

RAMÓN GÓMEZ DE LA SERNA

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Ricardo Fernández Romero



MONOGRAFÍAS

TAMESIS

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vi
List of Contributors	vii
Introduction	
RICARDO FERNÁNDEZ ROMERO	1
1. Ramón, the Artist and His Brand	12
RICARDO FERNÁNDEZ ROMERO	
2. Ramón as Art-Collector and Visual Artist: Slum of Oddities	63
EDUARDO ALAMINOS LÓPEZ	
3. Ramón and Photography. ‘The Dead Thing’	90
HUMBERTO HUERGO CARDOSO	
4. Ramón and Theatre: Staging Reform in <i>El drama del palacio deshabitado</i> (1909)	119
NICOLÁS FERNÁNDEZ-MEDINA	
5. Ramón and the New Materialism: The Ecstasy of Objects	145
JULI HIGHFILL	
6. Ramón and Cervantes	163
ALAN HOYLE	
Gómez de la Serna’s Life, a Chronology	205
A Guide to Gómez de la Serna’s Literary Works	207
Bibliography	211
Index	229

Introduction

RICARDO FERNÁNDEZ ROMERO

The great Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote that modernity spoke through Ramón Gómez de la Serna (Madrid, 1888–Buenos Aires, 1963) and, at least between the two world wars, Ramón was unanimously considered the most representative avant-garde writer in Spanish literature ('Una de cal ...', 175). Indeed, he should be placed among the greatest artists, not just writers, of the first third of the twentieth century, one of the most fruitful periods of Spanish culture.¹ Yet, Paz lamented the forgetfulness and lack of recognition of an entire Hispanic world, on both sides of the Atlantic, which had learned so much from him. This double circumstance brings us to the first of a long series of paradoxes that characterise the work and figure of Gómez de la Serna. If he was, and this is unquestionable, as I will show, one of the champions of the renewal of literature in the Spanish language between 1908 and 1936 (at least), how might we explain that lack of definitive recognition? A first clarification, which delays and makes the answer a little more complex, is that, in spite of his avant-garde credentials, we are not dealing with an elitist, obscure or difficult-to-read writer – quite the contrary. During the years from 1910 to at least the end of the 1940s, Gómez de la Serna knew how to combine, in a very personal recipe, features of all the advanced forms of literature appearing all over Europe – sometimes anticipating them – with a constant presence in the mass media, including radio, newspapers and intellectual magazines, but also humorous or entertaining periodicals. Thus, he coexisted with Cubism, Futurism, Imaginism and Surrealism, but he used and parodied popular literary genres and even managed to become famous enough to be considered a real celebrity – something relatively exceptional for a writer at the time. In fact, he liked to remember, probably exaggerating, that if he was saved from being shot by a group of anarchists at the beginning of the

¹ The designation of this period as the 'Silver Age' of Spanish literature, coined by José Carlos Mainer, has become quite popular (see Mainer, *La Edad de Plata (1902–1936)* and Mainer, *Historia*).

Spanish Civil War, in July 1936, it was because when they heard his voice, they recognised him as ‘the one who speaks on the radio on Sundays. Let him come in’ (*Oc*, XX, 700).²

Much of the reason for being banished to this strange place, where he seems destined to be repeatedly ‘rediscovered’ every so often, was his political alignment with Francoism during and after the Civil War (1936–1939), which earned him the antipathy of progressive and liberal readers. However, there is another factor, as much or more important, that has to do with the characteristics of his adventurous aesthetic. The fact is that it is only in recent times that his *Complete Works* (1996–2013) have been published and, even so – and this is symptomatic – they have remained incomplete, given the complexity of publishing one of his most extraordinary books, *Pombo*, and its sequel, *La Sagrada Cripta de Pombo*, full of drawings, photographs and engravings lifted from the daily press (reproduced in very low quality in the first edition in 1918 and 1924, respectively). The fate of this laudable endeavour could not have been very different, even if the publishers had not agreed to add to the twenty volumes originally planned perhaps the same again, that would include his enormous output of articles, scattered in an astonishing number of newspapers and magazines in Spain, Latin America and Europe. If I insist on this point, it is to show that, unlike other European artists of exquisite work, such as Stéphane Mallarmé, or others dedicated to one work almost exclusively, such as Marcel Proust or James Joyce, Gómez de la Serna dispersed his talent in a kind of assiduous communication, sometimes daily, with his public. The reason for this hyper-productivity is certainly economic, but I think there is an aesthetic decision behind it that should not be underestimated. The result of a constant literary and, this is important, media presence is the devaluation of his work due to the author’s overexposure and inability or refusal to concentrate on a definitive, finished work, on a par with *Ulysses* or *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Here we begin to find an answer to that first paradox, since it is not only Ramón’s conservatism that discredited him, but the situation of a writer who, having written so many books, does not seem to have written any.

This dispersion of work into a multitude of publications is replicated, thus aggravating the process, within each of these texts. This aspect, the fundamental relevance of the fragment compared to the great literary projects of the nineteenth century, is not a feature that separates him from the many other contemporary European writers. However, his particular implementation, to the very end, of an aesthetic of dissolution is original, exemplified in his youthful motto (1910), known as ‘My seven words’, ‘oh, if the impossibility of

² Unless otherwise indicated, all texts by Gómez de la Serna refer to the edition of the *Obras Completas* (abbreviated *Oc*). Only the volume and page are indicated. Translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

undoing comes!’ (*Oc*, I, 181). The atomisation of reality, in phantasmagorical consonance with the science that fragments the atom in search of even more impossibly tiny particles, gives rise to the minimal unit of Gómez de la Serna’s literature, the ‘greguería’ (López Cobo). I will examine its relevance later, but it is enough to say for now that greguería is an amalgamation of metaphor or image and sharp, humorous observation of reality, the latter conceived beforehand as a sign, as a field of metaphorical or analogical relations, to which the only means of approach and enjoyment is aesthetic. Let us take a random example for now: ‘La linterna del acomodador nos deja una mancha de luz en el traje’ (‘The usher’s torch leaves a stain of light on our suit’). The brevity and intensity of the poetic or metaphorical revelation is sustained by the fact that its point of attention is ‘things’, this minimal, even banal element of a reality that, in its turn, is beginning to be flooded with objects.

In any case, the ‘greguería’, which is not all Gómez de la Serna but which corresponds to a conception of the relationship between art and reality that underlies all Gómez de la Serna’s aesthetics, has ended up assuming the total value of Ramón. The ‘greguería’, like the one in the previous paragraph, is as much a spark of ingenuity and a lyrical vision of reality as a product that is easy to digest and consume (and forget), especially when, during his most productive years, he inundated the literary market, publishing several almost daily in the press.³ At the same time, the self-sufficiency of the ‘greguería’, being a small lyrical atom and not a part of a larger narrative or structure of meaning, invites an inattentive or random reading. In its turn, this contributed, then and even now, once again, to a reception that makes Gómez de la Serna an all too familiar voice, recognisable as a staple in the cultural landscape, but without a single outstanding work. Even his novels, composed/structured in accordance with this general tendency towards fragmentation and atomisation, have suffered a similar fate.

Not all this is in contradiction, however, to the degree of influence he was able to achieve. In fact, despite the uneven acceptance of ‘greguería’, a witness to the innovative and risky nature of his endeavour, his imaginative capacity and irreverent fantasy informed a good part of the aesthetic experiments of his contemporaries. In fact, in Spain the poets of the so-called ‘generation of 1927’ (Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, etc.) took note when practising a type of poetry in which metaphors or images were the mark of a superior ‘lyrical algebra’, to use the

³ Originally, in Spanish ‘greguería’ meant ‘unintelligible language’, like the cries of an animal. Currently, the official dictionary of the Spanish language (*DRAE*) recognises that this word also denominates the literary genre created by Gómez de la Serna. Pura Fernández has collected the ‘greguerías’ and published them in volume VIII of *Obras completas*. Those prior to 1926 are included in volume IV of the same edition.