CHAPTER 5

Things: Material Ontology in El Rastro (1914)

Eduardo Gregori

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Ramón Gómez de la Serna's El Rastro (1914) as an example of the Avant-Garde's deconstruction of Descartes' radical dualism. Positing a fluid relationship between his own being and the objects of the Madrid flea market (“el Rastro”), Gómez de la Serna articulates a veritable material ontology in this novel, whereby the subject/object dialectic is transformed into an illuminating imbrication of materiality and subjectivity.

…

Fuimos cosas y volveremos a ser cosas.

GÓMEZ DE LA SERNA, “LAS COSAS Y EL ELLO” 174

... 

Art historians speak of a “crisis of the object” that affected the Avant-Garde, from the experimentations with papier collés and sculpture-objects created by Picasso (Verre d’absinthe) and Oscar Domínguez (Exacte sensibilité), to the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp (Fountain) and Man Ray (Gift) or the surreal objects of Meret Oppenheim (Luncheon in Fur) and Salvador Dalí (Veston aphrodisiaque). This artistic current revealed an intellectual interest in the materiality of modernity. There was, as it were, a profusion of things, a material effervescence cluttering painters’ studios and writers’ rooms with the same feverish abundance. This, for instance, is the description that art critic Sebastià Gasch offered of Joan Miró’s workshop:

Su taller parece actualmente un almacén de briac-à-brac. Hay allí los objetos más extravagantes: raíces de cañas que parecen idolillos negros, fragmentos de esqueletos encontrados en la playa que parecen esculturas egipcias, corchos con incrustaciones de moluscos que poseen cualidades de riquísimas conchas, muñecas reventadas, llaves, cantos rodados, espejuelos de la calle de la Boquería, postales de la calle Nueva de la
Rambla... objetos estrafalarios que servirán a Miró para sus construcciones plásticas.¹


The same hoarding can be appreciated in Gómez de la Serna’s public speech performances known as conferencias-maleta. Guillermo de Torre, in an article for *Sur* (1931) notes how Ramón pulled out a myriad of disconnected and arbitrary objects from his suitcase:

mariposas, estrellas de mar, bolas de colores, flores de papel, títeres, una diosa de muchos brazos, un brazo-relicario, una codorniz mecánica, el ya mencionado monóculo sin cristal, una caja de magia, un pito de afilador...

Qtd. in Bonet, “*Ramón y los objetos*” 1990: 29

Ramón’s room was also notoriously crammed with random things: close-up photographs of actresses, Greek busts, broken dolls, old watches, orthopedic limbs, street signs, and taxidermied animals. He commented on his hoarding in the following manner:

Mi despacho me es agradable porque hay un tránsito perenne entre unas y otras [cosas]; se traspasan, se saltan, se están muy quietas y ganan el olvido alternadamente […] sería horrible todo esto si no fuera traslúcido y si sobre cada objeto no estuviera su Trinidad hecha de tiempo y de espacio.

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His room became a three-dimensional collage, where the apparent disconnectedness of material elements created a parodic anti-discourse, effectively deconstructing the orderly tidiness of the bourgeois interior. In Ramón’s study, ornamental items are liberated from their decorative function and transfigured into meaningful objects. We witness the Eucharistic transubstantiation of quotidian things into the marvelous illumination of wonder. It is in this regard that Gómez de la Serna speaks of the objects’ “trinity,” made of time, space, and materiality. The limit between spirit and matter has completely disappeared: matter is spirit; immanence becomes transcendence.

In effect, there is in the Avant-Garde a prevalent aesthetic notion positing the inherent interconnectedness between object and subject; a radical rejection of the Cartesian split between the subject, defined as “thinking stuff”

¹ The translation from the original Catalan is by Juan Manuel Bonet.