The Spanish avant-garde
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were in rebellion. Three essays deal with the image of the urban environment that is the essential locus of the avant-garde, examining the idea of modernity in this context and how the social, economic and political world was seen from the avant-garde perspective in Spain. The remaining essays focus on some of the principal figures of the 1920s, Buñuel, Lorca, Alberti and Cernuda, who represent the moment when the avant-garde comes to full fruition as a result of the horizon-squaring synthesis of romantic ethics and revolutionary modes of expression.

Notes

2 G. de Torre, 'Aviograma', in Gullón, Poesía, p. 137.
3 A. del Valle, 'Signo celeste', in Gullón, Poesía, p. 143.
5 V. Aleixandre, 'Blancura', Espadas como labios. La destrucción o el amor, Madrid, 1972, p. 106.

2 / Ramón Gómez de la Serna's oxymoronic historiography of the Spanish avant-garde

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Ramón Gómez de la Serna, the founding father of the Spanish avant-garde, produced his own highly personalised account of the European avant-garde under the succinct title Isms, although many of the 'isms' included are of his own designation, like Archipénkism. As historiography Isms is a work as idiosyncratic as its author, a singular work set apart from a context of artistic and literary histories in Spain that was already quite substantial by the time Ramón's book appeared in 1931. The year 1925 had seen the publication of two fundamental critical works, Ortega y...
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Gasset's *The Dehumanisation of Art and European Avant-garde Literatures* by Guillermo de Torre. Many articles have appeared, especially in Ortega's magazine, the *Revista de Occidente*, from 1923 onwards, as well as several books dealing with the avant-garde in both literature and art. Gabriel García Maroto's *The New Spain* 1930 is a curious attempt to develop a utopian 'policy of aesthetic education'. The translation of Franz Roh's *Magic Realism* popularised the ideas of 'New Objectivity', introducing this late version of expressionism into the Spanish avant-garde context where it had been relatively uncommon. Ernesto Giménez Caballero's *Posters* inspired by the practices of futurism, promoted the propagandising power of the advertising poster, while José Díaz Fernández's *The New Romanticism* challenged many of Ortega's ideas from a perspective of left-wing political commitment. In this context *Isms* is a history which is not a history, a case of oxymoronic historiography synthesising a series of paradoxes which shaped the development of the avant-garde in Spain.¹

Gómez de la Serna had always been both a central and an eccentric figure, defining himself in *Isms* with this trenchant statement: 'what I call "Ramónism" has always fought against categorisation, and in Spain I always maintained a position as an outsider in my outsider's novel'.² In his reply to the survey of a broad range of writers organised by *La Gaceta Literaria*, the central magazine of the avant-garde, seeking to find an answer to the question 'What is the avant-garde?', he makes a strong defence: 'I will die admiring that word; those who are offended by it will never make me feel ashamed of its meaning. I am sorry that my friends are weakening their resolve; but I remain an enemy of my enemies, I despise them, I spit on them'.³ With these words Ramón distanced himself from the acceptance of tradition by the 'young literature', while at the same time giving his declaration a defensive ring, like a swan song of avant-garde purity, which sets him apart from any socially committed aesthetic. In 1935 he declared his dissatisfaction with the contemporary situation in no uncertain terms: 'I am about to close Pombo... tonight there were too many commies, including some with self-indulgent expressions and a detestable way of siding up to each other'.⁴ This is clearly a symbolic gesture when one realises that the Café de Pombo, from where he had issued in 1915 the 'First Proclamation from Pombo', one of the earliest avant-garde manifestos in Spain, was one of the places where Ramón experimented with the fusion of life and art. It was one of the places which contained his particular conception of avant-garde activity alongside a *fin de siècle* bohemianism and the Hispanic *tertulia*, a place which Ortega described in 1921 as the 'last barricade' of liberalism, beyond which lay the restoration 'of hierarchies, discipline and rules'.⁵ Ramón, whose attitudes had come to be concentrated exclusively on artistic revolution, totally ignoring their prehistory which had anarchist and Marxist sympathies,⁶ had no wish to see hierarchies restored, although his continuing involvement with the origin of these attitudes in turn-of-the-century vitalism led him to defend in *Isms* the far from liberal surrealism.⁷

These attempts to strike a difficult balance indicate that Gómez de la Serna's situation cannot be successfully explained, as has been the case, by categorising him as a unique, gigantic figure. His 'Ramónism' is, in fact, part of an attempt to establish an aesthetic modernism in the difficult, confused context of the early years of this century in Spain. From Hispanic *modernismo* came his scorn for what he termed the gregarious 'Belgian spirit' of the 'littérateurs d'avant-garde', like Baudelaire. Ramón, it must be remembered, had refused to become the leader of ultramism. From *modernismo* too came his adoption of the image of the isolated dandy who defends the Ivory Tower, which in his case was a real tower as well as a symbolic one, where he had accumulated a mythical collection of objects that related him both to the decadent Des Esseintes and to the avantgardist Kurt Schwitters.⁸ The avant-garde counterbalance to aestheticism is also found in his adaptation of the futurist concept of the manifesto: he had had installed in the tower in 1930 a microphone so that he could broadcast via the Union Radio company.⁹

Like other authors at the turn of the century he was subjected to the slavery of journalism¹⁰ and like the members of the Generations of 1914 and 1927, he was a traveller. In Paris he took up a position between the Bohemia of the *modernista* Alejandro Sawa, who had once been kissed on the forehead by Victor Hugo and had not washed his face since, and the 'provincial' cosmopolitanism of the two most intellectual members of the 'Generation of 1927, Jorge Guillén and Pedro Salinas, who both held language assistantships at the Sorbonne.¹¹ Not since the days
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of Blasco Ibáñez, the author of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, had a Spanish writer enjoyed such fame in Europe. Valéry Larbaud wrote: 'Ramón's window, lit up in the dawn, there in Madrid, shines like a beacon on the prow of the ship of Europe'.12 His first visit to Paris, in 1910, opened his eyes to avantgarde visual art (in contrast Ortega's favourite painter was the genre painter Zuloaga), and his final visit gave birth to the idea of publishing Isms.13

A history of the avant-garde, and above all one written by an active participant presents a basic paradox: to what extent is it possible to write a history of the new? Ramón's Isms, in fact, centres around the contradiction between history and the avant-garde, as studied by Paul de Man and exemplified in the paradox produced by Baudelaire who, when writing about Constantin Guys, the 'painter of modern life', attributed to him the need to submerge himself in the 'memory of the present'.14 Ramón sets about this task at the start of the book by praising 'the new', in accord with the path he mapped out around 1909 in his book My Seven Words, when he decided that his attitude towards the world should be one of constant vigilance to ensure his ability to 'unmake' all those things which had become petrified. This attitude was further developed through the cultivation of a personal myth of a Robinson Crusoe, like a child alone in a kaleidoscopic world saturated with so many things to see, provoking the excitement of the discovering genius who 'has the ability to reveal the hidden aspects of the visible world'.15 This revelation is not achieved through the process of analogy the symbolists used, conjuring an essence behind appearances, but rather through the simple establishment of an 'inventory' of reality which itself assumes an 'oneric' character, as Walter Benjamin noted in his 1927 review of the French translation of Ramón's The Circus.16 Also, the 'new' here relates to a subject with which Ramón was totally in tune, unlike most of his compatriots, and in which he considered himself to be a part rather than an intermediary: 'I lived before the new forms of art and literature were born, and I was in the closest relationship with them afterwards', as he says in the opening sentence of the prologue to Isms. This attitude is the result of a personal interpretation that places the text between the projection of the self on to the world and the annulment of self when faced with the spectacle of the world.17

From this point of departure the organisation of the book, like many others by Gómez de la Serna, becomes a catalogue or a topography. Borges had noted in 1925:

Ramón has made an inventory of the world, filling the pages not with exemplary acts of human adventures as is common in poetry, but rather he anxiously describes each of those things which when placed together form the world. Such an abundance is not in harmony nor can it be simplified through synthesis, it is closer to the cosmorama or the atlas than the total vision of life so sought after by theologians and creators of systems.18

In the case of Isms, the catalogue seeks to establish simultaneous connections between different genres. The essays on individual authors and artists establish an initial connection with biography, so much so that Isms becomes the successor to Effigies of 1929; which described Ruskin, Baudelaire, Barbery, Villiers and Nerval, that is writers who are precisely the precursors of modernism. There is also an overlap with autobiography and personal testimony: only the portrait of Toulouse-Lautrec is included among those regarded as precursors, because Apollinaire, Picasso, Marinetti, Lipchitz, Lhote, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Marie Laurencin, Rivera and Cocteau are all considered to be Ramón's acquaintances. Only Archipenko, Léger, Ozefant and Jeanneret are held to be outside his personal circle.

In addition, the book comprises an inventory of his own personal aesthetic preferences, since its twenty-five 'isms' are framed by the prologue on 'the new', a long theoretical article on 'humourism' towards the centre, in fifteenth place, and by the shorter 'novelism' in penultimate place. At the same time, on the level of rhetorical 'elocutio', the position he adopts is directly connected with the greguería, that bond which holds all of Ramón's work together, since 'humour is something that looks to the future, throwing everything into the melting-pot, slightly easing apart the connecting links in the cosmos, softening them through paradox, making them confused, turning them head over heels' (p. 199). This is described as a 'vital function' which reveals the 'family-links between all things' (p. 202), and which in Spain
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'has the function of making you accept death' (p. 217). The greguería is like a compass rose whose tendency to become caricature, as Cansinos-Assens observed in 1918, can lead it into biography. In 1935 Pedro Salinas defined the gregueria as 'a sudden brief revelation which by virtue of an unexpected mode of relating ideas or objects, illuminates a new way of seeing things'.

This links with the analogic tradition of modern writing, or what César Nicolás describes as the interaction of metonymic metaphors and metaphorical metonyms that can be extended to infinity, and which connects with the irony that is also an ingredient of the modern. Some of the isms dealt with ('Negroism', 'Jazzbandism') either resolve themselves or dissolve themselves into a series of greguerías, and this condition of fragmentary writing extends throughout the book, making it into an avant-garde exercise in avant-garde writing, where the idea of organic unity is undermined by the metonymic nature of the greguería, which creates a dominance of objects over people and of fragments over the whole that, in Walter Benjamin's view, sets the allegory of the baroque and the avant-garde in opposition to the symbol of romanticism and symbolism.

This attitude also brings the way in which the greguería is constructed close to that of the collage, where the objects (or textual fragments) from different sources are held together in their difference so forcing the reader or spectator 'to consider the interplay between preexisting message or material and the new artistic composition that results from the graft'. As a result Ramón's book becomes a double collage: that of the specific objects referred to in the text, and that of the coexistence of the successive 'isms'.

The constellation of the 'isms' Ramón has assembled is not totally arbitrary, the omissions are as important as the inclusions, most especially the omission of expressionism and of the Spanish movements; neither Huidobro, ultrazim nor creationism are included. The distinguished linguist, Roman Jakobson has linked the predominance of the metonym with cubist representation and cubism occupies the lion's share of this book. Apollinaireism (with the fundamental intertextual notion of the antimimetic crusade in The Cubist Painters) which exalts the simultaneity of the world, Picassoism (two essays published earlier, in 1924 and 1929) which caused, 'the donkey-like certainty of painters who only look and copy and look and copy to be destabilised for ever', and seraphism (about Cocteau), are all concerned with the area of cubism and postcubism. In turn, this is extended, as though in concentric circles, to Africanism, with the view that African sculptures should be the 'backbone of modern art' (p. 127), to Archipenkism and Lichitizm (about the cubist sculptors), nymphism (about the painter Marie Laurencin), Lhotism (André Lhote provided 'Cubism's bourgeois studio'), tubularism (Fernand Léger), and bottleism (the 'purists' Ozenfant and Jeanneret). Riveraism is about Diego Rivera and cubist 'neopostraitism': 'if there is one thing in us which is allegorical, it is contained in these cubist portraits' (p. 338), and simultaneism, is concerned with the Delaunays, whose art praises industry and the everyday: 'Delaunay's influence is already in the street, but no longer abandoned as a thing ignored by most people as it was in those Sundays of another age, but instead it is on fences, in shop windows and on façades, triumphant in the new magazines' (p. 175).

4. Maruja Mallo: Easter Fair, c. 1927. Oil on canvas
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This last 'ism' provides a link between the cubists and postcubist figure painting and another innovative sequence concerning the diffusion of the new aesthetic and the changes in perception it causes. This sequence reveals a sensibility curiously similar to that of Walter Benjamin; Ramón states at the beginning of the book: 'more than moral propaganda, what has-influenced life and habits - which most urgently need to be set free - has been advances in fabrics, lighting, furniture, pictures, literary genres' (p. 13). Luminism concerns new lamps and new light: 'new lamps are like a humorous reconstruction of broken lamps, reflecting the architecture of modern streets, evoking the accelerated development of all new things, balconies like illuminated ocean liners, the sense of brave straight lines which do not resolve into decorative symmetries but rather separate out into flights of steps of different sizes which make anyone who climbs them stay alert' (p. 139). Klaxonism is about car-horns, shelfish about new furniture, then there is monstrousism, machinism, jazzbandism and Chaplinism.

The other historical isms are set apart from these sequences. At the head is futurism, although Ramón is careful to distinguish 'the essential Marinetti... who began to shout wildly over twenty years ago' (p. 112) from the Marinetti at the time of the First World War who began to 'say conservative things about the stock idea of heroism that is greeted with official blessings' (p. 117). Then came dadaism, considered in a favourable light and ending with an exaltation for 'Tzara alone' (p. 255), followed by the long, admiring essay on superrealism, as surrealism was called then in Spain, which 'gives a shining light that nobody will be able to extinguish' (p. 264). Ramón values the subversive nature of surrealism, although in a very particular manner and in relation to the contemporary situation of Spain: 'the art this movement produces is one that it is hard to smile at. All the atmosphere of student revolt, the suicides and the most reckless acts of today's youth are acts of superrealism. They should be so in all their purity and thus should not let themselves be caught up in the game of political change mounted by a confused bourgeois and vulgar radicals' (p. 288). He also values the opening up of the unconscious and the idea of evasive poetry which Lorca at the time had adopted as an aesthetic emblem: 'Breton and his followers seek evasion, a word heavy with longing, which they present to today's youth suffocated by a stupidly bourgeois world. For them, the real meaning of

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a poem, its greatest triumph, lies in the extent to which it is evasive poetry and in its ability to enable the human soul to experience evasion' (p. 272). He finishes his essay with a 'practical explanation' in which he attacks the 'bourgeois prattle which puts everything in order' (p. 290) and he affirms that 'the only truth worth paying attention to is the latest one' (p. 293). However, he is dealing with an intercalated story, The Surrealist Son, that makes the task of narrating the history of avant-garde art, as he says, sufficiently 'undone'. For the reader, after so many paradoxes, this is particularly pertinent to Ramón's way of narrating the great spectacle of artistic innovation in the twentieth century.

This paradoxical history is, at the same time, involved in other paradoxes like the proliferation of essays and interpretations by Spanish writers relating to the avant-garde compared to the seemingly limited production of the native Spanish avant-garde itself. This imbalance of critical and creative activity is a product of the way modernism, in all its different aspects and characteristics, was introduced into Spain, providing an example of Matei Calinescu's view that aesthetic modernism is both an integral part and also an enemy of modernisation.24 The arrival of modernism in a Spain that was still in many respects premodern, involved a fairly rapid acquisition of all the sometimes confusing elements of modernism while, with some difficulty, synthesising and absorbing modernism's nineteenth-century aesthetic, decadent and symbolist prehistory, together with the philosophical background in positivism, Nietzschean vitalism and religious modernism.

The complex impact of the dialectics of modernism in Spain can be seen in the intellectual confrontation between Ortega and Unamuno in the years leading up to 1909. As a reaction against the 'wildness' of the turn-of-the-century mentality represented by Unamuno, the later generation of Ortega defended the entry into Europe with their faith in reason and technology, and the need to educate a minority of specialists to face the twentieth century in all its complexity.25 At the same time, through Gómez de la Serna's translation of Marinetti's manifesto in 1909, futurism, and with it the European avant-garde, was brought into Spain. From this moment the history of the reception of the avant-garde follows a rising curve that leads to the establishment of the first native avant-garde movement, ultraism, that flourished briefly between 1918 and 1921. But from 1922 onwards, with the exception of
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writers associated with the adaptation of literary cubism known as creationism, there is a notable imbalance between the abundance of theoretical information being disseminated and the limited production of avant-garde writing. This is a result of the dominance of the pedagogical, modernising attitudes of Ortega’s generation who wanted, in another paradox, to create a ‘constructive avant-garde’, in which the assimilation of formalist aesthetics, especially cubism, took primacy over militant subversion. These attitudes helped to establish a free, uncommitted dialogue between the ‘avant-garde’ and the ‘young literature’ (later known as the Generation of 1927), which came to occupy the centre-stage of the Spanish literary world in the mid-1920s, and saw itself more in the light of Ortega’s concept of a minority than as a militant group, although this is how it was seen from ‘outside’. The Generation of 1927 also contributed to this paradoxical dialogue their very characteristic and striking willingness to accept almost the whole of the literary tradition of Spain, which they absorbed into their espousal of a purified form of symbolism.

La Gaceta Literaria’s survey on the avant-garde reveals that something called the avant-garde was still perceived to be in existence at that time, although as a phenomenon that had completed its life-cycle. Subsequently the avant-garde underwent a new crisis of assimilation into modernism when some members of the literary minorities reacted against the intellectual climate in which they had been raised by turning to irrationality and a resurgence of romantic attitudes arising from surrealism and the left-wing critique of nineteenth-century liberalism. This is the climate of the 1930s in which, to use recent critical terminology, some members of the ‘young literature’ stopped being ‘modernists’ to become ‘avantgardists’ whose militancy was ‘directed towards changing the institution of art’. Some striking examples of this can be found in the statements of poetics which the youngest members of the group contributed to Gerardo Diego’s Anthology (1932), especially the attacks by Luis Cernuda and Vicente Aleixandre on ‘pure poetry’. This is then a very complex context in which diverse strands of ‘the new’ are expressed in hybridised forms created by the specific circumstances of the way the avant-garde was received in the Iberian Peninsula. This is the source of the originality of Ramón

Notes

1 The first edition of Ismos, Madrid, 1931, was augmented in subsequent editions. Page references, bracketed in the text, are to the most recent edition, Madrid, 1975. The references to other works mentioned in this paragraph are as follows: J. Ortega y Gasset, La Deshumanización del Arte, Madrid, 1925 (English translation, The Dehumanization of Art, New York, 1972); G. de Torre, Literaturas europeas de vanguardia, Madrid, 1925 (2nd and subsequent editions were much changed, the latest edition is Madrid, 1965); G. García Maroto, La Nueva España 1930, Madrid, 1927; F. Roh, Realismo mágico, Madrid, 1927; E. Giménez Caballero, Cartas, Madrid, 1932; J. Díaz Fernández, El nuevo romanticismo, Madrid, 1930 (re-edited, Madrid, 1985).


4 A. Soria Olmedo, Vanguardismo y crítica literaria en España, Madrid, 1988, p. 288.

5 ‘Palabras en Pombo’, Ultra, XX, 15 December 1921.


9 G. Gómez de la Serna, Ramón (vida y obra), Madrid, 1963, p. 159.

10 N. Dennis, Studies, p. 18.


16 Critica e recensioni, Milan, 1979, p. 35. See also R. Rossi, Breve storia della letteratura spagnola, Milan, 1992, p. 162.


18 J. Bonet, Ramón en cuatro entregas, vol. 1, p. 77.
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19 Ibid., p. 36.
27 G. Diego, Poesía española contemporánea (ed.), A. Soria, Madrid, 1991. The most violent statement comes from Cernuda: 'There was no point in my forgetting reality little by little if I were to remember it now and in the presence of such people. I detest reality as I detest everything that belongs to it: my friends, my family, my country. I know nothing, I want nothing, I hope for nothing. And if I could still hope for something, it would only be to die in a place not yet reached by this grotesque civilisation thatbloats humanity with pride.'
28 A version of this article was given at the 45th Annual Kentucky Foreign Language Conference at the University of Kentucky, 1992.

5. Pablo Picasso: Harlequin, 1917. Oil on canvas

3 / The theory of the novel in Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s The Novelist.

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