

MIGUEL GONZALEZ-GERTH

A LABYRINTH OF IMAGERY:  
RAMON GOMEZ DE LA SERNA'S  
*NOVELAS DE LA NEBULOSA*

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## PREFACE

Octavio Paz has said of Ramón Gómez de la Serna that he was «the great Spanish writer: the Writer or, better yet, Writing»,<sup>1</sup> la escritura, the Spanish equivalent of the Structuralists' pet-word l'écriture. That is how prolific and pervasive a writer Gómez de la Serna was in his heyday. Paz compares Ramón (as he is known in Hispanic letters) to a modern Lope de Vega and agrees with the praise heaped on him by Valéry Larbaud, the French critic and translator who introduced the Spaniard to the Paris scene. «There was a time», Paz goes on, «when modernity spoke through Gómez de la Serna. He was so new that he continues to be so... With Ramón Gómez de la Serna and a few others... modern Spanish and Spanish American poetry is born... speaking prose... as a double heresy: prosaism and cosmopolitanism».

It is a fact that Ramón is exclusively a prose writer (the few poems he ever wrote were promptly disavowed) and it is also a fact that Spanish avant-garde begins in the twenties to take on a prose quality we are now more able to appreciate. Yet long before Ramón's verbal dynamics had realized their full potential, his nonchalant use of metaphor had infiltrated all spheres of Spanish literature. In a stimulating though very uneven book, Ramón Gómez de la Serna en sus obras,<sup>2</sup> José Camón Aznar has succeeded in giving us a rudimentary impression of that infiltration. His bibliography of works by Ramón contains 189 books and essays published separately. It does not include ephemeral pieces which appeared in magazines and newspapers.

To some extent such prolixity may have negatively affected Ramón's posterity. When his productivity began to abate, so did his popularity, as well as the attention of literary critics. He declined from being commonplace to almost nonexistent. Some have said that no one ages more quickly than do forerunners. As the precursor of the Hispanic avant-garde, Ramón was a prime candidate for suffering such fate. Yet at least

<sup>1</sup> OCTAVIO PAZ, «Una de cal...», *Papeles de Son Armadans* (Palma de Mallorca), CXL (November 1967), pp. 186-87; reprinted in *Las cosas en su sitio (sobre la literatura española del siglo XX)* [in collaboration with Juan Marichal] ([México]: Finissterre [1971]), pp. 27-60. The above is my translation.

<sup>2</sup> JOSÉ CAMÓN AZNAR, *Ramón Gómez de la Serna en sus obras* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1972).

*equally true is the contention that without forerunners no innovation is likely nor is evolution as easily detected. Without Ramón the picture of Hispanic avant-garde writing is incomplete and, therefore, incomprehensible. My own contention is that though much in Ramón may seem dated now, his overall achievement and, specifically, his more ambitious and accomplished writings deserve a permanent place in literary history. What is definitely not dated and calls for continued study and reassessment are the forms those writings take to achieve the intended artistic goals. Were Ramón not Spanish, his name would figure alongside those of Gide, Kafka, Hesse, Joyce, and Musil.*

## INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that one of the outstanding contributions of Ramón Gómez de la Serna, the one most universally praised, is the easily recognized, extremely brief and aesthetically poignant kind of text he called *greguería*. Critics and historians who stop there, however, totally misjudge the range of his originality and tend to restrict his meaningful production to the period between the two World Wars. Ramón's work as a whole is not trivial imagery. All one has to do is read carefully his more recondite essays, such as «Las cosas y el 'ello'» and «Las palabras y lo indecible», certain passages in his literary biographies, and his more ambitious novels to comprehend the notions and concerns which lie behind his dynamically imagistic, basically humorous and metaphorical style.

Humor and metaphor were characteristic of avant-garde writing throughout Europe. They came along with the turn of the century, with the spirit of a new and youthful world. Roger Shattuck suggests that in France before the First World War «humor, a genre that can command both the directness of comedy and the subtler moods of irony, became a method and a style» and that «the future of realism in the arts of the twentieth century may lie in the ease with which it can sustain the carefully timed commentary of humor».<sup>1</sup> Although I tend to agree with the latter statement, I believe that there is another side to the question, namely the ease with which different kinds of humor in the arts survive the test of time or, more precisely, of given periods of time. For example, there seems to have come with the aftermath of the Second World War a schism in our general attitude toward literature, a schism brought about by the makers of literature themselves. In other words, humor, which had been during the war years a desperate refuge for everyday sanity, became something undesirable, particularly if the reader was not «in on it»; literature had to be at least thematically *engagée*. Not until Ionesco and Arrabal do we again find serious humor in literature, bizarre as it may be, without reaching the extremes of Genet, Beckett and Artaud. As Shattuck explains the phenomenon, «the ultimate modern transfor-

<sup>1</sup> ROGER SHATTUCK, *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961), pp. 33-34.

mation of the comic may render it no longer laughable, for the comic has delivered itself into the hands of the *absurd*.<sup>2</sup> And when we consider that, as Shattuck himself points out, «existentialists have invoked absurdity as the essential human condition»,<sup>3</sup> we come upon the line of separation between Ramón's two humorous nebular novels of the twenties (he had not coined the term yet) and the two of the thirties and forties. If, as Shattuck suggests, there is «a method of humor based on logic perpetually reversing its terms»,<sup>4</sup> which is quite the one Ramón used in his aphoristic and some of his discursive *gregerías*, his version of the absurd consists precisely in presenting human life in a dreamlike stasis which is suddenly liberated by a commotion such as death, the ultimate absurdity. This may be the kind of humor Shattuck attributes to Alfred Jarry by saying that «humor offers both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatening world».<sup>5</sup>

It is unfortunate that Spanish and, until recently, Spanish American literature have been so neglected by American, British and even other European literary critics and historians engaged in broad sweeps. It is regrettable that there should be no cognizance of a writer such as Ramón in Bradbury and McFarlane's *Modernism, 1890-1930*.<sup>6</sup> The only Hispanic writers mentioned are Calderón de la Barca, Miguel de Unamuno, Juan Ramón Jiménez, [García] Lorca, Neruda, Borges, and Paz. Ortega y Gasset is quoted several times. British and American channels for this cognizance can easily be traced. Similarly, there is no recognition of Ramón, though there is no imperative reason for it, in Shattuck's study of the French avant-garde. It is somewhat less excusable to find such an absence in Renato Poggioli's *Teoria dell' arte d'avanguardia*,<sup>7</sup> where García Lorca, Góngora, Jorge Guillén, Eugenio d'Ors, Ortega y Gasset, Pedro Salinas, and Guillermo de Torre are taken into account. This choice, too, can be explained, and it is a pity that no Spanish American writer is present. Yet even more surprising is the fact with ample opportunity and reason Octavio Paz, who has elsewhere, as we have seen, praised him, does not mention Ramón in *Los hijos del limo*, which makes me suspect he has not yet taken the time to assess the full import of the Spaniard's achievement.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SHATTUCK, *The Banquet Years...*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> SHATTUCK, *The Banquet Years...*, p. 34n.

<sup>4</sup> SHATTUCK, *The Banquet Years...*, p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> SHATTUCK, *The Banquet Years...*, p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> MALCOLM BRADBURY and JAMES MCFARLANE (eds.), *Modernism, 1890-1930* ([Harmondsworth]: Penguin Books [1978]).

<sup>7</sup> RENATO POGGIOLI, *Teoria dell' arte d'avanguardia* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 1962); *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, translated from the Italian by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> OCTAVIO PAZ, *Los Hijos del limo: Del romanticismo a la vanguardia* (Bar-