

Metaphoric Commerce: The *Greguerías novísimas* and Their Circumstance

Juli Highfill is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She has recently edited a collection on the economy of cultural production in Hispanic literature for the Journal of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies. She is the author of Portraits of Excess: Reading Character in the Modern Spanish Novel (Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies 1999) and is currently working on a book manuscript entitled "The Vitality of Things: The Spanish Avant-Garde in Commodity Culture, 1918-1936" where she explores the intersections of economics and literature.

...hubo un momento en que la modernidad habló
por la boca de Gómez de la Serna.
(Octavio Paz 187)

I. Exchanging Things

Consisting of a single sentence or paragraph, a *greguería* is a small epiphany, a brief instant of (mis)perception that brings two or more disparate objects into a surprising, humorous relationship of equivalence; hence, Ramon Gómez de la Serna's succinct definition for his invented genre: "metaphor + humor = *greguería*."¹ Ramón's metaphoric practice is extreme in that it manages to unite remote, seemingly unequivocal terms in a *discordia concors*, or similarity in dissimilars (Cardona 167).² And across thousands of *greguerías*, the sheer quantity of these surprising analogies reaches a critical mass that works to reweave the web of relations among things. By means of this multi-associative capacity, observes Luis López Molina, "seres, objetos, aspectos, actitudes, acciones, funciones y comportamiento se mezclan, encabalgan, interpretan y sustituyen, produciendo las consecuencias más insólitas" (113).

Consider a series of examples, proceeding from simple to more complex metaphorical structures—all drawn from *Novísimas greguerías* (1929)³:

Los canguros son los bolsistas del Parque Zoológico. (107)

El automóvil que se exhibe en pleno relucimiento de aluminio es como una coctelera de las velocidades, las distancias y los peligros. (62)

El volante de automóvil es el atril en que va la novela de lo por ver. (56)

Los relojes eléctricos ponen inyecciones eléctricas al tiempo, ya ca-duco, arterioesclerótico y dispéptico. (102)

In the first three *greguerías*, we find simple, explicit metaphorical structures in which a copula, the verb *ser*, establishes an equivalence between disparate terms. The equation in the first example, likening kangaroos to stock brokers, turns upon a mere pun on the term “bolsista.” The second *greguería* creates a metaphor based on the visual resemblance between a chrome-trimmed automobile and a cocktail shaker. But this visual similarity serves only as a point of departure for a more significant equivalence based on dynamic functions, for the *auto-coctelero* mixes cocktails of velocities, distances and dangers. In the third example, a condensed but equally dynamic *greguería*, a steering wheel is equated with a lectern, which in turn suggests a second metaphor likening the ever-changing road-side to the moving pictures in a reader’s mind. The final more complicated *greguería* dispenses with the copula and leaves the series of equivalencies implicit: electric clocks (as doctors) inject electricity (as medicine) into an aged and sickly Father Time.

Through hundreds of such absurd and ludic equations, the *greguerías* evoke a world gone awry, akin to Bataille’s vision of a “purely parodic” world:

Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a *copula* each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could

discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne’s thread leading thought into its own labyrinth. (5)

Of course with tongue-in-cheek, Bataille is likening copula to copulation, and similarly, Ramón’s *greguerías* exhibit *en masse* a palpable desire for unbridled miscegenistic couplings. Through their countless nonsensical equations, things enter into commerce, swapping properties, trading places, or becoming other things. Ramón argued that an unfettered metaphorical practice was particularly pertinent to the modern age:

La metáfora es, después de todo, la expresión de la relatividad. El hombre moderno es más oscilante que el de ningún otro siglo, y por eso más metafórico. Debe poner una cosa bajo la luz de otra. Contrapesa la importancia de lo magnífico o de lo pobre con otra cosa más grande o más desastrosa.⁴

A modern economy, characterized by commodity exchange, makes relative the values of things, by placing each commodity “bajo la luz de otra.” Hence, Ramón suggests, the modern subject becomes more “oscillating and metaphorical,” able to conceive not only of aesthetic, but also of ontological possibilities created by this generalized exchangeability of things. Ramón’s hyper-metaphoric practice occurs in the context of a generalized mania for metaphor in the European Avant-garde, which appears inextricably linked to the commercial, industrial boom of post-war Europe. This unprecedented expansion of market culture, which began in Spain during World War I, manifested itself in a new proliferation of mass-produced consumer goods made affordable for a growing urban middle class.

The approximately 2,500 *greguerías* in *Novísimas greguerías* (1929) provide an exhaustive inventory of the artifacts of modern life: automobiles, motorcycles, airplanes, electric lights, cinema, typewriters, gramophones, cocktails, X-rays, aspirin, radium, and orthopedic devices. The *greguerías* appear in random order, and the items they register remain utterly uncategorized and dehierarchized. The only thread unifying this vast inventory is the eye of the author and character, “Ramón,” who passes through the streets and fixes his gaze on the dynamic cityscape around him—taking in the traffic, asphalt, gas-pumps, sidewalks, street-lights, neon signs, shop-windows, mannequins, and trolley cars.⁵ With his “ojos trotamundos,” he observes not only the artifacts of modernity, but also its flora and fauna, typically urban wild-life: dogs scratching at doormats, cats run over by cars, swallows whose cries resound like screeching brakes, and trees transformed by headlights into seventeenth-century wigs.⁶ When he observes the human inhabitants of the city-scape, he finds neurasthenic pedestrians sea-sick in an ocean of sidewalks, impatient diner-xylophonists drumming their fingers on the table, women with permanents who emerge from beauty shops dizzy from the waves. Some of the *greguerías*, particularly those written in later decades, treat subjects removed from the immediate urban environment—the beach, food, musical instruments, and letters of the alphabet. However, the majority of those written in the 1920s offer snapshots of city life, as exemplified in the *greguería*: “En los cristales de los coches del ‘Metro’ nos hacemos las fotografías efímeras y tristes que no da tiempo a revelar ni fijar” (61).

According to César Nicolás, “La greguería actúa entonces como una cámara que, al enfocar y ampliar un chispazo in-

stantáneo, produce fotogramas o caricaturas estilizadas de los objetos que evoca” (125).⁷ This photographic technique conforms well with Ramón’s project as stated in his prologue to *Novísimas greguerías*: “Hay que dar una breve periodicidad a la vida, hay que darla su instantaneidad” (3). But far from providing a realist mirror of modern life, Ramón’s photographic eye operates more like a funhouse mirror—distorting, enlarging, or shrinking its objects through bizarre metaphorical couplings—thereby scrambling and rearranging the components of the city-scape.⁸

So while not mimetic in the realist sense, the *greguerías* do display what Walter Benjamin calls a “mimetic faculty,” for they actively mime the techniques and forms of the modern commercial world they inhabit (*Reflections* 333). They take their cues not only from the photographic snapshot, but also from the short, pithy messages of telegraphy and advertisements. Indeed, advertising provides the most striking parallel to the *greguerías*, showing both structural and thematic correspondences. A perusal of the popular magazine *Blanco y Negro* from 1910 to 1940, the hey-day of the *greguerías*, shows how advertising gradually “comes into its own.” In the issues from the nineteen-tens, the ads retain a certain nineteenth-century “look,” with their art-nouveau flourishes and extensive copy. However, in the twenties and thirties, the ads become progressively more stylized and spare, both in their design and text; and during these same decades, the *greguerías* likewise become ever more streamlined. Notice the structural parallels between the following *greguerías* and advertising slogans—all from the 1920s and 1930s:

Biombo: burladero discreto para la indiscreción. (*Flor de greguerías* 88)

Nogat. Producto especial mata-ratas.⁹ (advertisement)

Termos: bala pacífica para los desayunos. (*Flor de greguerías* 136)

Conklin: Dos compañeros leales de la persona inteligente y trabajadora. (advertisement for a fountain pen and mechanical pencil).¹⁰

Sillas de tubo metálico; sillas para esqueletos. (*Greguerías* 113)

Buen reloj y fiel amigo son términos sinónimos. Omega para toda la vida.¹¹ (advertisement)

Buen reloj y fiel amigo son términos sinónimos

Es una gran cosa tener un amigo verdad!... Frecuentemente es una salvaguardia y siempre un consejero. Cuando se sabe hacer la elección, también el reloj es un amigo de todos los días, de toda la vida, una salvaguardia, un consejero y un guía. Si desea usted poseer un reloj perfecto, elija el Omega. Sería para usted el más fiel compañero. No le engañará jamás. La salud del reloj Omega es su leyenda: su exactitud la hizo consagrada por numerosos premios de los Observatorios. Dispuesto siempre a servirle, el reloj Omega será un eficaz colaborador en sus negocios, en los cuales el éxito depende de la puntualidad.

Por otra parte, su elegancia es digna de sus condiciones de exactitud y de solidez. El reloj Omega satisface por su estilo original y por la variedad de sus modelos a todas las exigencias estéticas modernas.

OMEGA
"Para toda la vida"

ANUNCIOS ROLDOS Y CIA

These *greguerías* clearly mimic the standard form of advertising copy—brand name, punctuation mark, and attention-grabbing slogan—while parodying the commercial content.¹²

Moreover, in the ads that refer to a fountain pen and mechanical pencil as “loyal companions,” and a watch as “faithful friend,” we find that most common trope (or trick) employed by commodity aesthetics, the vivification of things—not accidentally, an equally common trope in the *greguerías*. Ramón’s contemporary, Walter Benjamin, observed how commodity aesthetics—with its technologies of marketing, advertising, and display—works to vivify things-for-sale, endowing them with a magnetic power to attract consumers’ displaced desire.¹³ As commodity aesthetics becomes more sophisticated, the old sales patter of the market-place is replaced by the mute appeal of objects in commercial displays. In advertisements, shop windows, and sales counters these products beckon and seduce, silently calling out “buy me.”¹⁴ Like Benjamin, Ramón recognizes that commodity aesthetics endows things with seductive power. Just as Benjamin remarks on how commodity fetishism “is subject to the sex-appeal of the inorganic,” Ramón, in his essay on “Lo cursi,” exclaims, “¡Qué sex-appeal el de todas esas cosas y esas bombas eléctricas!” (697).¹⁵ And his awareness of the techniques of commercial display is evident in the *greguería*:

Es curioso que las etiquetas de cartón de las que pende el precio de los ‘bi-belots,’ siempre vuelven la espalda al que se asoma a los escaparates, como si tuviesen intención comercial, deseo de intrigar al que pasa, obligándole a entrar en la tienda. (24)

Ramón’s many *greguerías* dedicated to shop-windows attest to their significance in the object world of the *flâneur*—in the city-scape. Just as these animated things

promote themselves in shop-windows, so does the *flâneur* promote himself as just another animated product for sale. Benjamin, speaking of the birth of *flânerie* in Baudelaire's time, remarks: "In the flâneur the intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer" (*Reflections* 156). Ramón, as a consummate practitioner of *flânerie*, is also an adept self-promoter who advertises and markets himself as inventor and propagator of "Ramonismo," star of the celebrated *tertulia* in the Pombo, and "public character" celebrated by the Ultraístas as well as by the middle-class readers of *Blanco y Negro*. His publicity stunts include delivering lectures in black-face, or mounted on the back of an elephant, or perched on a circus trapeze. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Ramón keeps himself in the public eye through radio broadcasts, the lecture circuit, and an array of literary and popular publications.

Ramón's literary productivity during this time is no less than astonishing. From 1910 to 1930 he publishes forty books. And although Ramón's claim to have written a grand total of 100,000 *greguerías* is no doubt exaggerated, the sum certainly amounts to between 15,000 and 20,000,¹⁶ leading Adriano del Valle to call him "Mr. Ford de la Greguería" (22). This telling image of Ramón as a one-man assembly line, mass-producing his *greguerías*, in still another sense situates his practice squarely in commodity culture. Not surprisingly, however, Ramón's work-a-day approach to literary output resulted in a devaluation of his work; for his hyper-productivity, his greedy desire to incorporate everything into his works, his inability to prune and polish his exuberant prose—all of these factors have impeded his canonization. He has been punished

as much for engaging in literary mass-production as for promoting himself in the literary market-place. On both counts, he failed to devote attention to maintaining his "symbolic capital," based on prestige and an illusion of artistic autonomy.¹⁷

Nigel Dennis, for example, has argued that Ramón's obsessive, eminently charitable desire "to collect and enshrine anything that caught any of the eyes of that vigilant sponge, from the most moving and expressive dawn to the most prosaic set of false teeth"—inevitably led to repetition and sameness (16). Ramón's "tireless search for and exaltation of the new"—in literature, art, and in technology—ultimately "produced a literary stasis" (10). His embrace of modernity—its fragmentation, transience, its myth of progress—led him to reenact the paradox that the new is always the same. In Benjamin's words, "precisely what is newest doesn't change. [...] It constitutes the eternity of Hell" (qtd. in Buck-Morss 97).

Yet, as we have seen, Benjamin's "Hell of the Same" is Ramón's paradise, for what drives his hyper-metaphoric practice is his ability to posit the most unlikely likenesses among things, thereby leveling values and rearranging the components of the world. In the *greguerías*, Eugenio de Nora remarks:

no se idealiza ni se rebaja el objeto con la comparación (si la hay): todo se nivela, se iguala, todo da igual: la frase surge con la naturalidad de lo que se registra sin valorarlo; la imagen aparece con la indiferencia de la que crearía una máquina que 'recordara' objetos afines por 'memoria' electrónica. (101)

Thus, by surrendering to a principle of equivalence, to the liquidity of exchange value, the *greguerías* simultaneously enact a

“permanent liquidation” of value (102). So of all the ways in which Ramón’s literary practice situates itself in commodity culture—miming the forms and techniques of telegraphy, advertising, commercial display, self-marketing, and mass production—it is his embrace of universal equivalence that most surely connects his work in the booming consumer economy of the 1910s and 1920s.

Benjamin remarked on the profound alteration in perception arising from a “sense of the universal equality of things,” which in modernity has increased to such a degree that it extracts equality even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (*Illuminations* 222). Jonathan Crary, in his study of modern changes in perception, argues that modernity obeys a “logic of the same” that permanently destabilizes traditional forms:

Modernization is a process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which impedes circulation, and makes exchangeable what is singular. (10)

For Crary, money and photography are great levelers, “magical forms that establish a new set of abstract relations between individuals and things and impose those relations as the real”; as a result, “a whole social world is represented and constituted exclusively in signs” (13). Thinking along similar lines, Rosalind Krauss connects early twentieth-century modernism to the abandonment of the gold standard (which, by the way, Spain abandoned earlier—in the mid nineteenth century).¹⁸ Krauss observes “a strange chronological convergence between the rise of the inconvertible token money of

the postwar economy and the birth of the nonreferential aesthetic sign” (6-7).

Such descriptions of modernity and modernism have become common-place, and however exaggerated their claims, they maintain a certain validity.¹⁹ It would follow, then, that Ramón’s gregueristic practice likewise pertains to this “crisis of equivalence” in modernity, that it constitutes one of many responses to the loss of a transcendental signified, be it Gold or God.²⁰ Indeed, in his earliest formulation of the *greguerías* he proclaimed: “Hay que equivalerlo todo y apelmazarlo, agitándolo en un líquido inmenso, ese líquido de agua fuerte, del espacio, del tiempo y del empuje” (“Tristán” 917). What César Nicolas calls the “fe de mundo greguerístico,” a faith in the underlying unity of an atomized world, a unity that permits the untrammelled exchangeability of its component parts, may well take its cues from an economy based on mere faith in currency, an economy characterized by the groundless circulation of merchandise. For clearly, Ramón takes the logic of the same to its logical conclusion and thereby effectively undoes it. He takes “at their word” the principles of equivalence and commensurability that govern symbolic systems—both economic and linguistic—and makes sameness work against itself. Refusing to use the principle of general equivalence to *differentiate* values, as in commodity exchange, he takes it as license to *equalize* values through an unbridled exchange of the properties, places, and operations of things. He thus makes equivalence equivocal to serve his nihilistic project.²¹

It is tempting, then, to align Ramón’s radical practice of “permanent liquidation” with Gianni Vattimo’s later notion of an “accomplished nihilism,” defined as the consumption of being in exchange value. Such

a nihilism would accept, indeed embrace, the late-modern condition in which “Being is completely dissolved in the discursing of value, in the indefinite transformations of universal equivalence” (22). Vattimo sees this yielding to generalized exchange value—“to the peculiar mobility, uncertainty, and permutability of the symbolic”—as our only chance, albeit not without risk; for it depends upon “the way in which we discover how to live it individually and collectively” (26, 28). Such a surrender need not result in greater alienation, within a “wholly administered and regulated society,” but may instead open new possibilities for freedom. The appearance of this possibility in late modernity may arise from the dizzying developments in mass media and technology, which now bring to attention in exaggerated fashion what has always been the case. Vattimo writes:

In the world of generalized exchange-value all is given—as it always was, but now in a more evident and exaggerated fashion—as narration or *récit*. Essentially, this narration is articulated by the mass media, which are inextricably intertwined with the tradition of messages that language brings to us from the past and from other cultures: the mass media thus represent not just an ideological perversion, but rather a vertiginous form of this same tradition. (27)

Perhaps for Ramón, as for other writers, artists and thinkers in his own vertiginous time, the dizzying changes in technology similarly brought such questions and possibilities to the fore; hence their preoccupation with objects, with autonomy of art (or lack thereof), and their policy of free trade in metaphor.

II. Articulating Things

Yet, it does not necessarily follow that the objects that populate the *greguerías*, as they freely engage in metaphorical commerce, are cavorting in an abstract, self-referential field of signification, relatively disengaged from the world. However compelling an alignment of Ramón’s art of “permanent liquidation” with Vattimo’s “accomplished nihilism,” in itself this understanding of the gregueristic project remains incomplete. For while the *greguerías* take full advantage of the “permutability of the symbolic,” they also extend that permutability to the material realm (Vattimo 26). While the *greguerías* assume a radical freedom to equalize and rearrange objects, those “greguerized objects” remain as rhizomically entangled with the objects in the world as with each other. More than all the circumstantial evidence that connects the *greguerías* to commodity culture between the wars, what most surely roots them in their circumstance is that they address the timely and timeless problematic of articulation in all its complexity.

We can trace the etymology of *articulation* from *ars*, to join or to fit, going back through Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, to Indo-European. Interestingly, the term *art*, from the Latin accusative *artem*, meaning skill, shares this same etymology, as does *article*, which derives from the genitive *artus*, meaning a connecting joint, and which later comes to designate a clause, part, portion, composition, as well as the grammatical part of speech. The verb *articulate* derives in turn from the Latin *articulare*, to divide into joints or parts, which gradually acquires additional meanings, “to connect by joints,” “to speak distinctly,” and “to express in words.”²² *Articulation* in all its contexts inhabits the space of *betweenness*, and like

grammatical articles possesses little meaning in itself. Across its semantic field, articulation comprises the activities of connecting, conceptualizing, and creating—thus bridging the posited divide between subject and object, idea and matter, words and world.

It is this divide that the philosopher of science, Bruno Latour, bluntly and mockingly calls into question: he describes how Western thought (at least its dominant strand) posits a surgically removed “brain in a vat” that gazes across a “yawning gap” at a distant objective world (4). It follows that Western thought must depend upon a correspondence theory of truth, by which words mimetically reflect the (ultimately inaccessible) world across that abyss. In his alternate conception, Latour points to the manifold, multiform connections that entangle people, concepts, and things. Rather than a “single vertical abyss” between words and world, Latour’s conception suggests “many differences between them, without anyone knowing *in advance* if these differences are big or small, provisional or definitive, reducible or irreducible” (141). And to designate this complex, vascularized zone of contact between subject and object, language and world, Latour enlists the concept of *articulation*.

Although working as a philosopher of science, seemingly far afield from the topsy-turvy world of the *greguerías*, Latour, like Ramón, wants “to redistribute the capacity of speech between humans and nonhumans,” for nonhuman things likewise *articulate* and indeed *act* upon humans. Moreover, Latour calls attention to the necessary detours in the process of articulation, which involve “displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before” (179). Ramón—that sponge-like *flâneur* who meanders through the modern city, gazing and absorbing—is

above all *articulating* sensory experience, albeit through a simultaneous *disarticulation*, as he undoes and redraws the relations among entities. By getting “carried away” with metaphor in the *greguerías*, by taking circuitous detours as he voices his urban experiences, Ramón displays the complex, vascularized interface between words and world. In other words, he elucidates the articulating process by showing articulation gone awry.

Of course, the term metaphor (in itself metaphorical) means precisely “carrying away,” given that *meta* signifies beyond or away and *phora* means bearing or carrying. Metaphor has always attempted to express the inexpressible through a transfer of meaning from one term to another via a linguistic detour.²³ By virtue of its power to redescribe, metaphor continually breaks and remakes our sense of the world, thus “increasing the referential and transformative capacity of language” (Tilley 14). When words fail us in a given sensory experience, we turn to metaphor to bridge the void of expression and carry the meaning over, by *substituting* something *for* something else. Whenever our understanding of the world, or a piece of it, grows tired or too familiar, metaphor offers a means of semantic innovation; for through disarticulation and rearticulation, it enables us to us to *see* something *as* something else. Metaphor thus works as a binding element in cognition, providing the “connecting joint” in the root meaning of articulation (also a metaphor)—a means of linking subject and object, observer and observed, abstract and concrete, verbal and nonverbal.²⁴ Yet this “connecting joint” of metaphor provides no direct, immediate connection, but rather a circuitous, looping link, what Derrida calls a “metaphorical redoubling, an ellipsis of ellipsis” (243). For the metaphorical substitution that links sign

and sign, depends upon a prior substitution that links sign and referent.

Western philosophy has often conceived of metaphor as a metaphor for our linguistic predicament, because the circuitous detours in the process of signification would seem forever to distance us from the world.²⁵ Paradoxically and tenuously, then, Western thought attempts to resolve this difficulty by conceiving of metaphor in terms of mimesis. As Derrida observes, “the ideal of every language, and in particular of metaphor [is] to bring to knowledge the thing itself”; “the turn of speech will be better if it brings us closer to the thing’s essential or proper truth” (247). We might be tempted then to associate Ramón’s project with that age-old dream of philosophy, for the *greguerías* appear to arise from his intense “ontological desire.” From his first articulations of *greguerías*, and his first theorizations about them in “Tristán” (1911), Ramón passionately advocates communion with solid objects—be it by swallowing them whole, or dancing cheek-to-cheek with them:

Hay que tragárselas abismándolas, no en el paladar ni en el estómago, sino en nuestro hueco, lleno de filtraciones subterráneas y practicado de sótanos corridos hasta no se sabe dónde [...]. Hay que juntar nuestra cabeza y nuestra mejilla con la cabeza y la mejilla de cada una de ellas, porque todas las cosas nos cuestan la vida. (“Tristán” 915)

Ramón continues to express this desire for communion with the object world throughout his works. In perhaps his most concise and complete statement, “Las cosas y ‘el ello’” (1935), he reiterates his “ternura por las cosas,” declares himself “el protector de las cosas,” and in turn sees things as

endowed with redemptive power, insisting, “Las cosas nos salvan” (191, 203).

Yet, although Ramón speaks of finding salvation in things, in “materialidad salvadora y redentora,” his project is not one of the many salvage operations in twentieth-century thought—among them, humanistic Marxism, phenomenology, and analytic philosophy—all of which, contends Vattimo, have sought to recover and preserve a ground free of the logic of permutability that characterizes the symbolic and economic orders (“Tristán” 916). Indeed, Ramón grants to the object world the fluidity and flux of the symbolic order, and, for his theoretical rationale, he turns to the new atomic physics of his time:²⁶

Universos de átomos, con sus electrones, protones y los otros *ones* que se van descubriendo, representan la noche espesa del vivir [...]. La materia de las cosas nos vibra de su sentido. El fanal de cristal tiene un torbellino de vida atómica que no sólo nos ataca en los reflejos como de avenida con faroles en la niebla helada de la noche, sino con la onda extracorta del vibrar de sus átomos. (“Las cosas” 190, 200)

Concerned in this essay about how things *reach* us and enter our subconscious, he repeatedly insists on the reciprocal power of objects upon human subjects. Moreover, he emphasizes that because we are composed of the same particles as are things, we are their kith and kin:

¿Que no somos la cosa? Somos cosa, cosa blanda, con circulación asesinante, con digestión apurada para poder vivir como seres además de como conjunto de átomos. La heterogeneidad de nuestros átomos

hace inestable nuestra vida, pues cuanto más heterogeneidad, más dispersión, más fácil desmorono. ("Las cosas" 203)

Because we too are things, "podemos hermanar con el objeto y su misterio" (190). The heterogeneity of our atoms makes our lives as unstable, heterogeneous, and dispersed as the world of things. Ramón invokes atomic theory to posit a dynamic interpenetration between people and things.

Although Ramón's understanding of physics was no doubt rudimentary, he does not use atomic theory as a simplistic means of perfunctorily dismissing the age-old subject-object gap via a "neo-animism" updated for the modern age. He does not deny the variable distances between observer and observed, words and world, but rather, in his theoretical essays and in the *greguerías*, he grapples with the problematics of that discontinuous continuum between sense and the senses, of words and world. At the far end of subject-object continuum, Ramón locates what he calls the "cosa-cosa" or "objeto"—"por exclusión la cosa inerte, emergente, tosca y verdadera" ("Las cosas" 192). Those distant objects, barely registered and not yet "known," retain their mystery, their independence, as an "América descubierta de las cosas" (201). However, upon being registered, these semi-autonomous objects gradually *emerge*; they approach humans and humans approach them; they join into assemblages with other objects, with humans and their discourse forming what Ramón calls "superposiciones":

Pero las cosas y los objetos no son importantes por sí en último término, sino porque todo el universo es superposición de cosas. Lo que en realidad maravilla al hombre es ver las cosas superpuestas. La super-

posición que consigue en construcciones, en ideas, en fantasías, es lo que cree que le hace trascendente. No ve lo que tiene de superposición toda arquitectura, sino que se embriaga con olvido de eso en la obra acabada. (197)

Ramón's notion of "superposiciones" is not far from Latour's concept of "imbroglios"—those points of intersection and entanglement among discourses, institutions, technologies, and economies. In the *greguerías*, Ramón's hyper-metaphoric practice displays this complex, variegated interface between words and world, exposing the process of articulation as the emergence of an object via multiple relations with other objects. His writings play across the elliptical continuum between senses and sense, showing that the presumed correspondence of words and world is the after-effect of a constitutive process of building connections.

Turning to metaphor in order to articulate this constitutive process, Latour employs the term *signature*: "our definition of existence and reality is extracted, not from a one-to-one correspondence between an isolated statement and a state of affairs, but from the unique signature drawn by associations and substitutions through conceptual space" (161). Each of Ramón's *greguerías* can be regarded one of these unique signatures, a trail of associations and substitutions through conceptual space, often illustrating this process by taking the detours to extremes.²⁷ The following *greguería*—an extravagant instance of catachresis—approaches indecipherability as it complicates the passage from sensation to sense:

En las esquinas de las vías modernas vemos el encenderse y apagarse unos terrones de cristal blanco con que triunfa el adoquín luminoso y con los que muchas veces se suele

hacer lo que con los terrones del café, impregnándolos de una especie de tornasol en licores de color, y se tiñen de rosa y de azul por extraña osmosis de luces. Es dulce esta iluminación; pero ahora corremos otro peligro: el de volvernó diabéticos de luz. (28)

Here Ramón departs from an initial metaphor likening the globes of street-lamps to lumps of sugar, playing not only with the similar circular shape, but also with the homonymical similarity of *terrón* and *tierra*, and adding an extraneous connotation of *globo terráqueo*. This convergence of light and land is further reinforced by the “triumph” of the once drab, now luminous paving-stone, which having absorbed light, now acquires agency. Continuing, Ramón remarks that it is customary to do with these “terrones de cristal” what is done with sugar-lumps: to soak them with colored liquors, thereby tinting them pink and blue by a “strange osmosis of light.” We might presume that Ramón thus extends the initial metaphor by likening the practice of placing colored bulbs in street-lamps to tinting sugar cubes; however, the elliptical detours do not stop there. It is significant that he describes the process of tinting as “impregnándolos de una especie de tornasol.” This term *tornasol*—with its triple meanings of *sunflower*, *iridescence* and *litmus*—in turn causes the metaphorical associations to spin out in distinct but related directions: a sunflower, turning to follow the sun, both absorbs light and projects a sun-like color; iridescence suggests the effect of any phosphorescent substance that gives off light; and litmus is the material applied to paper that absorbs and changes color in chemical tests. By proclaiming in the final sentence—“Es dulce esta iluminación”—Ramón pulls together the two dominant ideas in the

metaphor, sweetness and light. Then in the concluding clause, he suddenly introduces the human subject, using the first person plural to warn us of the danger of absorbing too much of this sweet illumination: we run the risk of becoming diabetics of light. This sensory moment, the perception of colored streetlights, becomes articulated through allusive twists and turns that cause distinct semantic fields to converge—the nocturnal street-scene, coffee-drinking, and the disease of diabetes. The *greguería* also works simultaneously on different registers—the poetic and the everyday—for the everyday absorbs the poetic sublime in a “strange osmosis of light,” just as litmus paper dipped in the urine of a diabetic absorbs the excess sugar and changes color. The spinning out of metaphorical associations in this *greguería* might seem to distance observer from observed through the tangles of discourse. Yet in its thematics, it suggests how the process of articulation inseparably entangles observer and observed, sensation and sense.

The age-old dichotomies of observer and observed, idea and matter—posited and sustained by Western thought—have negated the dynamic, reciprocal interactions through which people and things, as well as things and other things, continually transform each other. The majority of *greguerías* written between 1920 and 1936, like the one just cited, base their extravagant metaphorical exchanges on dynamic rather than static properties: electric clocks give the ailing patient of time injections of electricity; an electric fan shaves the beard of a hot day; neon signs endorse the modern street like a check (102, 18, 24). By basing the equations on dynamic properties, Ramón is able to leap across semantic domains and registers with unparalleled freedom, sometimes producing rather shocking effects:

Cuando en el circo el 'clown' traspasa de un salto el disco de papel de seda, la virginidad de la noche ha quedado rota. (44)

Cuando al automóvil se le enchufa la manga del distribuidor de gasolina parece que se cumple el mandato de un médico que le ha recomendado una irrigación. (48)

Cuando el automóvil aplasta un gato se ven rodar a la cuneta dos ojos luminosos como los gemelos escapados de unos puños. (54)

These *greguerías* (each a slightly off-color joke) bring together two distinct registers—high and low—and two distinct domains—the bodily and the technological—by basing their metaphors on equivalent *actions*: the clown breaks through the paper hymen of night; the hose of a gas-pump gives the car an enema; the shining eyes of a cat run-over and flung by a car are like cufflinks falling from the wrists.

Other *greguerías* base their likenesses on even more unlikely exchanges of actions, functions, or practices:

El automovilista muy viajero se alimenta sobre todo con los macarrones kilométricos de las distancias. (72)

Abunda ahora el caso de que el automóvil que recomponen o asean en medio de la calle deje en ella una mancha de grasa, que macula para muchos días el traje de la ciudad, pues sólo la bencina del tiempo la podrá ir limpiando. (38)

Acuden las nubes al ocaso para empapar su sangre, yendo a caer los algodones usados al cubo del otro hemisferio. (34)

In each of these farfetched metaphors, an action or practice proper to a given thing transmigrates to a different and distant context: the grease-stains left by automobiles on the city's "suit" are later dry-cleaned by the benzene of time. And even the *greguerías* that depart from static visual resemblances turn into dynamic metaphors: the white lines on a highway become macaroni "eaten" by the long-distance driver; the red-tinged clouds at sunset become cotton-balls used to staunch blood, then dropped into the trash-can of another hemisphere.

In his dynamic *gregueristic* practice, Ramón does not seek a *ground* in any static sense of the word, but rather a convergence of persons and things, things and more things, words and world through reciprocal interactions. The material of the *world*, of words, of those seemingly *immaterial* conceptual structures that can rigidify thought—all become pliable to a greater or lesser degree by working that material and allowing it to work upon us as readers, making us more pliable as well. In any given act of articulation the detours through a relay of signs goes on, without ever arriving at any definitive, final meaning; but the *work* itself, the *action* of signifying binds and entangles speakers, spoken words, and spoken world.²⁸ The relation between the visual/phonic signifier and signified, sign and referent may be arbitrary; but as Saussure emphasized, the links between sign and sign are not. Associative networks are forged through human interaction in the world; they are ever in the process of being produced and altered in the cultural memory. Ramón then, in a sense "grounds" or rather, mobilizes his wild metaphorical associations in the space of *betweenness*, where those multiple interactions of persons and things, of things and things take place. And he calls attention to

that “in-between ground” by the nonsensical transmigration of practices, actions, functions from their “proper” domains to absurdly improper ones.

This in-between space of articulation is also the territory of social commerce, of dialogism—hence the *gregariousness* of the *greguerías*. As Alan Hoyle has observed, Ramón’s peculiar adaptation of the term *greguería* (previously meaning “vocerío” or “gritería confusa de la gente”) signals from the beginning that:

he was trying to bridge the gap between the silence of the mortal, subjective, solipsistic self on the one hand, and on the other the orchestrated, highly organized clamor of modern urban society, thus producing and articulating his own new, mixed, confused, discordant noise or *greguería*, one which combined two previously incompatible (incongruous) things: the private impressions of the artist *griego* or Greek to the majority, and the common everyday language and reality of the people, in order to take the private to the public, making hermetic art *gregario*, gregarious, communicable. (“Ramón” 12)

In an apparent contradiction, the highly idiosyncratic *greguería*, widely imitated in its day but now considered a one-man, one-time genre, is in its conception and its concerns eminently a public form. Each sensory experience articulated in a given *greguería* is self-consciously gregarious. However quirky and idiosyncratic, it is meant to be shared.

Of course, the above-stated contradiction is a false one, given the *greguería*’s kinship with those age-old public genres—the maxim, proverb, and aphorism—those

kernels of common knowledge and received wisdom. But the *greguerías* diverge from maxims, adages, and aphorisms not only in their frivolity, but also because they show how knowledge is unmade, remade, and made public. Through their myriad instances of mad couplings, they expose the complexity and mystery of articulation, the simultaneous distancing and binding of people and things in that circuitous passage from the sensory to sense.

Earlier, I suggested that Ramón’s literary practice in the *greguerías* aligns him with a “sense of the universal equality of things,” which, according to Benjamin, so radically alters perception in the modern age. I went on to argue that Ramón’s hyper-metaphoric activity amounts to a surrender to the logic of exchange value and thus decisively connects his work to the booming, commercial culture of the 1920s. Moreover, in basing so many of his metaphors on the dynamic properties of things, Ramón may well have taken his cues from the speed and dynamism of the machine age—just as he appears to have modeled his short, pithy *greguerías* on advertising and telegraphy. However, all of these formal and thematic coincidences may be considered mere circumstantial evidence. What most surely connects Ramón’s gregueristic practice to its circumstance is his preoccupation with the timeless questions of the articulations between world and words, and in so doing, he could do nothing but articulate his particular time. Indeed, his time of rapid technological changes, not yet naturalized, may have opened chinks in the ideological weave of Western thought, providing opportunities for “new” reflections on timeless questions. If the works of writers of the 1920s have particular resonance in our own time, as I believe they

do, it is because we too are grappling with the consequences and possibilities of rapid commercial and technological transformations; our time, like theirs, offers not only risks but also chances for new answers to those age-old questions.

Notes

¹ This formula does not appear until the final version of his standard but ever-expanding prologue to the *greguerías*, in *Total de greguerías* (1955), xxxiv. Through all of his prologues, from 1917 to 1955, Gómez de la Serna continues developing and refining his definition of the *greguería*. The sudden appearance of this formula pertains to an expanded argument on the centrality of metaphor in the *greguerías*.

² Rodolfo Cardona considers *discordia concors* as the key to Ramón's genius and a sign of his "baroque-ness":

The wit of [Ramón's] works can be described in the words Dr. Samuel Johnson used in his *Life of Cowley* to characterize John Donne's poetry: 'a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.' (167)

For other discussions of this notion, see Alan Hoyle, "El problema de la greguería," and Richard L. Jackson, "The Greguería of Ramón Gómez de la Serna."

³ My examples in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are drawn from *Novísimas greguerías* (1929).

⁴ This argument first appears in Ramón's prologue of 1935, "Explicaciones" in *Flor de greguerías* (12).

⁵ José Enrique Serrano credits the *flâneur* with providing unity to the *greguerías*: "El personaje que da unidad al conjunto es básicamente un transeúnte cuyos orígenes en la obra de Ramón se remontan al menos a *Tapices*" (13).

⁶ I borrow the image of "ojos trotamundos" from Ramón's contemporary, Adriano del Valle, who writes of him:

Todo está observado por él y recorrido por esos trotamundos incansables que son sus ojos. No quedará cosa alguna en el mundo que no haya sido catalogada o fichada por él en ese *bureau* de información universal que será su obra. (21)

⁷ César Nicolás, in *Ramón y la greguería*, provides the most exhaustive and useful study of the *greguerías* yet available.

⁸ See José Enrique Serrano's discussion of Ramón's photographic technique (14-16).

⁹ *Blanco y Negro* 1938, July 8, 1928.

¹⁰ *Blanco y Negro* 1751, December 7, 1924.

¹¹ *Blanco y Negro* 1961, December 16, 1928.

¹² Among the many precursors Ramón recognizes—among them Horace, Shakespeare, Renard, Santayana, Verlaine, Franklin, Wilde, Jacob, and Apollinaire—he never admits kinship with advertisers. However, in his prologue of 1935, he includes an anecdote suggesting that advertisers recognized their kith and kin in Ramón: "Tantas veces he escrito, sobre todo la del jabón, que hubo una fábrica de jabones que me propuso pagarme si la añadía el nombre de su marca" (*Flor de greguerías* 30-31).

¹³ That Benjamín knew at least one of Gómez de la Serna's works is evidenced by his review of Ramón's *El circo*, published in *Internationale Revue* in 1927 and republished in *La balsa de la Medusa* 34 (1995). No evidence exists, however, that Ramón knew Benjamín's work. For Benjamín's analyses of commodity culture, refer to "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in *Reflections* and to *The Arcades Project*. Also see Susan Buck-Morss's reconstruction of that project, *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

¹⁴ See Tag Gronberg's discussion of the development of advertising and commercial display in *Designs on Modernity*.

¹⁵ Benjamín is speaking here of how fashion "couples the living body to the inorganic world" in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (*Reflections* 153). Ramón refers here to the mass-produced objects in "Cursi" and "Modern

Style” from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—“muebles, candelabros, cuadros, jarrones ideales, fanales” (“Lo cursi” 697). In a later *greguería* Ramón again refers to the sex appeal of things: “Los museos están llenos de ‘sex appeal’” (*Gregerías* [1940], 45).

¹⁶ Antonio A. Gómez Yebra discusses the controversy over the final count of *gregerías* (22-23).

¹⁷ I refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital as elaborated in *The Field of Cultural Production*.

¹⁸ Krauss is referring specifically here to the work of Picasso and Gide in the 1910s and 1920s.

¹⁹ These descriptions of modernity hearken back to the famous passage in “The Communist Manifesto”:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. (Marx 111)

José Enrique Serrano connects the *gregerías* precisely to this perception that “‘todo lo sólido se desvanece en el aire.’ Ante la circunstancia, el artista ha de recrear las transformaciones de la materia y la energía que la ciencia y tecnología nuevas han propiciado” (11). The only way to adequately appraise the achievement of the *gregerías*, Serrano contends, is to place them squarely “en el mapa de la modernidad occidental” (11).

²⁰ Here I paraphrase from Jean-Joseph Goux, in *Symbolic Economies* (4-7).

²¹ In “Tristán” (1912), Ramón’s first formulation of the *gregerías*, he theorizes the *gregerías* in nihilist terms.

²² I draw these etymologies and definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²³ For discussions of the implications of this etymology, see Aristotle’s *Poetics* (67-68); Wheelwright, “Semantics and Ontology,” (67); Derrida, “White Mythology” (231-35); and Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture*, 4-7.

²⁴ I am indebted here to Ricoeur’s seminal work, *The Rule of Metaphor*, as well as to Christopher Tilley’s overview of theories of metaphor in *Metaphor and Material Culture*.

²⁵ This is the subject of Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy.”

²⁶ Also see Ramón’s apocalyptic story, “El dueño del átomo” (1926), which prefigures the development of the atomic bomb.

²⁷ See César Nicolás, “Imagen y estilo en Ramón Gómez de la Serna” (137-46) and *Ramón y la greguería* (19-20, 94-96), where he analyzes with great precision the “desviaciones metafóricas y metonímicas” in the *gregerías*.

²⁸ See Bernard Harrison, “On ‘White Mythology,’” 531-34. Harrison offers a critique of Derrida, based on the later thought of Wittgenstein, suggesting that we can ground our ways of using words in dynamic practices.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. and Ed. James Hutton. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982.
- Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Trans. and Ed. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- . “El circo de Ramón.” Trans. Pablo Marinas, Miguel Marinas, and Pepe Vázquez. *La balsa de la Medusa* 34 (1995): 3-5.
- . *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- . *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York, Schocken, 1978.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1989.

- Cardona, Rodolfo. *Ramón: A Study of Gómez de la Serna and his Works*. New York: Eliseo Torres, 1957.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1992.
- Dennis, Nigel. "Ramón at the Centenary: The Parts of the Whole." Introduction. *Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna*. Ed. Nigel Dennis. Ottawa Hispanic Studies. 2. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1988. 7-22.
- Derrida, Jacques. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 207-71.
- Gómez de la Serna, Ramón. "Las cosas y 'el ello.'" *Revista de Occidente* 134 (1934): 190-208.
- . "El dueño del átomo." *Revista de Occidente* 34 (1926): 59-84.
- . *Flor de greguerías*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1935.
- . *Greguerías*. Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1940.
- . "Lo cursi," *Obras selectas*. Madrid: Editorial Plenitud, 1947. 693-718.
- . *Novísimas greguerías*. Madrid: Ernesto Giménez, 1929.
- . *Total de greguerías*. Madrid: Aguilar, 1955.
- . "Tristán (propaganda al libro 'Tapiques')." *Obras completas*. Ed. Ioana Zlotescu. Vol 1. Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, Galaxia Gutenberg, 1996. 905-34.
- Gómez Yebra, Antonio A. *Introduction. Greguerías*. Madrid: Castalia, 1994. 7-54.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.
- Gronberg, Tag. *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.
- Harrison, Bernard. "'White Mythology' Revisited: Derrida and His Critics on Reason and Rhetoric." *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999): 505-34.
- Hoyle, Alan. "El problema de la greguería." *Actas del IX Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas, Berlin, 18-23 agosto 1986*. Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 1989. 283-92.
- . "Ramón Gómez de la Serna and the Avant-Garde." *Changing Times in Hispanic Culture*. Ed. Derek Harris. Aberdeen: Centre for the Study of the Hispanic Avant-Garde, University of Aberdeen, 1996. 7-16.
- Jackson, Richard L. "The Greguería of Ramón Gómez de la Serna." *Symposium* 21.4 (1967): 293-305.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Picasso Papers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Latour, Bruno. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- López Molina, Luis. "Nebulosa y sistema en las greguerías ramonianas." *Versants: Revue Suisse des Littératures Romanes* 1 (1981): 109-20.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. "The Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Selected Works*. Vol I. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973. 108-37.
- Nicolás, César. *Ramón y la greguería: Morfología de un género nuevo*. Cáceres: U de Extremadura, 1988.
- . "Imagen y estilo en Ramón Gómez de la Serna." *Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna*. Ed. Nigel Dennis. Ottawa Hispanic Studies. 2. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1988. 129-51.
- Nora, Eugenio G. de. *La novela española contemporánea (1927-1960)*. Vol 2. Madrid: Gredos, 1962.
- Paz, Octavio. "Una de cal." *Papeles de Son Armadans* 47.140 (1967): 175-97.

- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Trans. Robert Czerny. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1977.
- Serrano, José Enrique. Prólogo. *Obras completas. De Ramón Gómez de la Serna*. Ed. Ioana Zlotescu. Vol 4. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1997. 11-33.
- Tilley, Christopher. *Metaphor and Material Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- Valle, Adriano del. "A modo de introducción," *Obras completas*. Vol 1. De Ramón Gómez de la Serna. Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1956. 21-22.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. Trans. Jon R. Snyder. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988.
- Wheelwright, Philip. "Semantics and Ontology." *Essays on Metaphor*. Ed. Warren A. Shibles. Whitewater: The Language Press, 1972. 61-72.

