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Transitions in the Avant-garde: Dada to Surrealism as illustrated by Ramón Gómez de la Serna's novel *El Incongruente*?

Emma Wadsworth-Jones

Written on the cusp between two movements, *El Incongruente* by Ramon Gómez de la Serna eloquently illustrates the transition between Dada and Surrealism. Utilising key Dadaist principles – such as the renunciation of logic, chance combinations of chapters and the juxtaposition of contradictory imagery – combined with Surrealist elements such as a focus on dreams and the passing of time, Gómez de la Serna constructs the puzzling world in which Gustavo lives. *El Incongruente* breaks with literary tradition eulogizing Dadaist elements whilst still representing the harbinger of Surrealism.

The avant-garde refers to those artists and writers who attempt to move away from the status quo, who push the boundaries of what is acceptable and challenge 'popular' thinking. Many studies into the avant-garde have been carried out in an attempt to better understand and define it. Whilst a neo-avant-garde can be witnessed today, it has been said that the avant-garde emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Two of the most influential movements were Dada and Surrealism. The illustration of these two movements, and indeed what could be argued to be the transition between them, in *El Incongruente* will be the focus of my study.

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A statement by Cardona eloquently explains how Gómez de la Serna achieved his own unique style, *ramonismo*:

not only do we find in his works attitudes, themes, ideas, and styles which one would ordinarily connect with the various “isms” of the twentieth century, but in most cases he seems to have heralded these attitudes.¹

It is a style in which he incorporates and manipulates a wide range of elements reflecting the different artistic and literary movements of the age, without ever directly affiliating himself with any one in particular. It is evident through the course of his works, that Gómez de la Serna not only was influenced by the avant-garde², but anticipated and pioneered some of its most influential movements. This can be no better exemplified than in his novel *El Incongruente*. Written in 1922, in the wake of the Dadaist movement, the novel not only demonstrates the key Dada principles but also hints towards the movement's successor, Surrealism.

Born out of the devastation of the First World War, Dada was a phenomenon that was to last until 1924 and was witnessed simultaneously developing in various cities across the globe; the most influential of these being Zurich in neutral Switzerland. Dada was a movement that defied all logic. With a strong sense of destruction at its core - even to the extreme of self-destruction - it sought to fight against rationalism, which it held in increasing disdain following the outbreak of the First World War. As Grossman explains, 'the destructive activities of the Dada movement are not so much a manifestation of nihilism in

¹ Rodolfo Cardona in "*Ramón: A study of Gómez de la Serna and his works*" (Eliseo Torres & Sons; New York, 1957) p 9.

² "su particular *ramonismo* asimila y adelanta rasgos del cubismo, del futurismo, del dada, del creacionismo y del surrealismo" (His particular *ramonismo* incorporates and furthers features of cubism, futurism, dada, creationism and surrealism) César Nicolás in "*Imagen y estilo en Ramón Gómez de la Serna*", found in "Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna" Nigel Dennis (Ed.) Ottawa Hispanic Studies 2, Dovehouse Editions Canada (1988) p145

the arts as they are an expression of moral outrage by a group of disillusioned young artists and writers who realized, above all, that they must arrive at the *reductio ad absurdam* of life and art so that they might begin anew³. Indeed, one of its creators, Hugo Ball, saw it as an opportunity to create a form of “constructive anarchy”⁴. Writing in 1946, Gómez de la Serna himself says, ‘ahora que el mundo ha entrado en una pausa de paz, voy a dar en serie varias novelas de la nebulosa, pues cada vez estoy más convencido de que decir cosas con sentido no tiene sentido’⁵ (Now that the World has entered into a pause of peace, I am going to produce a series of nebulous novels, I am increasingly convinced that to say things that make sense doesn’t make any sense). Here he refers to his collection of novels *novelas de la nebulosa*⁶ written over the course of his lifetime that began with his 1922 novel *El Incongruente*. Dada, although short-lived, had a profound effect on the art and poetry of the time, emphasising the importance of chance, spontaneity and doubt. In a literary context, this was realised through the implementation of such devices and forms as negation, juxtaposition, contradiction, phonetic poetry, simultaneous poetry, and free association in its earliest form. Whilst it is true to say that, ‘la vanguardia ha tenido poca suerte con la creación de textos largos; en especial la novela y el teatro resultaron obstáculos difíciles de vencer’⁷ (The avant-garde has had little luck with the creation of long texts; the novel and play have posed

³ Manuel L. Grossman in “*Dada: Paradox, Mystification, and Ambiguity in European Literature*” (Pegasus; New York, 1971) p166.

⁴ Ibid p61

⁵ Ramón Gómez de la Serna in *Prólogo a las novelas de la nebulosa* found in “El Hombre Perdido” (Espasa-Calpe; Madrid, 1962) p8

⁶ Gómez de la Serna’s *Novelas de la Nebulosa* tried to ‘buscar cosas menos convencionales, menos amaneradas, en otras dimensiones de la vida...revelando como nos ataca el mundo confuso de hoy.’ (Look for less conventional things, less affected, in other...revealing how today’s confusing world attacks us) (ibid, p10)

⁷ Manuel Durán in “*Origen y función de la greguería*”, found in “Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna” Nigel Dennis (Ed.) Ottawa Hispanic Studies 2, Dovehouse Editions Canada (1988) p 117

to be obstacles that are especially difficult to overcome), key elements of Dada can be observed in Gómez de la Serna's work *El Incongruente*.

From the opening of the novel it is apparent that Gómez de la Serna has broken with the traditions of the literature of the age. Devoid of logical transitions from chapter to chapter, *El Incongruente* is a novel that presents the reader with a series of incongruent events that happen over the course of its central character Gustavo's life – from the moment at the age of four when he declares to his father 'mira, necesito un bastón'⁸ (look, I need a walking stick), to the day he unexpectedly views himself on screen in a cinema and realises he is sitting next to his co-star and as a consequence decides that he should listen to Destiny's call and marry her, thereby putting an end to the incongruous stage of his life with 'la más lógica de incongruencias'⁹ (the most logical of incongruities).

Each chapter stands alone and whilst, on occasion, some nexus may be found between two chapters, for the most part the presentation of the events is as incongruous as the events themselves. Indeed Gómez de la Serna writes, 'tiene que ser una incongruencia la misma historia de su vida y la de la elección de capítulos'¹⁰ (The self-same story of his life and the choice of chapters must be an incongruity), which would suggest that, as in Tristan Tzara's use of chance combinations of sounds and words in poetry, the author uses chance combinations of chapters to form his novel¹¹. *El Incongruente* represents 'la descomposición del discurso lineal y de la trama o el argumento convencionales en un sin fin de greguerías, de imágenes, de *unidades digresivas* ensartadas en

⁸ Ramón Gómez de la Serna "El Incongruente" p9

⁹ José Camón Aznar "Ramón Gómez de la Serna en sus obras" (Espasa-Calpe, S.A; Madrid, 1972)

¹⁰ Ramón Gómez de la Serna "El Incongruente" p15

¹¹ "It was left to Tzara to follow the principle of chance to its logical or illogical conclusion in literature. Sounds are relatively easy to put together, rhythmically and melodically, in chance combinations" Hans Richter "Dada: art and anti-art" (Thames & Hudson; London, 2001)

un *collage* metonímico...o en un *collage* metafórico¹² (The decomposition of the conventional lineal discourse and plot or argument in a never-ending barrage of *greguerías*, images and *digressing units* strung together in a metonymic *collage*...or in a metaphorical *collage*).

Breaking with traditional literary techniques in this way, Gómez de la Serna heightens the sense of irrationality and illogicality that is pervasive throughout his novel and depiction of Gustavo's life. From the first Dada manifesto¹³ it becomes apparent that to write in a Dadaist manner means to break with all tradition that has come before it. Dada produced many short-lived publications – some only producing one edition – all of which attempted to break with preconceived notions of literature and rejected 'all forms of punctuation including the use of capital letters...and the typography was violently disjointed, combining texts and illustrations in a perfectly arbitrary manner'¹⁴. Whilst the use of disjointed typography is not seen in Gómez de la Serna's work, the arbitrary way in which the text is put together along with the 'collage' of imagery is very similar to that of Dada.

In *El Incongruente*, the main protagonist, Gustavo, like the 'plot' of the novel in which he features, is left underdeveloped throughout; we learn little about him as a person. It would appear that Gómez de la Serna wishes to direct the reader's attention away from Gustavo the character toward his experience, real or imaginary, and the objects that surround him. As Manuel Durán describes, 'los detalles brillan más que el conjunto, nos distraen de la esencia y existencia

¹² César Nicolás "Imagen y estilo en Ramón Gómez de la Serna" in "Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna" Nigel Dennis (Ed.) (Ottawa Hispanic Studies 2, Dovehouse Editions; Canada, 1988)

¹³ Published by Tristan Tzara in 1918.

¹⁴ Manuel L. Grossman "Dada: Paradox, Mystification, and Ambiguity in European Literature" (Pegasus; New York, 1971) p 63

de los personajes centrales y de su posible evolución a través de la novela¹⁵ (The details shine brighter than the whole, they distract us from the essence and existence of the central protagonists and from their possible evolution through the novel). Gómez de la Serna dedicates much of the novel to the description of the objects that surround Gustavo, often in the form of *greguerías* but also in his personification of them. Gustavo describes in one passage how, ‘las que más disfrutaban en el baile de mascarar eran las lámparas’¹⁶ (Those who enjoyed the masked ball the most were the lamps) and later Gómez de la Serna gives Gustavo’s motorbike animal characteristics writing, ‘la motocicleta parecía seguir una pista como un perro policía y él la dejaba ir sin apretar las orejas, sin conducirla apenas’¹⁷(The motorcycle seemed to follow a clue like a police dog and he let it go without gripping its ears, barely driving it at all). Gustavo’s motorbike is the subject of a series of 29 humorous *greguerías*, Gustavo describes it as a ‘bicicleta con dolor de tripas’ (bicycle with a stomach ache), a ‘pistola que se ha escapado con cargador y todo’ (gun that has escaped with the magazine and everything), a ‘triciclo trotón, ultravertebrado, evolutivo, que ha perdido una rueda y ha salido corriendo para mantener su equilibrio’¹⁸ (trotting tricycle, extravertebrate, evolved, that has lost a wheel and set off at a run so as to maintain its equilibrium). These *greguerías* serve not only to draw the reader’s attention to the motorbike, and add humour – a quality that Grossman deems important in the works of Dadaists – but also to attack rationalism and our understanding by juxtaposing conflicting imagery. Gómez de la Serna’s subjectivisation of objects can be likened to Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ where he chose already existing objects and declared them art ‘when it was lifted from the limbo of unregarded objects into the living world of works of art: looking at it made it into art.’¹⁹

¹⁵ Manuel Durán “Origen y función de la greguería” in “Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna” Nigel Dennis (Ed.) (Ottawa Hispanic Studies 2, Dovehouse Editions; Canada, 1988)

¹⁶ “El Incongruente” p53

¹⁷ Ibid p128

¹⁸ Ibid pp123-124.

¹⁹ Hans Richter “Dada: art and anti-art” (Thames & Hudson; London, 2001) p88

Another linguistic tool that Gómez de la Serna employs is contradiction, which serves to subvert the reader's expectations. When Gustavo finds himself in a town of wax dolls he is taken by his guide to see the queen. Gustavo is surprised to discover that she can speak. When he looks to his guide for an explanation he receives the response 'hablan, sí... Porque no son muñecas de cera, sino muñecas de cera'²⁰ (Yes they speak...Because they aren't wax dolls, but wax dolls). Another example, comes in the form of Gustavo's description of his visit to the town of the wax dolls, when he notes that, 'parecía una pura ruina, la ruina ideal, la ruina de lo nuevo'²¹ (It looked like a mere ruin, the ideal ruin, the ruin of the new). Whilst Gustavo might have viewed this response as sufficient the reader is left feeling confused. In the light of Hans Richter's statement, 'Dada invited, or rather defied, the world to misunderstand it, and fostered every kind of confusion'²² it would appear that Gómez de la Serna has embraced another of the Dada principles.

Gómez de la Serna plays with the concept of time, dedicating only a short chapter, or paragraph, to an event that spans a few days, whilst devoting long chapters to mere moments in time, explaining in the utmost detail Gustavo's surroundings. An example of this is his dedication of only one chapter to Gustavo's early life, in which many incongruent events happen. He dedicates only a passing sentence to each incongruity, including the occasion when Gustavo extinguishes a bomb that, had it gone off, would have killed thousands.²³ If this event had occurred in his later life, Gómez de la Serna might have dedicated pages to the episode. Similarly, Gómez de la Serna dedicates a chapter²⁴ to a seemingly random collection of incongruences that occur in

²⁰ "El Incongruente" p118

²¹ Ibid p116

²² Hans Richter "Dada: art and anti-art" (Thames & Hudson; London, 2001) p9

²³ '...y en una ocasion apagó la mecha de una bomba que si hubiese estallado habría matado a más de mil personas' (and on one occasion the fuse of a bomb went out, which had it exploded would have killed more than a thousand people) p10

²⁴ Chapter II "Batiburrillo de incongruencias" pp16-22

Gustavo's life, each detailed in no more than a single paragraph. Inez Hedges²⁵ indicates that Gómez de la Serna's move away from the traditional narrative style of the beginning, middle and end, and his manipulation of apparent time clearly demonstrate the application of Dada principles in this novel. This becomes even more apparent in light of José Camón Aznar's assertion that, 'estamos seguros que cuando comienza a escribir una novela ignora su final. La casualidad proveerá'²⁶ (we are sure that when he begins to write a novel he ignores its end. Luck will provide). If this is the case then like the Dadaists, Gómez de la Serna allowed chance to dictate the passage of his novel.

Throughout *El Incongruente*, Gustavo is a character that epitomises the role of chance and spontaneity. Chance was one of the strongest influences on Dada's work, both in art and literature, so much so that Hans Richter described himself and his fellow Dadaists as following chance "like a compass"²⁷. This can also be seen in Gustavo's behaviour; Gustavo puts his faith in 'la casualidad' (chance) and 'la incongruencia' (incongruence). Indeed, he describes his dislike for Sundays because 'es un día en que está cerrada la Casualidad...¡Qué se va a esperar de un día que está cerrada la Casualidad! Es un día en que mejor sería que nos cloroformizasen'²⁸ (it is a day on which Chance is closed...what can one hope for from a day on which chance is closed! It is a day on which it would be better that we were chloroformed), it would appear that a day without chance is a day that is worth skipping. Further to this, Gustavo firmly believes that each of the incongruities he faces is part of his 'Destino' (Destiny). When he receives a summons to court accusing him of having abused a young girl, Elena, Gustavo notes 'de los malos pasos en que le metía la incongruencia era la

²⁵ Inez Hedges "Languages of Revolt: Dada and Surrealist Literature and Film" (Duke University Press; Durham N.C., 1983)

²⁶ José Camón Aznar "Ramón Gómez de la Serna en sus obras" (Espasa-Calpe, S.A.; Madrid, 1972) p33

²⁷ "Chance became our trademark. We followed it like a compass" Hans Richter in "*Dada: art and anti-art*" (Thames & Hudson; London, 2001) p 51

²⁸ Ramón Gómez de la Serna "El Incongruente" (Orbis, S.A; 1982) p100

incongruencia misma la que le venía a sacar²⁹ (of the bad situations that incongruence got him into, it was incongruence itself that came to get him out again). He has no fear whatsoever of being imprisoned, believing it to be another one of life's jokes and consequently when he arrives at court the next day makes a mockery of the proceedings 'su aparición en la sala tuvo algo de clownesca y más teniendo en cuenta que se había vestido de una etiqueta seduciente con americana ribeteada'³⁰ (his appearance in the room was clownesque³¹, more so taking into account that he had dressed in a seductive style with trimmed jacket). Gustavo believes himself to be subject to chance's whim, which is at its most evident in the chapter in which he receives a telegram summoning him to the side of an unknown old woman. Once he has met the woman he sets about discovering why it came to be him – a man she admits she has never met before – whom she summoned, only to discover that he was chosen by her at random from the *Guía de Vecinos de la Capital*³² (telephone directory).

Gustavo lives in a world where reality and dreams are almost interchangeable. Whilst Gustavo may accept the things that happen to him without deeper questioning, the reader might view this suspension of reality as alluding to the Surrealist movement even in spite of Gustavo's claim that 'a mí nunca me ha pasado nada completamente sobrenatural... Todas esas bromas que me gasta el Destino han tenido siempre una base de realidad'³³ (Nothing completely supernatural has ever happened to me...All of these jokes that Destiny spends

²⁹ Ibid p 153

³⁰ Ibid p156

³¹ Translation note: As is common in his work, Gómez de la Serna chose here to invent the word "clownesca", as it does not exist in the Spanish lexicon I chose to reflect the same sense of play with words whilst still conveying the essential meaning by translating the word as closely as possible to the original.

³² Ibid p98

³³ Ibid p90

on me have always had a basis in reality). Richter³⁴ would argue that the disintegration of reality and creation of irrationality that we see throughout the novel was a Dada principle. However, in his writing, Gómez de la Serna sometimes hints beyond Dada towards Surrealism, in both his imagery and his focus on dreams. This impression becomes more substantial in the light of Grossman's statement that, 'the influence of Dada was so all-pervading in the early days of Surrealism that it is often impossible to distinguish what was Surrealist from what was Dadaist'³⁵.

Some of Gustavo's experiences, like that of finding himself in the town of the wax dolls, seem so bizarre – bordering on the surreal – that readers find themselves questioning whether Gustavo can really be experiencing it or whether it is, in fact, a dream. Another example of this is when during a search for the lost pawn of his chessboard, Gustavo uncovers the fourth dimension in the corner of his room by the skirting board³⁶. On another occasion, Gustavo takes it upon himself to empty out a fish tank. Whilst he, and the reader, expects the fish to fall to the floor he actually witnesses them continue to swim in mid-air and watches as the tank itself floats up towards the heavens as if it

³⁴ "Dada is involved in this progressive disintegration of reality...Dada desired this disintegration...wanted to be destructive" Hans Richter "Dada: art and anti-art" (Thames & Hudson; London, 2001) p91

³⁵ Manuel L. Grossman "Dada: Paradox, Mystification, and Ambiguity in European Literature" (Pegasus; New York, 1971) p153

³⁶ "logró una tarde encontrar, junto al zócalo de los pasillos, un trozo del zócalo de la cuarta dimensión, donde encontró un guante, muchas horquillas, muchas cerillas gastadas y, entre todas esas cosas, el peon perdido" (One afternoon in he succeeded in finding, alongside the skirting board in the hallway, a piece of the skirting board from the 4th dimension, where he found a glove, lots of hairpins and used matches, and amongst these things the lost pawn) "El Incongruente" p61. Gómez de la Serna further explores the idea of other dimensions in his later work, part of the *Novelas de la Nebulosa* collection, *El Hombre Perdido* where not only does he suggest that in order to fully understand life we must experience its dimensions but he deals more comprehensively with Surrealist techniques expanding on what can be seen in this novel.

were a helium balloon³⁷. This subversion of our expectations adds humour which ‘obtained a high place among the Surrealists, since through it they could effect a grotesque parody of all things that the ordinary man believed in, and even revered.’³⁸ Gómez de la Serna does not solely write about the incongruences that occur in Gustavo’s waking hours but also dedicates two chapters of his novel to the description of Gustavo’s dreams, which seem to have been ruled by the same illogicality and irrationality as his waking experiences. The exploration of dreams and the subconscious were constant and important themes of the Surrealist movement.

A further focus of surrealist imagery that may be seen throughout the novel is the focus on time. Unlike previously mentioned Dadaist imagery related to time, a surrealist perspective comes not from the meddling with time and its passing within the structure of the novel, but in the contemplation of it and how its passing affects the characters themselves. Time is obviously an important motif in Gustavo’s world as he is constantly mentioning his watch. It is however, the other characters whom he comes across that bring time to the foreground. When Gustavo goes to the aid of an old woman in Segovia he finds her worried, attempting to clean her hair. Gustavo describes her saying, ‘tenía la sensibilidad del tiempo; los relojes la desesperaban’³⁹ (She felt the time; clocks made her desperate); the old woman describes how ‘tengo la cabeza llena de

³⁷ “Gustavo descolgó la pecera y soltó los peces como si fuesen pájaros y los peces se hubiera dicho que, en vez de precipitarse en la calle, siguieron su camino como peces en el agua, y después, con la pecera en la mano, se le escapó a Gustavo y se vio cómo la pecera sin peces subía al cielo como un globo de los niños” (Gustavo picked up the fish tank and released the fish as if they were birds and the fish, instead of swiftly falling to the street, continued on their way like fish in water, after this the fish tank, which Gustavo held in his hands, now empty of fish escaped from his clutches and floated up towards the sky like a child’s balloon) “El Incongruente” pp41-42

³⁸ Rodolfo Cardona “Ramón: A study of Gómez de la Serna and his works” (Eliseo Torres & Sons; New York, 1957) p 19

³⁹ “El Incongruente” p98

segundos⁴⁰ (my head is filled with seconds) and how it has been snowing minutes. A further example of Surrealist imagery within the novel is that of the beach filled with paperweights where Gustavo sees them as living objects, ‘se veía claramente que esos pisapapeles estaban mucho más vivos que esos que ya instalados sobre las mesas de despacho no tenían el soplo de una vida interior’⁴¹ (one could clearly see that those paperweights were much more alive than those already installed on office desks that didn’t even have a breath of internal life) and spends the whole chapter describing the various facets of them – he even likens the paperweights to the ‘hermanos de esos relojes encerrados en un cristal’⁴² (siblings of those clocks enclosed in glass).

In conclusion, Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s novel *El Incongruente* ‘creates a completely irrational atmosphere, a complete liberation from logic. Gustavo’s world is chaotic, without the slightest trace of logical organisation’⁴³ – both in the diegesis and the novel’s structure – placing the utmost importance on chance, spontaneity and contradiction; as such the novel demonstrates many of the key principles of the Dada movement. However, unlike the Dadaists, ‘Ramón’s subversive attitude had been confined to aesthetics and unlike the Dadaist agitators, had never extended itself to the social and political plane’⁴⁴. In this work, Gómez de la Serna even goes so far as to employ some elements more usually associated with the Surrealists – in his use of imagery and exploration of dreams – even before such a movement existed.

Written on the cusp between two artistic movements – Dadaism and Surrealism – *El Incongruente* is the very expression of what is ‘the avant-garde’. In its pages, we witness the passage of one movement and the arrival of another. If the purpose of the avant-garde is to push the boundaries to challenge all aspects

⁴⁰ Ibid p98

⁴¹ Ibid p136

⁴² Ibid p136

⁴³ Rodolfo Cardona “Ramón: A study of Gómez de la Serna and his works” p23

⁴⁴ Ibid p18

of what has gone before and what is expected, in *El Incongruente*, Ramón Gómez de la Serna expresses this challenge completely. Gómez de la Serna is not simply influenced by the avant-garde, through his genius he expresses the very spirit of the avant-garde as he explains, 'hay una realidad que no es surrealidad ni realidad subreal, sino una realidad lateral'⁴⁵ (There is a reality that is neither surreal, nor unreal, but a lateral reality).

⁴⁵ Gómez de la Serna "El Hombre Perdido" (Espasa-Calpe S.A; Madrid, 1962) p7

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