in the second half of the twentieth century, the paper argues that prostitution is both a subject and a lens allowing us to understand the fundamental changes in non-fiction writing in the continent.

Keywords:

Latin American *crónica*, narrative journalism, realist novel, prostitution, human trafficking

región en términos de temática y posicionamiento del autor. Se propone que el lugar de personaje, testigo, denunciante, "responsable" del autor en la crónica periodística alejó a los escritores de tratar en su no ficción un mundo que conocían al dedillo. A la luz de la evolución de la crónica hacia finales del siglo XX, se postula que la prostitución es un asunto y una lente que nos permite entender los fundamentales cambios que se han producido en la no ficción del continente.

Palabras clave:

Crónica latinoamericana; periodismo narrativo; novela realista; prostitución; trata de blancas.

1. Introduction

This paper looks at the handling of a complex and thorny subject, prostitution and human trafficking in Argentina and Chile, in the novels and *crónica* of the first half of the XX century. It covers the limitations and difficulties of two fundamental authors of *crónicas* and novels in Chile (Joaquín Edwards Bello) and Argentina (Roberto Arlt) when immersing themselves in brothels as non-fiction narrators and argues that such limitations and difficulties are related to their personal, real-life experiences and their bohemian intellectual circles as users and consumers of such sordid dens. Both Arlt and Edwards Bello wrote of a multitude of other urban scenes and topics in their numerous *crónicas*, but not of matters concerning prostitution.

Furthermore, this paper explores the same topic's treatment in the book *The Road to Buenos Aires*, by the French cronista Albert Londres, as a prime example of narrative journalism with real characters, credible dialog and believable descriptions. The book uses first person narrative with the narrator as witness and participant in criminal and menacing actions towards women, and as interviewer of victims, murderers and authorities that do not perform their duty of protecting the weak.

The paper proposes an answer to the question of how and why a French writer "passing through South America" manages to illustrate, explain and denounce this social ill in a chronicle of true events, while local authors who knew this world in greater depth reserved the subject for their works of fiction.

To make this comparison, the paper looks at the contextualised role of prostitution, the sex trade and 'white slavery' in realist novels and narrative journalism between 1870 and 1970: the different forms, narrative strategies, the creation of characters, and the places where the narrator puts himself to observe these issues and people. This work stems from a surprising realisation: this knotty subject is highly present in the realist novels of the period, in French social novels and particularly in the key works of the Latin American "boom," but is almost completely absent in the narrative journalism of the time.

The authors of two of the three main novels of the time that deal with the world of brothels, the Chilean Joaquín Edwards Bello (author of *El roto*) and the Argentinian Roberto Arlt (author of *The Seven Madmen*) were the most prolific cronistas on the two sides of the Andes in the first half of the XX century. Studying the subject matter of the immense number of *Aguafuertes porteñas*

(*Etchings from Buenos Aires*) by Arlt and crónicas of Santiago and Valparaíso by Edwards Bello, published in both writers' collected works², houses of ill-repute, prostitutes' lives and pimps are notable by their absence, as shown throughout this paper.

Why so many novels and so few crónicas? This is especially notable when the cronistas are both novelists and storytellers. The sad tales from their fiction are almost totally absent from the same authors' non-fiction. However, the subject does figure in one non-fiction work of the period, one of great force, modernity, and foresight: *The Road to Buenos Aires*, by the French traveller and social commentator Albert Londres.

This paper strives to answer the following questions: what is the place of prostitution in the social novels and crónicas of the Southern Cone in the early XX century? What was the role of the European crónica in the development of prostitution in Southern Cone crónicas in the XX century? Why is it that such matters, so prevalent in the region's novels, are not to be found in the same authors' crónicas, while they are found in *The Road to Buenos Aires*, a work that has earned itself a new translation, re-publication, and critical attention over the last decade?

2. Methods

This study sets out to describe prostitution's place as a subject in the Southern Cone crónica in the XX century. Three specific objectives are proposed: to compare prostitution's place in social novels with that in crónicas in the early XX century in the Southern Cone; consider the presence of prostitution in European social novels in the late XIX and early XX centuries; and lastly, study the role of European crónicas in the development of this issue in Latin American crónicas throughout the century.

In order to achieve these objectives, this study performs a documentary review of literary, critical and journalistic works. In the French case, we are interested in France as the origin of the literary myth of the noble, warm-hearted prostitute, a victim of poverty and social injustice, especially in two fundamental novels: *Nana* (1880/2015) by Emile Zola and *Les Misérables* (1862/2015) by Victor Hugo, and an essential play: *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848/2018) by Alexandre Dumas jr. Concerning European crónicas, we look closely at the work and career of Albert Londres, a French poet and cronista who specialized in a particular type of reportage. In particular we analyse his *The Road to Buenos Aires*, a piece of journalism that covers human trafficking at a time when, as we shall see, local crónicas did not speak of such subjects. In the case of the Southern Cone, we shall be looking closely at the literary work of Augusto D'Halmar and that of Edwards Bello and Roberto Arlt, these latter two as exponents of the period with a double role as both literary figures and cronistas.

We present our review in the next section. Firstly, we present prostitution in French and Latin American social novels. We then turn to *la crónica* in Latin America and Europe in the early XX century. Thirdly, we analyse the possibilities offered by the social novel and crónicas of the time in Latin America. We then consider both the figure and the work of Albert Londres. Finally, we offer some reflections and interpretations drawn from this documentary review and contextualisation of the works.

² Some of Arlt's travel texts are not found in the volumes from Alfaguara and Edwards Bello's complete works are currently being edited by Publicaciones de la Universidad Diego Portales

3. Results

3.1. Prostitution in French novels

Prostitution is one of the key topics in French realist novels between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and those of Emile Zolá, as well as in the parallel works of Charles Dickens on the other side of the English Channel, prostitution is portrayed as the result of the degradation, be that material or spiritual and psychological, of poor girls whose fortune it was to be desirable and who enter, or are pushed, onto the sex market.

However, from the first, two clearly defined types of prostitutes are shown as characters in the novels. In a cultural and moral environment so dominated by the Catholic Church, it is logical that both stereotypes have their origin in two great biblical figures: Eve the sinner and Mary the selfless mother. Though there is complexity in the literary construction of the novels, it is hard to find characters that escape the dichotomy between the innocent girl brutally introduced to "bad life" and that of the "manipulator of men", conscious of her powers of attraction.

In the first case, we find the image of a girl who loses her innocence but never her intrinsic goodness, and who sells her body as a quasi-religious sacrifice in order to survive or to feed her family. This is Fantine in Víctor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862/2015). A single mother with a girl conceived with an unscrupulous man she fell for. She presents one of the characteristics of the literary figure of a prostitute that runs through the XIX century and on past the halfway point of the twentieth. The prostitute can be absolved by the author's prose, as was Fantine; but, to the relief of the puritan souls among her readers, she always comes to a bad end. Fantine works in a factory but is fired for being an unmarried mother, she wears herself out prostituting herself to feed her baby girl. She pulls out her incisors to sell them so the girl does not go hungry, goes down with tuberculosis and dies.

In *The Temptation of the Impossible*, Mario Vargas Llosa brands Hugo as a moralist because, though she falls into ill repute through necessity, her suffering is life-long, and her tribulations till the day of her death make the author think of divine punishment: the Peruvian Noble laureate feels that, as regards sex, the morality of *Les Misérables* has its roots in the most puritan and intolerant version of Catholicism (Vargas Llosa, 2004). John Andrew Frey sees Fantine as an example of how proletariat women were mistreated in XIX century France. Fantine represents deep compassion for human suffering, especially among women born to a low social station (Frey, 1999).

The other stereotype of prostitution in French novels is far harsher, although the character's fate may be the same. This is the perverse manipulator, the young woman who from the start knows her powers of attraction and her beauty and uses them in her favour to the detriment of weak men; some of them victims of their own lust and others genuinely in love with the perverse creature. The classic among these fascinated looks at the pure evil of a whore, is *Nana* (1880/2015), by Emile Zolá, part of a saga of 20 novels (*Les Rougon-Macquart*). The perfect dramatic structure of this novel sets the model of the rise, fall and final punishment of a woman who leads men to their perdition. With all the cunning of those who know their weapons well, Nana inspires joy and anguish in her admirers, tortures them with jealousy of each other and makes them compete to compliment her.

While Fantine is the perfect model of a Mary who selflessly sacrifices herself for her daughter, Nana, who undergoes a relatively painless abortion as she will not stand for any limits to her freedom (from the narrator's point of view), plunges to her doom with all the force of her own sexual energy.

Nana is the model of the Latin American social novel of “loss”. So much so that the names of Parisian prostitutes, and of *Nana* in particular, were chosen for the characters of local strumpets. One of the most celebrated of poor-girl-fallen-into-disgrace novels, *Juana Lucero* (1902), by Augusto D’Halmar, makes it clear: in the moment when Juana, a servant humiliated by her mistress, abused and left pregnant by her master, decides to enter a brothel, she is given the new name of Naná.

3.2. *The place of the brothel in the social novels of the Southern Cone*

3.2.1. *Presence in the novels and absence in the crónicas of Joaquín Edwards Bello*

In *El imaginario de la prostitución en Chile: literatura y figuras arquetípicas, 1902-1940*, Ana Gálvez Comandini (2013) credits the contribution of novelists (all male) to the vision of this phenomenon in Chile in the first half of the XX century:

The doctors and police indicated in their writings and documents that it was impossible to eradicate, by means of laws and norms, a social practice so well-established in society, and writers confirmed this, their novels representing the place held by brothels in the collective imagination and the importance they had in early twentieth century Chilean society. The writers’ contribution was focused principally on shining a light in their books on social practices that had been condemned to the shadows (p. 220).

The “prostitution novel” was born in Chile with *Juana Lucero*, by Augusto D’Halmar, published in 1902, which provoked enormous social uproar. The main character represents poor country girls who come to the capital to work as servants and, with the inevitability of a road to hell from which there is no escape, end up prostituting themselves in a Santiago brothel.

Joaquín Edwards Bello, whose columns harshly criticised the misdoings of the upper classes and spoke of luxury and poverty, chose the brothel as the scenario for his novels *La cuna de Esmeraldo* (1918) and especially *El roto* (1920/2019). These stories contain surgically detailed descriptions of houses of ill-repute as the stage for degradation, a mix of corruption and false luxury as imagined by the common people. These novels’ structure as morality tales looks more to the legacy of French realist novels (well-known to the readers) than to the frugal and descriptive style of the *crónicas* of the time, as analysed by his anthologist, Roberto Merino. Merino (2014) regards Edwards Bello’s *crónicas* as a stark description of the Santiago high society he knew so well, and his novels, especially *El inútil* (1911) and *El roto* (1920/2019), as proposals for the redemption of characters from the lumpen of society, who come into his work through the lens of fiction.

Other novels from that world appear throughout the first half of the XX century: *Vidas mínimas* (1923/2020) by José Santos González Vera, *El delincuente* (1925/1974) and *Son of a Thief* (1951/1973) by Manuel Rojas, *La viuda del conventillo* (1930/2000) by Alberto Romero, *La vida simplemente* (1951) by Oscar Castro and the saga of “marginal” novels by Nicomedes Guzmán, published between 1939 and 1951.

Ana Gálvez Comandini (2013) postulates, concerning the criticisms in these novels, that they see prostitution as a social and economic consequence of a system established by oligarchic governments in Chile at the time. She concludes that “prostitution comes to represent another form of repression of less exalted sectors by capitalism’s interests” (p. 221). Gálvez uses Jungian archetypes to present four central characters in brothel stories: the brothel, the prostitute, the madame and the customer. The brothel is centrally located, close to the seat of power, though not to where the elite live. In the shadow of these icons of power and modernity, sordid neighbourhoods emerge, inhabited by those others forgotten by progress and the illustration.

Thus, for example, Alberto Romero (1935/1997) describes this scene:

Between factories and hovels, the singled-storied dwellings give shelter to a strange, evocative world of workers and prostitutes; of low-level delinquents and humble shopworkers; of the retired and the sickly, relegated to the slums by the cost of living, where the fallen girl gives the evening a note of sad distinction as she appears in the window frame at dusk with her pathetic, painted face (p. 22).

Ana Gálvez Comandini's vision (2013) of the description of brothels in Chilean literature is particularly apt: hostile on the outside, cosy within, vaguely evocative of a lost grandeur that neither the prostitutes nor their clients ever knew and with elements that the years do not change, though the streets around them become unrecognisable. The author points out that, although 30 years separate them, the brothels in novels remain the same, because they emerge from the same nineteenth century ideal, and from the place that the writer and their public recognize as a den of material and spiritual degradation:

It is interesting to note the similarities between the brothel described by Óscar Castro and that of Joaquín Edwards Bello, largely because there is some 30 years between one novel and the other. However, this serves to confirm that the imaginary world of prostitution lurked in both writers' contemporaneity, and while Edwards wrote first, Castro, 30 years later didn't hold back, relating even childhood memories of life in those places of infamy and pain. In the literary tales, the representation of brothels as physical spaces is always a matter of them pretending to be something they are not (Gálvez Comandini, 2013, p. 229).

In his novel *El roto*, Joaquín Edwards Bello paints a precise picture of the parody of conquest that the house of ill-repute's spell cast over its customers for generations:

These indelicate, fearless women, hardened by experience, rubbing shoulders with the most beastly of men, used the coquetry of passivity and feigned timidity to show something of femininity. Unable to move or speak, not wishing to hurt a fly, wrinkled and rigid, waiting to be asked to dance, which they did with a demure look, timid step and downcast face, all compliance and affected scrupulousness. Lengthy flirting was required to win their favour (1920/2019, p. 61).

The critic and columnist Héctor Soto shines a light on the moralising character of these narrations, especially in *El roto*. In his article "Local y visita: El doble eje de Joaquín Edwards Bello" (2010), Soto shows a moral dichotomy in Edwards Bello's novel which is the opposite of that boasted, at the time of publication, by the self-righteous and erudite bourgeoisie, which led to the book's negative, aggressive reception. *El roto* does not depict the corruption of the poor, but rather that of the wealthy. Soto (2010) postulates that *El roto's* ethical lesson is the following: it is in a whorehouse where the child who is to become *el roto* grows up, where the chance for Chile's moral redemption is to be found:

if Chile has a destiny, Edwards Bello believes, it is due to those values that remain at the base of the social pyramid –among los rotos, among those classes which poverty and alcoholism are dissociating and destroying– and not those values that national indolence and covetousness made disappear from the top. It has to be said: unlike what he says in his *crónicas*, in his novels Edwards Bello was sensitive to the moral of social redemption. He wished to teach, moralise, redeem, save the world, and it is probably due to this, more than any other factor, that he has not aged very well (p. 342).

As we can see, Soto spots a difference between the Edwards Bello of his novels (*El roto* and *El inútil*, a devastating criticism of the indolence of Chilean high society), as moralizing fables with a moral message, and his columns, which are more descriptive, less

academic. Nonetheless, I consider there are two other differences, which I will seek to explain in the next section: on one hand, the issues; on the other, the author's position on what he is showing, detailing and denouncing.

3.2.2. *The presence in Roberto Arlt's novels and absence from las Aguafuertes (the Etchings)*

In *Roberto Arlt, el habitante solitario* (1972), Diana Guerrero studies the social issues in Arlt's work and focuses on women's role as the oppressed victims of a patriarchal and phallocentric society. In the novels *The Seven Madmen* (1929/1986) and *The Flamethrowers* (1931/1968), Guerrero sees both married and single women who seek a husband as doubly oppressed by the roles assigned to their gender in the early XXth century. Hipólita is the only one who escapes the rules for her sex in becoming a prostitute and a threat for bourgeois wives. Arlt's world in his novels is peopled by tragically triumphant outcasts, headed by Erdosain, the author's alter-ego, who despises bourgeois values, strives to break the chains of mediocrity, joins with criminals, tricksters, madmen and undesirables, and dreams of an outlandish invention that will make his fortune and redeem him.

Tania Diz (2016) stresses both the novelist's radical vision and Guerrero's perspective: the character of the prostitute as a free soul, which Arlt presents in his novels, is not to be found in the more conservative vision of the city and its people that the author describes in his crónicas of the time. For Diz (2016), Hipólita is portrayed as

The only independent female character: the others are no more than the female opposite to the male who defines, uses, idealises or despises them. Hipólita, on the other hand, from outside the petit-bourgeois identity, becomes a threat to males, as she does not respect the rules of her gender and, what's more, manages to grow as a character as she makes the most of the places she occupies: servant, wife, prostitute (p. 30).

Furthermore, the author identifies the most monstrous character in a novel teeming with monsters: that is Haffner, the ruffian who blames the prostitutes, who he oppresses, humiliates, tortures, and defrauds, for the situation they are in:

How is he monstrous? In considering that when he exploits the prostitutes, he has established a relationship with them, one of dominance which recreates the sadomasochistic ties between master and slave, in fact, through inversion, it is the victim who forces the master –the man– to humiliate her (Diz, 2016 p. 32).

We find in the novel itself the central point of the perversion of the oppressor who alleges his innocence, a character far darker than any of those who populate the author's melancholy, costumbrist etchings:

You, like ninety percent of people, believe that the pimp is the exploiter and the prostitute the victim. But tell me: what does a woman need the money she earns for? What the novelists haven't said is that the street walker who has no man, is desperately seeking one who will fool her, who'll break her soul from time to time and who takes all the money she makes, because she's that lost. They say that women are the same as men. Lies. Women are inferior to men (Arlt, 1929/1986, pp. 28-29).

As can be seen from what we have said so far, it is noteworthy that it is in a novel, and not in the crónicas of writers from both worlds, such as Arlt or Edwards Bello, where we find the character who gives voice to a truth *apparently* too crude to be dealt with by novelists, and which, therefore, belongs to the true stories of life on the streets.

3.3. *The other shore: the possibilities and dangers of non-fiction*

Numerous definitions and lists of ingredients have been offered for the *crónica*, narrative or literary journalism. In the Latin American sphere, Venezuelan Susana Rotker (2005) outlines its origin in the modernist *crónica* and distinguishes among its components a personal vision, with elements of the essay and a profusion of metaphors and comparisons, the description of atmospheres and the creation of characters. The main examples are the *crónicas* of José Martí and Rubén Darío. In Spain, Albert Chillón (1999) prioritises the "linguistic twist" in his analysis as well as the presence of the narrator in the events he relates. He particularly studies European non-fiction writers like the Pole, Ryszard Kapuscinski and the Italian Oriana Fallaci. Authors such as Jorge Carrión and María Gómez Patiño (2015) coincide in that the term is still object of debate. For Gómez Patiño (2015), the literature does not reach consensus on the definition of the genre, and, in fact, there seem to be as many types of *crónicas* as there are *cronistas*. She states that "it is paradoxical that the term Literary Journalism is regarded as something inevitable for the *crónica*, while it has space for umpteen formulas, styles and characteristics that are difficult to pigeonhole" (Gómez Patiño, 2015, p. 160).

As regards narrative or literary journalism, in his book *Periodismo narrativo*, Roberto Herrscher (2012) suggests that rather than confining itself to true events, real people or conversations, and observations actually made, such journalism may go into the same depth, and work with narrative strategies, complex or hybrid structures and styles, which speak as equals to the classics of fiction, poetry or theatre.

However, immersion in one's own experience and the author's participation in the events he narrates require a level of openness and sincerity reached by the Latin American *crónica* towards the end of the XX century. In Arlt and Edwards Bello's times, the place for describing what the *cronista* was doing in brothels and the nature of his relationship with the characters he met was clearly the novel. It was the fictional character who could go where the *cronista* whose name figured in the newspaper could not, whether when denouncing society's ills or showing the extreme poverty of the individual.

In Europe, on the contrary, the appearance of true narrative as a way to show political, economic, social or cultural problems in depth took place earlier. In the 1920s and 30s, Manuel Chaves Nogales (1935) took up the subjective vision of a bullfighter (*Juan Belmonte, matador de toros*) to show us with some wit an extreme life marked by both danger and fame, and travelled to the USSR to show the contradictions of a revolution containing a mix of cruelty and hope. He wrote his masterpiece, *A sangre y fuego* (1937), to highlight the failings of both sides in the Spanish Civil War.

In the same period, the Catalan Josep Pla, in *The Gray Notebook* (1966/2013), turns an intimate diary into an accurate and subjective tale of his times. And, with *Grandes tipos* (1958/1995) he travelled through the troubled Europe of the moment and sketched the great men of his country in a choral portrait which is both timeless in its ambition and rooted in a historic moment in his vision of how each of us sees one facet of our time. At the same moment, and moved by similar historic events, George Orwell combined incredible journeys, meetings with unforgettable characters and an accurate eye for major historical changes as well as personal and class relations, in such books as *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937/2001), *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933/2015) and *A Homage to Catalonia* (1938/2013).

3.4. Limitations of the *crónica*, possibilities of the novel

Towards the close of the XX century, the new Latin American *crónica* finally reached the state of “non-fiction literature”. The Ecuadorian academic Fernando Checa Montúfar (2016) is surely right in pointing to the fundamental characteristic of the *crónica* from 1990 on:

The *crónica* is a rebel genre not only because of its subjectivity (someone speaking from his/her own viewpoint), in contradiction to the demand for “objectivity” in traditional journalism, but especially as that type of journalism almost always deals with personages from public life, from great events; while the *crónica* rebels against that (Checa Montúfar, 2016, p.160).

However, as explained above, in *crónicas* published in newspapers from the first half of the XX century, both Arlt and Edwards Bello came up against internal and external limits before reaching the roots of the social, mental and spiritual failings of their peoples.

The external limitations are related to what could be published in the dailies of the time. As the historian Eduardo Santa Cruz says (2011), ownership of the media and almost all its readers belonged to the monied class, and the cronistas knew how far they could go with their criticism, not just of the government of the moment, but of the social class served by the media for which they worked. Noam Chomsky and Peter Hermann (2000) explained this decades later with their theory of the four filters in *Manufacturing Consent*. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Edwards Bello called for fiction writers to write what journalists or historians could not. “In Chile, where so much history is written, so much so that nothing is known, we need lots of novelists telling us of intimate things, of sub-history” (Arlt, 2020, p. 20).

The internal limits have to do with what was conceivable in non-fiction writings in the Latin America of the time. Continuing with the definition of journalistic *crónica* inherited from the Spanish tradition³, non-fiction had to limit itself to fleeting observations, at-a-glance portraits, swift conclusions that could be taken in between a sip of coffee and a nibble of a biscuit or a cake. This was due to the limited space available in the press as well as the economic conditions they were working in, which Arlt complained of throughout his career (unlike, Edwards Bello, who enjoyed the fruits of his aristocratic inheritance).

This limitation may be related to a generalized conception about newspaper texts, which Gemma López Canicio warns us of (2017):

The immediate objective of any newspaper text seems to be the opposite of literary text: whilst literature can allow itself licence to modify even real facts, to construct artistic and fictional stories while losing neither its value nor its main objective, any change to reality in a journalistic text is not taken as a fictionalisation, and, as such, accepted by the reader, but is taken as a fallacy or lie, and the text is discredited. This occurs because journalism’s chief goal is, as in history, to recount reality with the greatest possible accuracy, objectivity, and exactitude (p. 182).

The depth of the writer’s vision, the complexity of the characters’ construction, and, especially, the self-reference and questioning of the narrator’s place in the text were destined to the novel’s freedom, creativity and depth. That is why a modern reader is so struck by a book on human trafficking in the same time and place as *The Seven Madmen* and *El roto*, written with a strict

³ In *El estilo del periodista*, Alex Grijelmo (2014) postulates that the *crónica* takes elements from the news, reportage and analysis. The primacy of its novel content distinguishes it from the latter two, it is different from news in that it includes the writer’s personal vision.

adherence to reality, without invention or concealment, and, particularly, with a participating narrator who questions his sources and constantly wonders about his own role in the story he is telling. That is the daring and radical modernity of Londres's *The Road to Buenos Aires* (1927/2008).

3.5. Albert Londres & *The Road to Buenos Aires*

3.5.1. Albert Londres's road

Who is Albert Londres? The France-based north American academic John Bak (2015) compares his life and work with that of his "almost" homonym Jack London, and seeks the singularity of this most famous of gallic non-fiction cronistas among the similarities and differences between them. In fact, the greatest prize for French *Grand Reportage* is called the Prix Albert Londres. Bak (2015) defines his ethical commitment, his style and his subject matter, comparing them to those of London, as follows:

Like London before him, Londres was heavily influenced by the naturalism that pervaded the *fin de siècle*, and both writers experienced wars, exposed poverty and studied urban decay through a realistic and scientific lens. They shared not only a dislike for house styles but also a complete distrust of journalistic objectivity, demanding their editors and audiences alike to confer a level of trust not always attributed to first-person reportages that read like a novel or a short story. Also like London, Londres felt that his mission as a writer was to be 'un éternel vagabond', obliged to 'dénoncer l'opprimeur, révéler les lieux d'oppression' and 'donner la parole à ceux qu'ils l'ont perdue' (p. 2).

Albert Londres was born in Vichy in 1884. He published three books of poetry in his youth and later specialised in a highly personal and elaborate type of journalistic reportage that combined travel writing, character profiles, dramatic action, historical context and analysis of issues of great import with a very agile style linked to the realist social novel. Bak spoke thus of his beginnings, of his first *crónica*, during the First World War, which saw him find his voice and style and positioned him as a literary narrator:

On September 21, 1914, Londres filed his story, titled "Ils ont bombardé Reims et nous avons vu cela!", for *Le Matin*, appearing on the front page. Many scholars of the French press identify his dispatch as one of the first examples of modern French *reportage*. The story, a first-person account of the bombing and near-destruction of Rheims cathedral, is noteworthy in how it rallies its readers to the cause not through a gruesome, naturalistic portrayal of the deaths of French soldiers and civilians, but rather through a universalizing of the death of France as a nation rendered through the metonymy of the cathedral itself. Describing the cathedral in religio-anthropomorphic terms, Londres writes that it was "*la majesté religieuse descendue sur la terre*" (Bak, 2015, p. 4).

From then and until his untimely death in 1932, when the boat he was on in the sea of Indochina was bombed (his body was never found), Londres published 20 books that are, for literary journalists, about travel and the study of France, the keystone of his art. In *Dante had seen nothing* (1924/2012), for example, he sketches the inhumane living conditions of French overseas military prisoners. Later, in *Terre d'ébène* (1929/2012), he looks at the moral degradation of colonial functionaries in France's slave colonies in Africa. *Pêcheurs de perles* (1931/2012) considers the miserable, dangerous life of the divers who risked their lives in Ceylon in the search for adornments for European ladies. These are some of the books in which Londres, with unusual bravery, flings in his compatriots' faces the atrocities and scandals of their government and their powerful multinationals around the globe. The literary traveller brought before his Parisian readers the dark side of the colonial grandeur and economic might that the ruling classes boasted of. *The Wandering Jew has arrived* (1930/2012), moves through eastern Europe, the Mediterranean

and British Mandate Palestine showing the wandering of the Jews pursued by antisemitism and seeking their own dreamed-of homeland. This last point is tremendously prophetic and helps us to understand the *progroms*, their persecution by the Nazis and their allies across Europe and the ensuing conflicts when the refugees reached Israel following the Second World War.

The decade from 2010 saw the rediscovery of Londres's literary journalism, with studies such as those by Bak (2015); Dow, Bak & Meuret (2015), and by the French researcher Johanna Cappi (2021). His rediscovery in Spain came parallel to the re-edition of major texts by Manuel Chaves Nogales and the appearance on the market of the Spanish translation of Walt Whitman's journalistic crónicas, coinciding with the two hundredth anniversary of the great poet's birth in 2019. The complete works of Londres started to become available in Spain in the same decade, in volumes each containing three or four of his books. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Argentine editorial Libros del Zorzal published *The Road to Buenos Aires* in 2008. The book had not been available in the city's bookshops since the 1930s, with its descriptions of the city's less salubrious quarters rendered as no other journalist had done.

3.5.2. What had Albert Londres come to Buenos Aires to find?

The Road to Buenos Aires is the fifth of the 20 travel crónicas by Londres, and the first that the author conceived from the beginning as a book and not as a series of reportages to be published in the media. His style is already consolidated, his way of work more polished, his prose more mature than in his earlier works. As subject matter, he chooses common speech, irony, humour. His friendly tone with traffickers of white French girls could be thought of as mocking or, even worse, an expression of racism and sexism, of approving of the ruffians' offensive expressions and self-justifications. However, a closer reading of the book reveals that his lack of a frontal assault denotes neither his agreement nor neutrality when faced with the violations of the most basic human rights, such as the trafficking of people, psychological and physical violence, sexual abuse and kidnapping. Rather, it forms a part of Londres's mature writing style: he trusts in the reader's intelligence and perspicacity.

The above is expressed, for example, in the following scene, where he invites the reader to follow in his steps:

This is the Casa Francesa. Don't be shy. Follow me! Let's climb these five steps together, they may also be reglementary. Let's knock at the door. Don't you dare? Let me. What a lovely bell! Clear, Sharp, Argentinian! The curtain twitches. Don't run. We're being examined. We've passed. We can go in. It's a broad door. In we go, friends. You don't have to be a saint! My Lord! It looks like a bus stop. They're going to hand out numbers. Five sitting on the bench, three on chairs, four standing. Too many. Let's go somewhere else. Let me show you the way. It's only a hundred metres. We ring the bell. We pass the exam with flying colours. In we go. (Londres, 1927/2008, p. 65).

In another scene, the madame treats him as a distinguished client, which serves to increase the feeling of displeasure and repulsion, without the author explicitly telling us what he feels or how it should be read. Here he is talking to a group of pimps:

—A few minutes ago, I had the pleasure of meeting mademoiselle Ópalo. She told me she had lit her lamp four hundred and two times in one week, in the house. —Ópalo? —said Cicerón—. And whose darling is that? —Ah! —I said—. Not mine, I'm afraid! —I think she's Adrien's —said Víctor. —Then, at five pesos the match and fifty-two weeks in a year, even if he only had mademoiselle Ópalo, Adrien'd be making 1,489,410 francs in twelve months (Londres, 1927/2008, pp. 69-70).

In this non-fiction, Londres relates the chat between the pimps as being almost identical to that of the ruffian in Arlt's novel. What was unthinkable in one of the Argentinian's newspaper articles, a real conversation where he uses his true name, here (perhaps because the scene takes place in another country, in another language?) appears in a *crónica*. In contrast, contemporary writers like Martín Caparrós (2017) or Juan Pablo Meneses (2004) do now use this type of dialog, without the journalist's critical voice, in Latin American *crónicas*.

This depiction of scenes without the narrator's opinion was unheard of in Argentine or Chilean *crónicas* of the time. The effect was devastating. The criminal in *The Road to Buenos Aires* concludes with this moralising speech (1927/2008):

What would women do without us? They smoke, drink, take coke, fall in love, spend the night, marry each other! These last words made the other three indignant: —That's it —said Cicerón—. Look at how depraved these women can get! —As soon as they've earned a few pennies, they stop work. They stay in bed surrounded by filth, or go out on the town. They're twenty years old and you find them sloshed on the pavement! They drink white burgundy instead of buying lingerie. They're dirty, with filthy nails, greasy hair. They lose all decorum. They even pull each other's hair. They're foul-mouthed. We stop all of that. We take them under our wing, wash them, scrub them. Dress them decently. We teach them to appreciate clean clothes. We get them away from bad company (p. 72).

At the end of the book, after telling of his journey from France with the killers and their hoodwinked victims, their arrival in Buenos Aires, the disillusionment, the brutality, the squalor, the desperation, only on the final page, does Londres turn to the reader and rebuke him/her:

You'll lecture about what should be done, and what shouldn't, about right and wrong. You'll speak of what should be seen. The most scandalous thing, listen well now, is not that evil exists, but that it's seen! (...) While there's unemployment. While the young are cold and hungry. While they don't know which door to call at for somewhere to sleep. While we let the ruffians take our place and fill their bowls. You can burn their homes, excommunicate their ashes, you'll have done nothing but make flame and grand gestures. The responsibility is ours. Don't let's shirk it (1927/2008, p. 127).

The bravery in this *crónica* from 1927 lies in the radical "I" as the representative of the readers: "I was there for you", among the other merits of diligent research; his presence on the scene, to the point of putting himself at risk, care with the accuracy of the facts and his forceful style. But at the same time, until the final moment, and that is what gives it such weight, there is this absence of "I" as judge, no "J'Accuse", no moral stance.

Therefore, Londres's presence is like that of a fixed camera, which does not highlight, but nor does it let us look away. It is an uncomfortable first person, because it represents us. Regarding this kind of first person, Darío Jaramillo Agudelo says (2011) in the introduction to his *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual*:

They convinced us that the first person is a way of diminishing what we write, of reducing its authority. But it is the opposite in the face of the trick of informative prose (which pretends that nobody is telling the story, but what is being told is "the truth"), the first person takes charge, it says "this is what I saw, knew, thought", there is always a subject who looks and tells, who makes literature (p. 22).

4. Discussion

As we have shown throughout this paper, almost all the writers involved in journalism and literature reserved their journalism for the telling of relevant and accurate facts, denouncing society's ills, and those of its rulers, or interviewing persons of interest. Literary flights of fancy, creative structure and immersion in the complex spirit of people and their times were to be found in the realm of fiction. This, we have seen, can be found in the work of Edwards and Arlt. Their discourse and the sordid reality wherein the two extremes of Chilean and Argentine society of the time were mixed, are only possible under the mantel of fiction, which conceals and mitigates the narrator's gaze.

On this point, it is important to point out that it is not a matter of putting the novels of Romero, D'Halmar or Edwards Bello in the same place regarding purpose, genre and style as those of Roberto Arlt. Noted critics such as Ricardo Piglia (1973), Beatriz Sarlo (2007) and David Viñas (1997) have remarked on the radical modernity and peculiarity of Arlt's work: he does not portray losers and the humiliated as innocent victims, but rather as accomplices and often masochistic executors of their own tragedy. However, for the purposes of this paper, there is a truth, a delicacy in the detail, a complexity in the description of what is beautiful and horrible at the same time in both authors' great novels which is missing from their celebrated crónicas.

The above is in contrast with the development of the European crónica, as exemplified by its elastic, malleable prose and the precise, multi-faceted construction of the characters in the work of Albert Londres. We can apply to the latter what López Canicio (2017) defines as the person of the "narrator-journalist":

The narrator adopts, then, the identity of the writer of the piece and is made in his image: he is concerned with justifying the information he imparts, actively intervenes in the tale, judges and offers opinions, appeals to the reader, apologises... Through this type of literary narrative voice, the author strives to express in his work all knowledge of the case at hand and, what's more, is very interested in the audience understanding that all this knowledge is fruit of an arduous process of real research, which corroborates as truthful all the information the story proffers (p. 89).

This is exactly the type of search for the literary in reality, of the construction of the character of the narrator as distinct from the "neutral" voice of the informing journalist, and even the construction of a tale that builds a world and transports the reader there, which distinguishes the complex non-fiction tale from the brief crónica, though they be the fun, lucid crónicas of Edwards Bello and Arlt. What they sought in novels —because they could not ignore the strict limits of the newspaper article—, Albert Londres assembled with the building blocks of reality, and in the same terrain of the criollo brothel where his southern counterparts passed to the novel. It is in this contrast that we find the need to rescue Albert Londres's work, especially that situated in the Southern Cone. As we have seen, Londres "brings" a crónica from Europe, and in some way, is a forerunner of the Latin American crónica of the second half of the XX century, probably influencing that local crónica.

5. Conclusion: why prostitution irrupts in crónicas decades after disappearing from its privileged place in novels

The conditions that allowed Albert Londres to write the great work of non-fiction on prostitution in the Southern Cone in the 1920s are varied. Here I suggest a few. Firstly, the overarching project of his work, which took him through the five continents over

two decades. In the cases of the cronistas of the past (like Chaves Nogales, Pla, Orwell, Karl Krauss, and Egon Erwin Kisch) and of today (such as Caparrós, Leila Guerriero, Joseph Zárate, Juan Villoro, and Josefina Licitra), it is always largely personal effort, ambition and talent which sees them produce work that surpasses the usual norms of everyday journalism.

Nevertheless, beyond such personal qualities, Londres had an editorial industry, an intellectual setting, a media context which allowed texts that questioned and attacked the preconceived, self-congratulatory ideas of his homeland on the terrain of non-fiction. The Chilean media industry and journalistic publications in book form had been reluctant for many years to foster discourses that ran contrary to the nation's "core values", its institutions and its ruling class, as indicated by Chilean historians Eduardo Santa Cruz and Gonzalo Peralta in the introductions to the first two volumes (1813-1884 & 1884-1932) of the *Antología de la crónica periodística chilena* (2017a; 2017b).

As Patricia Poblete Alday (2019) in her studies of Chilean *crónicas*, and Marcela Aguilar (2019) in her thesis on the development of the *crónica* in Latin America, explain, the format, length of the texts, complexity of the subject matter, style and degree of criticism of the established powers permitted in the genre of journalistic *crónica* throughout almost all the XX century, encouraged such texts as *Aguafuertes* by Arlt or Edwards Bello's *crónicas*. At the end of the XX and early XXI century the *crónica* lived a boom using a longer format that questioned the pressing issues of the day through narrative journalism, with cold, hard facts, long interviews, journeys of discovery and serious analysis. It is over this same period that Latin American cronistas like Martín Caparrós (2017), Juan Pablo Meneses (2004) and Pedro Lemebel (1996) approached the subject of prostitution.

There are many other issues where the participation and role of the cronista complicate subjectivity. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to find a place free of socialist moralism and do-gooding. Future studies could look at these other questions that illustrate the character of *crónicas* through history.

The *crónica*'s way is not that of looking for a prostitute imagined or desired as bad, good, victim or symbol of the truth, with all its contradictions. Rather, it is the search for a possible viewpoint among all the cronistas' contradictions. This is even more complex, for almost all the cronistas and novelists analysed are men. In this double quest, we have asked questions about the possibilities and hazards of novels based on fact and of non-fiction accounts, of real events and of French influence, both in fiction and in non-fiction, in America's Southern Cone. Who observes? Who judges? Who is "us" and who are "the others"?

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