

A Brief account of Ramón Gómez de la Serna's life and literary career
by Ricardo Fernández
School of Modern Languages
University of St Andrews

Ramón Gómez de la Serna (Madrid, 1888-Buenos Aires, 1963) is justly considered the avant-garde writer par excellence in Spanish literature. Widely known in Spain, as well as in Europe during the interwar period, and until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), he should be placed alongside writers like Marinetti, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, the French surrealist Group, etc, as the prototypical cosmopolitan modernist writer: embracer of all things new in art, literature, science, technology, etc.

Gómez de la Serna was a surname linked to politics and law studies. Several members of his family had important roles in the higher ranks of the Spanish administration of the Restoration period (1875-1925), among them his own father Javier and his uncle Félix. But his vocation for pursuing a literary career was welcomed from a very early age. With the support of his father he started publishing articles in the regional press (*La Región Extremeña*, *Diario de Avisos de Segovia*, etc), as soon as 1905. Javier Gómez de la Serna funded Ramón's own journal, *Prometeo*, between 1909 and 1912.

The period of 1905 and 1914 is the formative period of a precocious writer, immersed in Nietzsche, Ibsen, Poe, etc. Gómez de la Serna's style and themes combined the language of decadent symbolism and a radicalism in social and political views that were soon ditched in favour of the pursuit of a pure literary career. In his first years Gómez de la Serna relied on supporters like his father, the journalist Francisco Gómez Hidalgo and his lover Carmen de Burgos, a feminist and socialist writer. Through them he started to have a limited access to the press and the editorial houses (the journals *la Hoja de Parra*, the newspaper *La Tribuna* and the publishing house Sempere, in Valencia). Gómez de la Serna published during this period probably his most avant-gardist experiments: *Morbideces*, *El libro mudo*, and his first novel *El ruso*. Texts that have been overlooked as part of the juvenilia of Ramón, but that, in spite of their verbosity and intellectual incoherences, constitute some of the most advanced experiments in prose writing before surrealism in Spain.

The first cornerstone of Gómez de la Serna's output, and arguably one of his few masterpieces, inaugurated his professional career and the beginning of his most productive and successful period: *El Rastro*, a miscellaneous book dedicated to Madrid's flea market of the same name, was published in 1914. It was the first book printed through a professional publishing house, and probably the first book of his in which all the characteristics of the best Gómez de la Serna can be found full blown. On the surface, the book consists of the observation and description of everyday reality, as following the example of a well established tradition among realist writers. But its originality resides in the process: the dissection of reality in a myriad of separate items and its subsequent re-construction through unexpected connections under the form of humoristic metaphors and images of an experimental nature, akin to all the "isms" of what we know as the historical avant-gardes of the 1920's and 1930's. This combination of experimentalism and tradition is mirrored by the content of most of his works, halfway between a *casticismo*, or depiction of national habits and mores and a certain superficial cosmopolitanism.

This second period of Ramón Gómez de la Serna covers roughly the years of 1915-1936, although the central years should be those between 1923 and 1932. This period is characterised by a relative success in the literary world, a success that should be measured more in terms of the visibility and kind of influence proper to a contemporary "celebrity" than by the number of sold copies of his novels and other books. He succeeded in transforming himself, through his constant presence in the press, in a sort of literary brand, epitomised by his signature, "RAMÓN", in capital letters, as if he was emulating those lit signs for advertising products in the emerging capitalist and consumerist society of the Madrid of the 1920's. Indeed, Ramón, as he has been known since then,

behaved like a literary company, providing the market, inundating the market, with a constant flow of literary products, especially through his collaborations in the Madrilenian newspaper *El Día*, and then later *La Tribuna*, and *El Liberal*. His high productivity was probably directly proportional to the ephemeral nature of his output. He was admired by the selected few and at the same time disregarded as a humourist, as a provider of non playful metaphors, or absurdist novels by the many. In a way he tried to bridge the distance between his populist aims (he constantly sought notoriety, success, public acclaim) and a rigorous linguistic and literary experimentation. His main tool for this purpose was an invention of his own, his most successful, the “greguería”, a sort of literary micro-genre, that he defined as “humor + metáfora”, somewhere between a maxim, without its moralism, and pure gratuitous linguistic experimentation, almost of a poetic nature. He published greguerías by the thousands, serialised in articles, but also as part of his novels and other miscellaneous texts. At times it seems that his attempts at cultivating all kind of literary genres, especially novels, are nothing but different ways for finding new outlets for his most famous product, the “greguerías”. Precisely, his gravitation towards the novel is part of an attempt of finding a greater success (and literary recognition), especially in relation to his collection of miscellaneous books, made after the accumulation of “greguerías” and variations of that fragmentary vision of the world that he named as “caprichos”, “gollerías”, “trampantojos”, etc. In our opinion, though, it is in these books (*Muestrario*, *El libro nuevo*, *Pombo*, etc.), decorated with his characteristic drawings, more than in his novels, where we can find the best manifestations of the originality of Ramón’s aesthetic project. True to his motto of 1909 (“Oh, si llega la imposibilidad de deshacer”), the cubist need for dismantling and reorganising reality through his proto-surreal capacity of vision breaks in this books all limits and literary preconceptions in order to create his own “-ism”: the “ramonismo”.

In any case, he progressively found himself in an impossible situation, in part brought upon by himself, in which his incessant production earned him a notoriety that at the same time undermined not only his reputation and credibility as a serious writer, but fundamentally his attempts at creating a perdurable work of art. Hence his retirements to Italy (Naples), Paris and Portugal (Estoril), in search for the peace that could afford him the time and concentration for proving his value as a true artist. For different reasons, among them economic reasons, since he refused any other income than what was resulting from his literary production, those stays were always brief, and he ended up returning to Spain, continuing his feverish activity.

Among the myriad of literary articles he produced, he had the time to write some remarkable novels and other unclassifiable texts. *El novelista*, *El incongruente*, *La Quinta de Palmyra*, *La mujer de ámbar* are among his best novels. Another aspect inseparable from his artistic activity, but also close to the role of public relations, was his constant campaign as a curious cultural agitator. Through his public lectures (somewhere between happenings and literary improvisations), his “tertulia”, or gathering of intellectuals (maintained with more or less continuity since 1915 until 1936 in the Café Pombo in Madrid), and the banquets he offered as homages to notorious and relevant figures of Spanish culture, he tried to secure himself a place in the cultural world. His efforts paid off, partially (again): by the time the younger poets and novelists of the generation of 1927, notoriously Federico García Lorca, were gaining recognition and even success, they all paid respect to Ramón as the “precursor” innovator and moderniser of Spanish literature (alongside with Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Antonio Machado). Indeed, the signature of RAMÓN was present in practically all of those short-lived journals that erupted at the time, promoted by the new names, and more importantly, he was a household name in the three most important cultural magazines of the 1920’s and 1930’s, *La Gaceta Literaria* (directed by Ernesto Giménez Caballero), *Revista de Occidente* (directed by José Ortega y Gasset) and *Cruz y Raya* (directed by José Bergamín). Precisely, an important role in this recognition should be attributed to the support of the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, whose intellectual leadership was also recognised by the new generation of writers. The connection between Ramón and Ortega goes beyond the latter’s aesthetic validation of Ramón’s literature. Through Ortega, who was the intellectual and political inspiration for the cultural enterprises of Nicolás María de Urgoiti, Gómez de la Serna found open to him, almost on a

daily basis, the different newspapers that Urgoiti promoted through the 1920's and until the first years of the Second Republic. In *El Sol*, the best and probably most influential newspaper of its time, and later in *Crisol*, *Luz*, *La Voz* and *Claridad* Ramón found the perfect outlet for his journalism. To all of this we must add international recognition and fame, especially through France and the devotion of the French Hispanist Valéry Larbaud, translator and introducer of Ramón to the Parisian cultural world. Ramón also enjoyed a certain amount of recognition in Latin America, especially in Buenos Aires. Jorge Luis Borges, Macedonio Fernández, Norah Borges and others demanded his presence in Argentina and celebrated him when he finally visited the country for the first time in 1930. He returned again in 1931; by then he was already living together in Madrid with the Argentinian writer Luisa Sofovich, his second stable companion, whom he married much later. But this national and international recognition did not arrive at Ramón without a bitter downside. He still needed to maintain a copious journalistic output, augmented by an important number of biographies, a genre he practised since the 1920's and later in exile in Argentina, with dedication and originality as his biographies of Goya and El Greco, among many others, could attest. In addition, and more importantly, especially during the first years of the Second Republic, Ramón found himself in an unexpected situation. For many years, Ramón experienced hostility towards his literature. His was a single-handed battle for modernity and innovation. And even if this could not be entirely true, even if others were in that front, it is also nonetheless true that he enjoyed and contributed to that image to the point that he truly adopted it as his own identity. It is from these heroic years (until he started publishing in *El Sol*, from 1923 onwards) that the cliché of Ramón as a “unipersonal generation” stems. But by the late twenties and early thirties, what in, say, 1915, was outrageous and groundbreaking, was actually the common currency among many young avant-gardist writers who were received with more attention than he ever received. They were succeeding without having paid for years with the heroic faith in the new that Ramón maintained intact. The turbulences of the Second Republic aggravated this feeling of being displaced by those he considered “opportunists”. The political instability did not favour Ramón's aesthetics. The radicalisation of the Second Republic, the unreconcilable antagonisms affected deeply Ramón, as well as the failure of Urgoiti's cultural enterprises. Ramón, in spite of his radical youth, was nothing but a liberal (moderately progressive) bourgeois, that needed stability, political and economic, a stability that could secure, in its turn, his mode of continuous production and his vision of the world, governed by an optimistic faith in progress and material development. His apparent lack of interest in politics (albeit he seconded Ortega y Gasset in his initial hopes for the Second Republic) did not play in his favour by the mid-thirties. In any case, he refused to change his “pure” literary approach to reality. In 1935, though, he depicted in his contribution for the *Literary Almanac* of *La Gaceta Literaria*, an apocalyptic political and social atmosphere.

The outbreak of the war terrorised Ramón, trapped in Madrid. He initially supported the Republic (prompted by José Bergamín, a catholic, a communist sympathiser and a friend from the heroic times). Ramón finally managed to escape Madrid with the excuse of attending a conference of the Pen Club in Buenos Aires. It has been said that when he arrived in the harbour he saluted alternatively raising his fist and extending flat his palm, probably not sure about who were welcoming him, Francoist sympathisers or supporters of the Republic. This confusion reveals the state of shock of a writer who saw how his natural cultural habitat disappeared or was taken away from him by a war whose roots and causes he probably was not capable to fully understand.

The final part of Ramón's life is not sufficiently known. His own autobiographical accounts, starting with *Automoribundia* (1948), his last masterpiece, and later *Nuevas páginas de mi vida*, and *Cartas a mí mismo*, reveal an isolated life, surrounded by a few friends, equally dedicated to literature, writing ten hours a day, always during the night as he did since his beginnings, and with the only constant company of who finally became his wife Luisa Sofovich. He returned to Spain in 1949. And although he manifested his support for Franco, almost since the start of his exile, his visit was a failure. He never returned and died in exile in 1963. This last period covers almost three decades and it is not exempt of brilliant examples of a mature, “rehumanised” Ramón, more interested at last in reflecting the human anguishes and fears in front of the uncertainties of life,

death, the dangers of technological progress, wars and other miseries. And yet, it is considered a period of decadence, where the audacities and irreverences of the past (notably the sexual and erotic content of many of his novels) are substituted by a certain conservatism and fear of God not present until then (although there are multiples examples of ascetic meditations on death in earlier works, notably in *Los muertos, las muertas y otras fantasmagorías*, from 1935). But we feel that this vision is not doing justice to Ramón's life and works. For once, we need to know more about his multiple collaborations in newspapers in Argentina, and other Latin-American countries, and about his cultural activities during that long period. It is true that he dedicated most of the decade of the 1940's to reeditions of his old novels, but at the same time he wrote *El hombre perdido* (1947), one of his best novels, managing to add to the "usual" ingredients of "ramonismo" a very personal and desperate take on "existentialist" themes. Ramón seemed conscious of this progressive exhaustion of his creative energies. In this sense, *El hombre perdido* is perhaps, if we don't count his autobiographical writing, at the same time his last important artistic effort and his aesthetic testament. It is very significant, in this sense, that he decides, retrospectively, if we can say it this way, to pair this novel with *El novelista*, from 1924 and *Rebeca*, from 1936, to form a trilogy that he labels as the "novelas de la nebulosa". With this trilogy it seems he is trying to build a continuity and a coherence in his own artistic corpus (when ironically, at the same time, many of his works lack that coherence). His drive for innovation decreased in favour of the repetition of formulas that by the late forties and fifties looked certainly outdated. In contrast, his autobiographical writing, a tendency in Ramón since the beginning of his career (see *El libro mudo*, *Morbideces* and *Mi autobiografía*) flourishes in exile with the already mentioned *Automoribundia* and other works. Fortunately, this essential book from 1948 has received a well-deserved attention by the critics and it is unanimously considered, and not just by the specialists in Ramón, as one of the true masterpieces or Spanish contemporary life-writing.

No doubt his support for Francoism has detracted Ramón from the consideration that other writers of his time had obtained. Indeed, a detailed study of the political evolution of Ramón's thinking, and not just in relation to this last period of his life, is another area of his biography that needs to be written and researched in more depth and detail. Although this is not the only relatively unknown aspect of Ramón's life. A true biography of Ramón is still needed, since there is a paradox that crosses his life and even his literature. An expert in self-advertising like Ramón, he did not only hide his life behind his mask of an extravagant writer, he manipulated events and facts, precisely at the service of the different needs of his literary career. As a result, Ramón life is a collection of brilliant anecdotes and shadows.

But as we just wrote, a similar paradox traverses his literary production. For such an eventful, successful and problematic life and prolific literary career, one always remains with a final impression about Ramón, as disappointing as his own assertion, repeated here and there in his autobiographical writings: "I have never written a book". Indeed, he wrote an immense amount of pages, and yet, it is difficult to point out his definitive work, his *Regenta*, his *Fortunata y Jacinta*, his *La Colmena*. Paradoxically, everybody interested in twentieth century Spanish literature knows Ramón, but nobody seems to have actually read him, or very few. Indeed with this website we seem to increase the size of this paradox, adding even more texts to the already existing endless ocean of "ramonismo". But what we are trying to provide here is a coherent context that could contribute to making Ramón accessible to all and truly known at last.

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