

Ramón Gómez de la Serna's greguerías: futurist aesthetics and the re-emergence of the fragment

Las greguerías de Ramón Gómez de la Serna: la estética futurista y el resurgimiento del fragmento

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ABSTRACT

Ramón Gómez is known for his innovative short form of prose poetry, denominated "Greguerías." *Greguería* could be described best as a certain kind of aphorism, a one-liner comic joke; also similar to wordplay, and occasionally, to mini philosophical annotations on life. Furthermore, De la Serna is considered the father of the *Greguería*, since he used it for the very first time at the beginning of 1910. After its appearance, this literary form became very popular and spread as a rhetorical and stylistic device within Spanish and Latin American literature. The *Greguería* nurtures a cult for the image; specifically, a witty and surprising image.

De la Serna's literary preference was the avant-garde. His book *Ismos* (1931) is dedicated to this movement and it introduced a new term in Spanish dictionary. In it, he defends artistic autonomy and freedom of words. De la Serna found himself at a literary crossroads with regards to the literary currents of his time, but in terms of style, experimentation and narrative technique, the model he chose to work with in *Greguerías* is obviously very close to contemporary short-short stories.

KEYWORDS: De la Serna, fragment, futurist aesthetics, greguería, short short story, minificción.

RESUMEN

Ramón Gómez es conocido por su innovadora forma de poesía breve en prosa, denominada "Greguerías". La greguería podría describirse mejor como un cierto tipo de aforismo, un chiste cómico de una sola línea; también se asemeja a un juego de palabras y, ocasionalmente, a mini anotaciones filosóficas sobre la vida. Además, De la Serna es considerado el padre de la Greguería, ya que la utilizó por primera vez a principios de 1910. Tras su aparición, esta forma literaria se hizo muy popular y se extendió como recurso retórico y estilístico dentro de la literatura española e hispanoamericana. La greguería alimenta el culto a la imagen; en concreto, a una imagen ingeniosa y sorprendente.

La preferencia literaria de De la Serna era la vanguardia. Su libro *Ismos* (1931) está dedicado a este movimiento e introdujo un nuevo término en el diccionario español. En él defiende la autonomía artística y la libertad de las palabras. De la Serna se encontró en una encrucijada literaria con respecto a las corrientes literarias de su tiempo, pero en cuanto al estilo, la experimentación y la técnica narrativa, el modelo que eligió para trabajar en Greguerías está evidentemente muy cerca de los cuentos contemporáneos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: De la Serna; fragmento, estética futurista, greguería, microrrelato, minificción.

1 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and futurist aesthetics in Spain-Spagna veloce e toro futurista¹

The speedy train of Futurism rushed through the Iberian Peninsula precisely thanks to Ramón Gómez de la Serna. Not only did he translate the text Marinetti wrote about Futurism, but he himself also pondered about the fundamental values of the new literature that appeared in the beginning of the XX century.

The magazine where some of the first writing about this new literary current appeared was called *Prometeo* ("Prometheus"), and the articles were regularly published between 1908 and 1912. (Marinetti, 1910: 519-531) Ramón Gómez de la Serna is the one who makes Marinetti known in Spain by publishing his very own translation of "Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo" into Spanish.

The name of the article was "Movimiento intelectual. El futurismo", and even though it wasn't signed by name, its author indubitably was Gómez de la Serna. It was the first time that the readers of Iberian Peninsula had the chance to get in touch with the ideas of Italian Futurism, with the eleven points of the manifest, that is. These can be resumed like this: love for danger, for bravery and rebellion, exaltation of the aggressive attitude, of feverish insomnia, somersault, slap and punch, beauty of speed, praise of the automobile, a man at the wheel as a hero, contempt directed towards the past, glorification of war-the only possible hygiene of the world, militarism and patriotism, destruction of museums, libraries, academies, glorification of the multitudes, of the revolutions, of the vibrant flame of arsenals and shipyards, voracious railway stations, factories, gigantic bridges, steamboats, locomotives and airplanes. (Letzen, 1989: 309)

In 1910, in the same magazine, another manifest appears, named "Proclama futurista a los Españoles", which was also translated by Ramón Gómez de la Serna. The title of this article in Italian was "Contro la Spagna passatista". Marinetti shouts at the Spanish people, inviting them to leave their mystic past behind and open up to the grandiose spectacle of electricity, and to turn away from the cathedral, which symbolizes the clerical dominion, or they shall be buried underneath its ruins. He also insists on progress of agriculture and industry in order to renew a country with a vision of the future, underlining that that task is on the shoulders of politicians, writers and artists. The article appears preceded by a short prologue, written by Gómez de la Serna and signed with pseudonym "Tristan", and it is particularly interesting because it is in consonance with the futurist way, filled with successive interjections in accord with the ideas of the movement:

¡Futurismo! ¡Insurrección! ¡Algarada! ¡Festejo con música Wagneriana! [...] Violencia sideral! [...] ¡Antiuniversitarismo! [...] ¡Iconoclastia! [...] ¡Voz, fuerza, *volt*, más que verbo! [...] ¡Saludable espectáculo de aeródromo y de pista desorbitada! [...] ¡Gran *galop* sobre las viejas ciudades y sobre los hombres sesudos; sobre todos los palios y sobre la procesión gárrula y grotesca! [...] ¡Simulacro de conquista de la tierra, que nos la da!" (Brihuega, 1979:89)

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The movement of Futurism appears as a strong reaction to post-Rubén Darío Modernism, and is looking for the new forms and contents, the ones that shall be more in consonance with the spirit of the upcoming era, dominated by the technical and scientific progress. It is fascinating, not only because of the cult of machines and speed but also due to the appearance of the idea of “freed words”, and the typographic text arrangement, partially also adopted by Spanish poets

Still, it has to be pointed out that the transcendence of Futurism was different and perhaps a tad slower in Spain in comparison to other European countries such as United Kingdom or pre-soviet Russia, a bit less organized as well. The reason for this can be found in the lack of national identity that was still looking for itself when the derived transformations of the progress arrived in the Iberian Peninsula. (Mancebo Roca, 2006:7)

As far as Ramón Gómez de la Serna is concerned, we can conclude that his own territory in which he wrote and created and was even called *ramonismo*, alluding to the figure of Valle-Inclán at a certain point, was closely linked to the Avant-Garde movement, not only because he was the first to translate the manifest, but because his style, motifs and structure of his opus fit perfectly in Futurism.

A proof of this link lies in his aforementioned book, *Ismo*, published in 1931 and reedited in 2005, formed by various articles that he wrote between the years 1910 and 1939. As Ioana Zlotescu states, this book is an entire era, presided by the dream of *porvenirismo*, and the fight against the past and tradition, which was started by futurists but simultaneously fought by Dadaists and by Surrealists and their *esprit nouveau*. (Zlotescu, 2005:11-26)

Apart from the first phase of Futurism in Spain, that commences the moment the text is published in *Prometeo*, there is a second phase that is to be situated in 1928, which is the year when Marinetti arrives to Spain. The division in two phases is also somewhat aesthetic and politic, since the first period would correspond to the diffusion of aesthetic ideas and the second one had a more political halo glowing around it. (Mancebo Roca, 2006: 8)

2 Visualisation and fragmentism in De la Serna's opus

We have already mentioned above that the works of Ramón Gómez de la Serna are vast and abundant in volume, but at the same time variable in genres and forms employed by the author. It is almost incredible and impossible to imagine that all of those essays, poems, theatre plays, short short stories and aphorisms had been written by one person and under same artistic guidelines, yet it is so. In the following segment of his chapter we shall try to offer a clear cut and reconciled-representation of the variety of elements that comprise his unique style.

One of the fundamentals of the artistic system of Gómez de la Serna is a so called “plastic vision of reality”. This way of defining it leads us to think that its literary discourse lacks of linear narrative and the so-called conceptual zone. Everything De la Serna related entails imagery, plastic and plastic representations. In some of his works, such as *El Rastro*, reality is dutifully transferred to figurative impressions. (Briones, 1986: 282)

Another constitutive component of De la Serna's art is “presence of things”, or as Francisco Ynduráin calls it, “nervio de la obra de Ramón”. To clarify this, it's necessary to say that objects and objects only are not what characterizes the topic of his

writings, but rather his perception of those objects and a certain way in which he “enlivens” them. The items that his focal lens turns toward, are suddenly seen by a reader in a different light as well, and the perceiver of De La Serna’s opus can establish new connections between things, thus discovering new meaning. (Ynduráin, 1969:200).

Such use of de-automatization of the vision of reality, and that constant search of new ties between the being and the non-being had become the basic characteristics of the “new genres” that this author has implemented in his opus, one of them precisely being *la Greguería*. (Rivas, 2006: 39). Inevitably, due to such prism of perceptive thought, two polar opposite stylistic devices emerge in his writing: “personification” and “objectification”. They are, so to speak, two sides of the same coin.

The first one has even led Francisco Umbral to state: “Ramón funciona como los niños y los primitivos, mediante el pensamiento mágico y el animismo” (Umbral, 1978: 255). On occasions, it is eerie how De la Serna performs an authentic psychological characterization of a certain object, which in turn obtains its own personality. Nevertheless, humanized objects are not the only trick the writer has up his sleeve, he also adds a poetic vision in to the game, and a convergent, associative dynamism, that doesn’t necessarily need to be symbolic or metaphoric. (Briones, 1986: 283)

Its polar opposite, objectification, even though both phenomena are convergent, is a presentation of protagonists reduced to objects, such in these two example, one from *El hombre perdido*, and the other one from *La abandonada en el Rastro* (in this one, protagonist eventually dissolves in many objects).

[...] Yo soy una radiografía que salió mal [...] Mas le voy a decir...soy el sillón que ya no sirve para el imposibilitado y la peluca del cómico viejo. (Gómez de la Serna, *El hombre perdido*, 1947: 35)

Se disolvía en sombrero, dentadura postiza, sillón ortopédico, corsé papiro, cabeza de peinadora fracasada, ojos de cristal, cuerpo de prueba modistil, piernas de muestra de sedería y sombrilla colgada de los alambres tendidos como paraguas inocentes. (*La abandonada en el Rastro*), 1929: 283).

Leo Spitzer denominates such way of writing “enumeración caótica” (Spitzer, 1968: 247-291), which maintains concomitances with surrealist writing, since it constantly tries to unveil the Baudelaire-like affinities and connections that lie in the sub consciousness. As F. Ynduráin says, De la Serna “no fue hombre de ideación sistemática, pues procedía por un asociacionismo mental e imaginativo deliberadamente caprichoso”. (Ynduráin, *Prólogo a Museo de reproducciones*, 1980:16).

This general aesthetics affects equally his novelistic genre, his essays, his theatre plays, and it looms above all of their elements, plot, protagonists and atmosphere likewise. Briones states: “Este tipo de relaciones entre las cosas solo es posible merced a su inesperada colisión en la consciencia, gracias, en definitiva, al azar... [...] la acción obedece casi siempre a la impremeditación; no hay necesaria relación causal-consecuencial entre los acontecimientos [...]” (Briones, 1986: 291).

Apart from metaphors, symbols and visualisation of existing connections between the humane and non-humane world, yet another jarring characteristic of our author is the aforementioned fragmentism. The creation of Gómez de la Serna consists of isolated glimpses, sudden, atomized revelations which do not belong in a larger context as subordinate elements. (Briones, 1986: 284).

They rather behave as independent textual unit, preserving a complete autonomy in comparison to the rest of the text and this is why, while reading his novels, one might

be under the “patchwork” impression: element is added upon the element upon the element. Such as it is, we might as well state that discontinuity constitutes one of the most dominant notes of his opus. The most genuine expression of afore-stated fragmentism is *la Greguería*.

3 De La Serna's own invention—*La Greguería*

To state that De la Serna was only an avant-garde creator, would be an utter fallacy. Naturally, it is true that he was devoted to that literary movement, but not in its entirety. At the same time, De la Serna was a man who was inspired by diverse XX century movements, schools and literary tendencies, without actually giving himself over to one of them exclusively.

De la Serna was a connoisseur of Charles Baudelaire and dedicated his biography essay *El desgarrado Baudelaire* (1929, in *Efigies*) to him; I had already stated that Baudelaire can be placed in the very origins of an occidental microfiction, because of his collection called *Petits Poèmes en Prose* (1869). At the same time he dedicated one of his famous essays, *Edgar Poe. El genio de América* (1953) to Edgar Allan Poe, the father of the Anglo-Saxon microfiction (minute story, sudden fiction, Flash Fiction...) because of his tales “Shadow: A Parable”, from 1835, “Silence: A fable” from 1837 and “The Oval Portrait”, from 1842.

Our author was, in a wide sense of the word, a *modernist*, open to all aesthetics novelties in his literary work, which abounds. Apart from being an author of various novels, essays, his own autobiography, translations, he has invented his own genre due to which he became internationally famous, so called: *la greguería*. How is one to define such genre? According to the author himself “humorismo+metáfora=greguería” (Gómez de la Serna, 1962: 35). I will posit that it's hard to outline its features as it is a synthesis of all characteristics or Ramon's literary art, or as Briones would state [...]la cristalización en una fórmula personalísima de una singular manera de concebir la literatura.[...] (Briones, 1986: 285).

A slightly different definition was, yet again, given by the author in the prologue to the 1960 edition of *Greguerías*: “la greguería es el atrevimiento a definir lo que no puede definirse, a capturar lo pasajero, a acertar o a no acertar lo que puede no estar en nadie o puede estar en todos.” (Gómez de la Serna, 1990: 51).

The *Greguerías* do, so to speak, resemble an aphorism, but it's the forcefulness in the strength of an imagery that which separates them. It's a literary manifestation that praises the value of the fragment. At the same time, it is a faithful and visible reflection of a heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings in a modern world. Simultaneously, it represents this non-stop searching for novelty. Gómez de la Serna has referred to his voracity to reach that dream of “Lo Nuevo” with the following words:

Lo Nuevo, en su pureza inicial, en su sorpresa de rasgadura del cielo y del tiempo es para mí la esencia de la vida. Lo nuevo nace más veloz. Hay que emplear hoy dos imágenes cada cinco segundos de escritura para emplear mañana tres en los mismos cinco segundos. Si el nuevo día dijese en qué consiste su novedad, nadie lo comprendería. Lo mejor que tiene es que es nuevo. Esto es lo que revelan las nuevas imágenes. (Gómez de la Serna, 1975: 14-15)

Greguerías were, without a doubt, his most attractive cover letter in the international context. Even though it wasn't always neither well understood nor interpreted, it would find the way to fascinate the readers and the writers likewise. This new genre was the result of the new time, an epoch of modernity and fragmentation. Its constitution is basically metaphoric or, stating more precisely, it establishes an associative/analogous relationship between two notions or two perceptions that we capture with different senses.

Plasticity as a configuring element of *greguería* is evident due to numerous baudelairian correspondences between concrete and material objects. According to Briones, there is a significant number of *greguerías* where the ideas of love, death, fear, life, and the passage of time are expressed via plastic impressions (Briones, 1986: 287)

El miedo es un ratón que se nos mete en el corazón.
Los recuerdos encogen como las camisetas.

Another characteristic of *greguerías* is a protagonism of objects, or so called personification: El huevo nos mira con su pupila interior.

Lloraba de frío la noche.
Las azucenas llevan los guantes a medio poner.

But above all, De La Serna's *Greguerías* are an unavoidable reference to explain the origin of short short stories in Spain, an essential touchstone regarding birth and development of microfiction in Iberian Peninsula. De La Serna published a first volume of *Greguerías* in 1917 which was closely followed by another compilation, *Greguerías selectas* (1919). This was a miscellaneous opus that contained short short stories called "caprichos." In 1925 Don Ramón published a separated volume of "caprichos", named *Caprichos*, and in 1926 he published *Gollerías-230* short prose forms without a narrative linkage.

Antonio Rivas defends that Gómez de la Serna had a fundamental role in establishing the short short story tradition since he experimented with microfiction early on and went on contributing to the popularity of the genre. (Rivas, "Entre el esbozo..." 22). The author, using the fragmentation method, renews the prose form of his age, sort of atomizing it and reducing it into its basic form: an image and a metaphor, a narrative sketch if you will.

In "los caprichos", he also defies rational thought and explores the absurdity, basing his narrative construction on condensation, humour and antirealism. This is why they are a manifestation of a narrative microtextuality, such as modern fable, parable, or anecdote. *Greguerías* are an example of a short short story writing but they aren't short short stories per se since they lack narration: "el género del aforismo y sus derivados, entre los que sin duda debe contarse la *greguería*, especialmente por el empleo continuado de la metáfora, de tanta trascendencia en los poetas del 27, se sitúa habitualmente dentro de las modalidades líricas." (Utrera Torremocha, 1999: 322).

Luis López Molina inserts the concept of *greguería narrativa*. Even though I have just stated that descriptions and humoristic tone are usually predominant in these pseudo short short stories, there are some of them which have more narrative elements and could have freely be named micronarratives/included in anthology of micronarratives:

Por mi parte, para elaborar un corpus de *greguerías narrativas*, he entendido por

narratividad el hecho de que en ellas se cuente una historia, por breve que sea, es decir que haya: 1) un “personaje” soporte (persona, animal u objeto) aunque el autor no tenga tiempo para caracterizarlo; 2) una situación inicial que evolucione hasta otra situación final distinta de aquélla; 3) un factor de cambio que se instala en la base de dicha evolución y que la genera. En una primera aproximación, como es la emprendida aquí, cabe afirmar que la greguería existe en función de este principio y que resulta mayor o menor según su grado de sometimiento a él. (López Molina, 2008: 18)

Luis López Molina illustrates his hypothesis with various examples of narrative greguerías, some of which I shall quote: “Hay cojos con pierna de palo que refloran cuando viene la primavera y se vuelven sátiros”; “El doctor ha llegado (la fiebre, asustada, sube)”; “Cayó el cuchillo del crimen al mar y desde entonces lo surca un pez más afilado que el lenguado y con la cola roja”. (López Molina, 2008: 18).

At the same time, greguería isn't narrative only: in many cases it presents an idea of a lyrical type (Fernández Romero, 1996: 432). Nonetheless, we shall not deal with those due to the fact that the ones written in prose contain a much more evident narrative component and they are closer to the microfiction that is the ultimate result of fragmentation we are aiming at. It was belief of Gómez de la Serna that:

La prosa debe tener más agujeros que ninguna criba y las ideas también. Nada de hacer construcciones de mazacote, ni de piedra, ni del terrible granito que se usaba antes de toda construcción literaria. Todo debe tener en los libros un tono arrancado, desgarrado, troncado, destejido. Hay que hacerlo como dejándose caer, como destrenzando todos los tendones y los nervios, como despeñándose. (Gómez de la Serna, 1962: 25)

Conclusion

From these words and based on the publications De la Serna had between the year 1917, with *Greguerías* and 1925, with the first edition of *Caprichos*, we draw the conclusion of the tremendous originality of a writer way ahead of his time. Apart from the values such as brevity and fragmentism, he introduced a new jovial element of humourism in his creations. Rodenas de Moya points out that his work influenced many young aspiring authors belonging to the posterior literary movements and that even nowadays, he continues to be an authentic reference for many microfiction writers.

Los ejemplos próximos de Juan Ramón y Gómez de la Serna sirvieron de guía y estímulo a los jóvenes escritores. No constituían los únicos paradigmas de la estética de la brevedad, desde luego, pero sí los más inmediatos. Las revistas de la joven literatura recogen muy pronto las escaramuzas con los diversos géneros que, de manera invariable, se materializan en forma de microtextos (Ródenas de Moya, 2008: 99)

One thing is certain: *la greguería* as a newly invented short prose genre is a ground-breaking move and yet another piece that contributes to the belief puzzle of fragmentism. Its existence forces many literary experts to review the conventional literary classifications and to admit the slow but certain dissipation of the firm novel structure into smaller pieces and the upcoming inevitable desire of words to be free and associate themselves with audio and visual content in

order to create new art forms.

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