

Unwriting the Spanish Literary Canon: Performativity, Materiality & Spiritualism at the Pombo Literary Gathering*

La *desescritura* del canon literario español: performatividad, materialidad y espiritismo en la tertulia literaria de Pombo

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Abstract: This article reinterprets the Pombo Café gathering (Madrid, 1915-1936) as a performative literary culture that produced literariness without textual production, based on the deployment of aesthetic-political inquiries surrounding death. Generating an interdisciplinary dialogue with performance theory and the cultural history of spiritualism, it argues that Pombo appropriated spiritualism as a repertoire of techniques (ritualized presence, mediated voice, obsolete objects, and the staging of death) to *literarily* suspend authorship, the bourgeois circuit of literary publishing and the existing public sphere, thereby challenging the imposition of a closed, linear temporality on Spanish literary history. Through an analysis of Pombo's books as compiled by Ramón Gómez de la Serna in 1918 and 1923, among other sources, the article shows how Pombo generated spiritualist “scenarios” to critically intervene in Spanish literary history.

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Keywords: literature and performance; material culture; canon; spiritualism; Ramón Gómez de la Serna; Carmen de Burgos.

Resumen: Este artículo reinterpreta la tertulia literaria de Pombo (Madrid, 1915-1936) como una cultura literaria performativa que produjo literariedad sin recurrir a la producción textual y a partir del despliegue de indagaciones estético-políticas en torno a la muerte. Generando un diálogo interdisciplinar con la teoría de la *performance* y la historia del espiritismo, se argumenta que Pombo se apropió del espiritismo como un repertorio técnico que, regulando la presencia ritualizada o el uso de objetos obsoletos, generaría praxis *literarias* en torno a la suspensión de la autoría, la salida del circuito editorial y la esfera pública, desafiando la imposición de una lógica temporal cerrada en torno a la literatura. A través del análisis de los libros de Pombo compilados por Gómez de la Serna en 1918 y 1923, entre otras fuentes, el artículo muestra cómo Pombo generó “escenarios” espiritistas para intervenir críticamente en la historia literaria española.

Palabras clave: literatura y *performance*; cultura material; canon; espiritismo; Ramón Gómez de la Serna; Carmen de Burgos.

INTRODUCTION

How can a literary culture persist while suspending literary production? For more than two decades, the *Café y Botillería de Pombo* hosted one of the pivotal gatherings of early 20th century Spanish literary life: Pombo. Under the leadership of Ramón Gómez de la Serna and his close associates, a haphazard series of encounters —initiated informally around 1909 under the auspices of the magazine *Prometeo*, and officially established at Café Pombo in 1915— took the form of conversational meetings and collective banquets that continued until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Consolidated during the 1920s, the Pombo gathering revolved around weekly discussions held on Saturday evenings, led by Gómez de la Serna together with figures such as José Gutiérrez Solana, Tomás Borrás, José Bergamín, or Luis Bagaría. Unlike formal literary institutions in Madrid such as the Ateneo or the Real Academia Española, Pombo brought together writers, artists, journalists, and passersby in a loosely structured collective. While Gómez de la Serna generally functioned as its leader and chief manager, Pombo —as its chronicles *Pombo* (1918) and *La sagrada cripta de Pombo* (1923) make clear— was designed to resist hierarchies, doctrinal programs, and explicit networking (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 202), privileging instead presence, shared time and friendship (“Estos banquetes deben dar fe, esperanza y obligar un poco a ser mejores. Deben dar ánimos a lo que en el fondo de todos es desanimación y corregir la ingratitud multimillonaria”, p. 205), as well as an expressive enactment of the literary against books and texts —a logic this article uncovers. Pombo’s *literary*

enactments were performed in the gatherings themselves and documented throughout its chronicles, consistently articulated through a rhetoric of death that was treated as intrinsic to the café's atmosphere. This insistence, and its ties to spiritualism, constitutes the analytical core of this article.

Even though the production of publishable texts or the practice of networking was explicitly discouraged (p. 202), Pombo's endurance over several decades makes it one of the most persistent, captivating, and influential sites of literary sociability in early 20th century Spain. In this light, we must ask: how, exactly, was the experience of being at Pombo produced? Before moving to an answer, it is necessary to pause briefly on the atypical place occupied by Ramón Gómez de la Serna and the Pombo literary gathering in the history of Spanish arts and letters.

Despite the significant efforts made throughout the current century to highlight the innovative and experimental features of Ramón Gómez de la Serna's "bookish" work (Fernández Romero, 2021) alongside his explicit "performatic" (Grueso Hierro, 2022) and "radio-art" (Demeuse, 2008; Dennis, 2012; Fernández-Medina, 2012) practices, and even the multifaceted nature and cultural significance of Pombo's *tertulia* within the Hispanic context (Alaminos López, 2020; Fernández Utrera, 2024, 2022; Zlotescu (coord.), 2018), the perception of Pombo's *literati* as merely a literary third string (Trapiello in Gómez de la Serna 1999a) persists within most 20th century Spanish literary historiography. This history, still usually focused on authors, books, and their periodization, tends to underestimate Pombo's historical importance almost by default (see Brihuega, 1981; Herrero Senés, 2014; Mainer, 2025; Soria Olmedo, 2016). While alternative narratives of the Spanish "Edad de Plata" (Ocampos and Romero López, 2024; Romero López, 2014) have gained prominence in recent decades, Pombo's collectivist nuances and expanded artistic impulses have yet to receive sustained academic attention.

Neither fully appealing to scholars primarily interested in the literary form and avant-garde political programs, nor sufficiently enigmatic for a literary historiography already saturated with studies of its central figure — Ramón —, Pombo's history resists prevailing modes of academic legibility, and stays suspended between aesthetic, historiographic, and disciplinary categories. This condition of in-betweenness has recently been articulated through an approach that foregrounds Pombo's social and performative dimensions (Fernández Utrera, 2022, 2024). Framing Pombo not primarily as a literary gathering in the conventional sense, but as a space initially oriented toward utopian forms of socialization, Fernández Utrera has

proposed a conceptualization of the early Pombo gathering as one marked by both liberal and anarchist inflections. I do not pursue here the question of Pombo's precise ideological inflections; what matters for the present argument is Fernández Utrera's emphasis on the gathering's participatory and performative culture: most certainly, Pombo's self-conceptualization as something other than an avant-garde networking gathering ("[no] debe ir nadie pensando que ha de encontrar en Pombo el editor o el pobre hombre al que explotar una temporada con los originales de la mediocridad", Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 202) did not emerge in a vacuum. While Pombo's banquets acted as aesthetic and political reinterpretations of 19th century literary banquets, literary cafés should equally be understood as a legacy and masculine appropriation of women's literary salons, which since the eighteenth century had been prone to interweaving literary and intellectual exchange with the art of "banal" conversation (Durán, 2016). This genealogy, closely related to the *aisthesis* of the literary text, yet culturally autonomized from it, helps explain Pombo's distance from professionalized literary circuits, while it also foregrounds the importance of conviviality and social ritualization as structuring principles of the gathering.

Building on this approach to literary gatherings, my argument shifts the focus to the cultural techniques and performative repertoires through which Pombo produced literariness without texts. Framing the question thus within the realm of literary cultures,¹ and seeking to account for the emergence of a specific form of literariness around Pombo, the present study reassesses the gathering in relation to spiritualism, a cultural and political movement of major relevance in the early 20th century. Spiritualism offered a model of collective experience that destabilized authorial legitimacy, privileged vocal and newly mediated forms of communication, and challenged the primacy of a written textual authority proper to the bourgeois public sphere. These are features that resonate strongly with Pombo's self-definition against literary production and institutional validation. I call this operation

¹ I follow Paulson here: a "literary culture" consists of communities, spaces, activities, organizational processes, or attitudes arranged around "literature," without which the idea of *what literature is* would not exist, but in which there are also "communities of literary culture that are deeply ambivalent about literature, and works of literature that are seriously disturbing to the values of such communities." (2018 [2001], p. 7).

unwriting: the suspension of writing and the text as privileged forms of literary belonging.

The issue here is not the ideological connotations or implications of Pombo's performative protocols as such, but the ways in which appropriated materials are transformed, and to what ends, producing an aesthetic distance both from the standard social experience of literary cafés and from the established Spanish literary canon. In this chasm lies an aesthetic experience and a political effect of a cultural literary nature, even when they operate without the stabilizing presence of the text. Specifically, I examine the connection with spiritualism and how its relational aesthetics were shaped and adapted to the format of a literary gathering that wanted to step aside from the mundane secularism of contemporary urban life and the boundaries of bourgeois literary conventions.

1. SPANISH SPIRITUALISM: DEATH AS A CULTURAL REPERTOIRE

Spiritualism, which predated the Pombo gathering by several decades, had been operating in a diffuse and transnational manner since the second half of the 19th century, with Amalia Domingo Soler (1835-1909) being its most prominent Spanish representative both as a medium and a popular writer (Arkinstall, 2014; Correa Ramón, 2021; Ortega, 2008; Rideout, 2017). Although the spiritualist movement experienced a resurgence in Spain after the First World War (Müllberger, 2016, p. 29), the study of Spanish spiritualism has often remained focused on its 19th century origins, resulting in a relative lack of research on its reception, influence, and modes of dissemination during the 20th century.

The term "spiritualism" encompasses a collection of practices, ideas, and associations that originated in the United States and gained international prominence from the 1850s onward (González de Pablo, 2006; Graus, 2019; Marín Silvestre, 2018; Mateo Avilés, 2011). Central to the movement was the belief that communication with the spirits of the dead was not only possible, but also a source of answers to many of the mysteries of human existence, potentially offering access to wisdom through its perceived capacity to merge science and religion (Asprem, 2014; Barrow, 1986; Noakes, 2019). Within the most explicitly socialist groups, it was even considered that spiritualism would contribute to social revolution, including redistribution of wealth and women's rights (Braude, 1989; Owen, 1989) in the equation.

In Catholic countries, the public dynamics of spiritualism inevitably differed from those prevalent in Protestant countries. Facing more vigilant suspicion and prosecution (Horta, 2004), the spectacularism of 19th century American spiritualism (Natale, 2016) would not find a counterpart in the early 20th century Spanish context. In his seminal work, Horta —who deals specifically with 19th century spiritualism in Catalonia, but offers a performative theory on the relational dynamics of the movement relevant to any research— characterizes *the medium* as both a popular prototype of liberation from social control through the body and as the experiential nucleus of new forms of social organization and utopian communitarianism. Horta argues that spiritualism generated forms of “charismatic convulsion” (p. 87) for those designated as “mediums” —usually, the poorest citizens, and most commonly, illiterate people for whom their own body was utilized as the first and most basic tool through which to achieve social change. This performative expression would have given rise to an “autonomous cosmovision” (p. 98) among spiritualists, one in which certain gestures and behaviors could form an alternative rationale to the one that confined them to the roles of the oppressed.

Understood in performative terms, spiritualism appears as one of the period’s available cultural repertoires, in which the figure of the medium and the whole system that led to the activation of the medium’s supernatural communicative practices could easily have captured the attention of writers and intellectuals who, despite being outsiders to grassroots spiritualism, held a historical interest in questioning Spain’s social and economic order. From this perspective, spiritualist mediation appears, when examined through the lens of literary cultures, as a significant historical model of cultural praxis not only for those seeking liberation from poverty and marginalization, but also for those willing to “terrorize” existing literary models, as Jean Paulhan (2006) would put it.

Against the academic spirit that previous authors, such as Unamuno, had attributed to literary caf  s, the founding group of Pombo articulated their gathering through a markedly *deadly* imaginary. In their foundational “proclama”, they claimed to be dead and wished to act accordingly:

All   dormimos todos, sent  ndonos cada noche como para siempre, en la posici  n perfecta del descanso de los vivos, la posici  n paralela a la perfecta posici  n en el lugar perfecto del descanso de los muertos. Estamos demasiado cansados, cansados de remar contra corriente; cansados de todo. (...) parece

como si nos hubiésemos malogrado, como si hubiésemos quebrado, como si hubiésemos muerto precozmente (*Primera proclama*, 1915, p. 1).

These words, written and published in 1915, do not perform a simple rhetoric of fatigue. Rather, they stage a collective posture of symbolic death that resonates with the imaginaries of spiritualist practices. By declaring themselves “dead”, the Pombians —participating members of the Pombo gathering— suspended the expectations attached to productive authorship, rational discourse, and bourgeois sociability, and instead embraced a mode of collective presence that mirrors spiritualist *séances*. The Pombo café was thus open to becoming a site for the rehearsal of alternative modes of experiencing *literature* while performing *death*.

2. RELOCATING THE SPIRITUALIST *SÉANCE*: THE SCENARIO, THE PERFORMATIVE AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Pombo’s maneuver transformed the pseudo-institutional nature of cafés (Martí Monterde, 2007, p. 189-233) into a ritualized gathering that, as Ortega y Gasset would notice, *performed myth and fantasy*, rather than textually producing it: “en los últimos quince años, el único mito que se ha elaborado es este de ‘Pombo’ (...). Han querido ustedes infeccionar de fantasía el corazón mismo de lo burgués” (Ortega in Martí Monterde, 2007, p. 223). If Pombo functioned as a site for the performative production of myth rather than literary texts, the question then becomes where the techniques and imaginaries that enabled such a transformation were drawn from.

One answer emerges from the very testimonial accounts shared by the Pombians themselves, which support the idea of a casual yet extensive participation of Pombo’s literati in spiritualist activities: “[y]o, que personalmente ni creo ni dejo de creer (esto me ocurre con muchas cosas), he dedicado muchas de mis horas inútiles a estas extrañas prácticas” (1919, p. 82). Not only Antonio Espina, but participants of Pombo such as Carmen de Burgos or Rafael Urbano attest to links with spiritualism. Espina’s quote reveals what the *séances* would signify for Pombo’s loose avant-garde: briefly, a complex set of disobedient performances through which to question the bourgeois regulations of code, semiosis, voice, writing and the body, by way of a socialization based on communitarian presence and shared time.

Spiritualist *séances*, in this sense, offered a structured and processual performative protocol for the creative organization of bodies, voices, gestures, and collective participation. Imagined and created just a few decades before, they functioned not merely as communal rituals, but as complex technical arrangements involving media, devices, bodily postures and sensory regimes that redefined authorship, perception, and agency. Designated mediums, who allegedly channeled the energy of dead spirits toward the participating group, constituted the main conduit for collective communication with the *other* world. Yet their practice also depended on material extensions ranging from pencil and paper to telephones, talking boards, or stethoscopes, and evolved in accordance with available technologies and their costs. Relying, therefore, on a multiplicity of objects and prosthetic phenomena that endowed human life and death with a *liquid* condition, the basic elements of a spiritualist séance at the beginning of the 20th century combined the presence of a group of like-minded people with a fixed and prepared meeting place and a few artifacts for a mediated, otherworldly communication to take place.

Although direct references to Pombo's appropriation of these practices are inevitably scarce, this is most likely how its literary culture —among others— negotiated and absorbed popular performative resources circulating at the time and perceived as having the potential to destroy the bourgeois literary hegemony. Ramón himself explains the choice of the table around which they would sit on Saturdays for their gatherings in these terms:

[E]s del justo tamaño de las lápidas funerarias, y por eso yo espero que mi sepulcro se cubra con ella, porque será una lauda afectuosa, cordial, menos fría que todas las otras, impresionada por mi vida y por la de mis amigos, y porque debajo de ella estaré como debajo de la mesa optimista. (Debajo de las mesas van a parar después de todo los muertos, y por eso acuden a las patas de las mesas cuando se les invoca en las sesiones de espiritismo.) (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 80).

Already by 1900, different authors had been affected by what the press described as a spiritualist fever. Araujo, for instance, denounced this interest as the cause of a “flojedad de la razón” among writers: “[n]o hay por lo mismo que asombrarse de la flojedad de la razón en estos novelistas, ni que sorprenderse de ver que unos creen en el espiritismo y en las mesas giratorias y otros consultan sonámbulas y quirománticos, habiendo quienes no

creyendo en Dios creen en el diablo” (p. 174). What Araujo denounced as a weakening of reason —the “laziness” of not writing, and of remaining apart from the interests and judgments of the public sphere— would later reappear in Pombo as a paradoxical literary value.

Spiritualist séances did not remain confined to explicitly occult practices and popular milieus, but mobilized a broad social body that occasionally included artists and literary authors. This circulation helps explain why spiritualism could operate, for writers of the period, as an available cultural model and not just a belief system for outcasts. For these writers, the séance was a counter-model to the 19th century literary banquet: a collective ritual not grounded in institutional authority or hierarchical speech, but in suspended belief, shared temporality, and performative experimentation. As such, the séance provided a repertoire of practices that could be reactivated in secular cultural spaces, particularly within the informal institutions that characterized early 20th century literary sociability.

Historical sources indicate that small modifications in the basic circuit of the séance enabled different experiential configurations for a given group. In spiritualist gatherings, these arrangements opened the possibility of mediumistic communication: the reception of messages from beyond through the medium’s writing, voice, drawings, and/or movements. In 1925, a reader and writer of *La luz del porvenir* recounted what may be understood as an ideal-type séance:

[N]os reuníamos todos los domingos y días de fiesta por la tarde, de cuatro a ocho, solamente cuatro entusiastas de nuestra doctrina, uno de los cuales era excelente médium mecánico escribiente. El médium (...), se sentaba ante una mesa de despacho, sobre la que se hallaban las hojas de papel, cogía el lápiz y se ponía en disposición de escribir. [...] perdía la consciencia y se ponía a escribir, con letra y sintaxis tan varia, cuando de distintos seres se trataba, y al mismo tiempo tan idénticas, cuando se comunicaba el mismo espíritu, que resultaba curiosísimo observar estas diferencias (*La luz del Porvenir*, 1925, n. 149, p. 73).

This scene condenses what I have elsewhere described as the communicative ontology of spiritualism: a written and bodily system in which mediumistic communication reorganized literacy, authorship, and the social value of writing (Pérez-Rodríguez, 2025). Francine Masiello (2018) has argued that the synesthesia proper to some avant-garde poetics holds a connection with the spiritualist belief that access to intellectual experience

is achieved through the “incarnated perception” of the body. Building on this insight, it can be further argued that such embodied epistemologies directly affected literary writing itself, reconfiguring the author as a medium rather than a sovereign agent. Fernando Pessoa himself understood his writing practice as a form of mediumship, deliberately incarnating different authorial positions through a systematic use of heteronyms, each endowed with distinct handwriting styles (Medeiros, 2016). This conception of writing and authorship emerges within a technological and historical context that mechanized writing (Lyons, 2021), weakened the social indexicality once attached to handwriting, and gave new meanings to the connection between writing bodies and their texts (Pérez Fontdevila, 2023, pp. 37-70). It ultimately shaped a “literary” automatic writing which, inherited from spiritualism, became foundational for surrealism and especially for André Breton’s theorization (Martínez Bravo, 2019).

Taken together, these parallel cases illuminate the broader engagement of different literary cultures with spiritualism, showing that Pombo was part of a shared literary attention to spiritualism during the period: not primarily as a religion or doctrine, but as a repertoire of performative techniques. In the first decades of the twentieth century, an increasingly technological and material historical context reshaped social life and, more specifically, enabled creative popular uses of writing utensils, the printing press, and nineteenth-century *cursilerías*. This process gave rise to different exploratory and performative protocols within literature during the avant-garde decades, as has been studied by Harding (2025) and Bishop (2012).

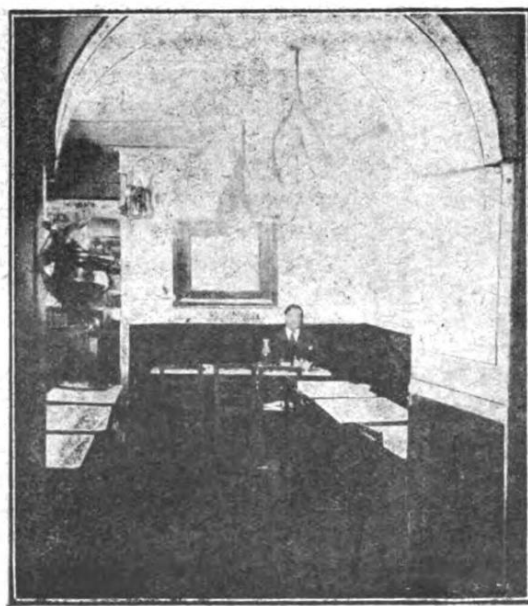
The Spanish spiritualist séance, highly political within the context of a mandatory Catholicism and systemic illiteracy, offered a set of resources that the Pombo gathering learnt from and, up to a certain point, repoliticized to produce a *new aisthesis* and disturb the order of the literary system. This performative and participatory character of Pombo resonates with the theoretical framework developed by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and The Repertoire*, who highlights the ways in which performance can transmit, shape, and activate cultural and historical knowledge. Her notion of “scenario” (2005) elucidates the intersection between Pombo and spiritualism: a scenario combines “scene,” the material setup that preserves the past, and “action,” the performative repertoire that activates it. A “scenario,” rather than reproducing the past, activates its latent cultural possibilities, and requires social participation instead of the contemplative stance proper to patrimonial approaches.

As a recurring artistic instance, Pombo can be read as adhering to Taylor's description of a scenario, since it combined a defined material space with a set of repeated, participatory actions, from conversations and sketches to more complex orchestrated rituals, like its creative banquets. Pombo's main instruction was, quite simply, being together: remaining in shared presence, surrounded by tables, mirrors, dim light, and an atmosphere of cultivated obscurity, in a material arrangement close to what Gumbrecht has called the "production of presence" (2003). Pombo worked toward what Ramón Gómez de la Serna called an "honest emptiness" (*Primera proclama*, 1915, p. 1): a deliberately produced suspension of purpose that functioned as a counter-rule to the effects of constant publishing, networking, and authorial profit. Rather than facilitating circulation, as other gatherings did, Pombo staged a pause, aesthetically designed to interrupt textual productivity as such, a gesture that can be understood as political with regard to the literary field. Pombo was, in fact, governed by a series of explicit *mandamientos* with clear scenic and performative implications. Let us reproduce just a small fraction:

A través de las noches se han ido formando los mandamientos de Pombo. Están en todos. *Primero*. Amar a Pombo sobre todas las cosas. *Segundo*. Sentirse dignos por dentro de estar en Pombo. *Tercero*. Estar llenos del fruto de la semana. *Cuarto*. No echar de menos la noche de fuera. *Quinto*. Ser fuertes hasta renunciar a los tranvías que ya no podrán tomarse a la salida. *Sexto*. Ser sinceros, pero no de sobra. *Séptimo*. Hacer conciencia y aprender desprendimiento en el ámbito concienzudo. *Octavo*. Respetar y temer al espejo sobre todas las cosas, y temer verse en él con la cara cortada de los traidores (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 202).

As the quote shows, every meeting had core operational and attitudinal rules for the gathering, which actively created its aesthetic experience. Over the years, and through a sustained commitment to the estrangement effect of practicing supposedly "trivial" actions and conversational exercises within a deliberately outdated scene, Pombo was constituted as a literary culture in which both the café—an inherited 19th century archive—and the group's practices—external to the printing conventions of literature, yet literary in cultural terms—operated an iterative communal performance. The requirement to affirm the gathering itself and its collective value was part of that, but its literary value was inherited or even stolen: Pombo operated within literature, though without relying on textual literary

production itself. In this way, this archival space and its Pombian praxis were mutually constitutive: the historical materiality of the café enabled a performative repertoire that insisted on the material past and the presence of death, continually reactivating cultural possibilities embedded in the scene.



Yo solo en *nuestra* capilla antes de que el cuadro de Solana ocupase el sitio del espejo.

Fig. 1. Ramón Gómez de la Serna and a mirror in Pombo. 1923, p. LII

It is from this configuration that Pombo's specific scenario —its mirrors, lighting, and controlled darkness— acquires analytical relevance. We can go further and ask: what were the specific material elements that sustained Pombo as a performative space?

3. OBJECTS FOR THE PAST: A MATERIAL 19TH CENTURY WITHIN POMBO

As a performative literary space, Pombo sustained itself with objects, surfaces, and visual devices through which presence, death, and literary value were staged. Understood as a practical and popular precedent for avant-garde performativity, spiritualism offers a particularly clear example of the material and prosthetic orientation of early 20th century literary

cultures (Highfill, 2014). As mentioned above, spiritualist practices relied on specific writing, communicative or inscriptive procedures which were usually developed in markedly non-institutional spaces, such as private homes or even pharmacies (Pérez Méndez, 1934). Apart from the use of cameras or phonographs, certain strands of spiritualism even articulated an explicitly hyper-materialist stance through telekinesis, postulating the reception of “contributions” from the other world.² At Pombo, likewise, the attention to small, obsolete, or marginal objects was not incidental, and Gómez de la Serna was keen to conceptualize this attention as part of Pombo’s constitutive interest in death (1999a; 1999b).

Gas lamps, low ceilings, small mirrors, and worn furniture —described in detail in Pombo’s chronicles (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 17-64)— were deliberately orchestrated against triumphalist narratives of novelty and progress of the early 20th century. The intentional arrangement and designation of uses created an atmosphere that was both intimate and social, which Gómez de la Serna specifically described, first and foremost, as a “crypt” (p. 1). In this sense, the café and the gathering of Pombo materialized a scenario for collective presence aligned with spiritualist techniques: a ritualized space in which things actively mediated sociability, temporality, and literary commonplaces.

Among these objects, the small mirrors hanging on Pombo’s walls played a particularly significant role. They enabled a playful artistic intervention in a long esoteric tradition around mirrors (Melchior-Bonnet, 2002), a tradition explicitly referenced in *Pombo*’s section “Los ojos del tiempo” (pp. 31-38), where Gómez de la Serna claims that “todos morimos en los espejos antes que en la verdadera muerte” (p. 34). Mirrors had long been associated with popular theories about the transmission of energy between bodies, diabolical qualities and even the myth of the *doppelgänger* (Warner, 2008). Although by the time Pombo’s scenario was functioning, mirrors had already begun to lose part of their spectral value —due to their technical cheapening and mass marketing—, Pombo’s 19th century mirrors were part of a sought-for and culturally charged choice, precisely indebted to this very obsolescence. By breaking the fiction of the living, “los espejos

² These contributions (“*aportes*”) were small objects allegedly delivered by spirits to the groups (F.G.R. 1913). As documented by spiritualists themselves, they included medals (“una medallita de plata oscidada [sic]”), dolls (“un niño de celuloide de pequenísimas dimensiones incrustado en una pera en dulce” (35)) and other small mass-produced goods.

revelan y ponen de manifiesto lo que es nuestra mentira (...) lo que está en ellos es el tiempo” (p. 31).

Mirrors at Pombo facilitated the conceptualization of the space itself as a crypt; as traces of a past luxury —plausibly carrying a cultural openness to interpersonal play between the living and the dead—, they were closely aligned with the material culture of spiritualism and the old tradition of consulting oracles of the dead. Not surprisingly, they were the main material element to guarantee the presence of 19th century authors such as Goya and, most notably, Mariano José de Larra —a Romantic writer known for having committed suicide in front of a mirror— in the gathering, while simultaneously invoking the future death of whoever looked into them: “será por ellos por donde miraremos cuando hayamos muerto, porque los muertos, gracias a los espejos, no carecen de mirada” (p. 35). In this scenario, Pombians played with death in two ways: as a materially accessible, cross-class rehearsal of one’s own demise, and, as I later argue, as a means of intervening in the Spanish canon.

This spectral logic of presence created through hanging and invoked images was further reinforced when the gathering was captured in José Gutiérrez Solana’s well-known painting *La tertulia del café Pombo* (1920), which inserted a self-referential image into the very space where the gathering still took place. Gómez de la Serna commented that, upon looking at the artwork, he saw himself and his friends as “muñecos de cera o muñecos de un gran escaparate o fantasmas de un gran espejo [...] en otro espacio que el de la vida [...], ya como en la muerte” (1999b, p. 363). Years later, Pérez Ferrero would recall the importance of this material and attitudinal invocation of spirits: “en los discretos espejos de Pombo nos hacíamos la ilusión de que se reflejaban, al conjuro de los versos que iba encadenando Solana y de las intervenciones de RAMÓN, las figuras de asistentes de tiempos pasados, los cuales querían ser también de la tertulia” (1974, p. 22). Painting and mirrors thus converged in producing a layered scenario of framed visual goods in which Pombo appeared as a space inhabited, simultaneously, by the living and the dead.

The ambivalence of mirrors as mediators of presence was explicitly problematized in 1937 by José Bergamín, a former member of the gathering, who invoked the figure of Mariano José de Larra at a moment when the magic of the gathering had already been lost. Ramón Gómez de la Serna had fled the country, and many Pombians either belonged to the Falange or supported the *coup d’état*. Writing in Larra’s name, Bergamín denounced the isolating force of mirrors, claiming that “el espejo es siempre mortal

porque aísla, separa al hombre de sí mismo,” and suggesting that Larra had ultimately let himself be driven to suicide *by the mirror* (*dejarse suicidar por el espejo*). Bergamín’s reading marks a historical and symbolic threshold, illustrating the definitive rupture that the Civil War would bring to Pombo, and exposing the performatively layered meanings of the Pombian mirrors.

If mirrors staged death as a scenically sustained literary and communal condition, photography, for its part, offered a way of fixing that condition beyond the moment of presence. The ephemeral portraits imagined through Pombo’s mirrors during the gathering found an actual archival counterpart built on stage every Saturday: the *Álbum de Pombo*. A peculiar multimedia book that gathered passport photos and signatures, the album was collected upon each member’s incorporation into the gathering (Gómez de la Serna, 1999b, p. 612). As has been noted, 19th century and early 20th century photography, specifically portraits and self-portraits, were reminiscent of, and deeply entangled with, occult interpretations of visual media (Natale, 2016; Ardanuy and Csefkó, 2018): the first cultural reception of photography challenged ideas about death and impermanence. Multiple-exposure techniques were central to spirit photography, fostering beliefs that the photographic surface could capture what escaped ordinary vision. Drawing on older mirror-based imaginaries, modern photography, thus, enabled the interpretation of exposure marks as “magnetic ectoplasm”.

This visual and material constellation allows us to read Pombo’s mirrors and photographs not as decorative or documentary elements, but as necessary components of a performative protocol inherited from occult and spiritualist material cultures. Where mirrors served to activate older esoteric notions of occult presences *in literary terms*, photography, in turn, extended this logic by fixing *deadly* visual traces into a book, allowing Pombians’ portraits to be understood in explicitly mortal terms. Pombian mirrors, and small café mirrors in general, were perceived by Gómez de la Serna as a *minor* version of the modern visual technologies that defy the limits of preservation of the human body. Much like spirit photography, and in keeping with Ramón’s own understanding of photographic portraiture as bound to inertness and the “dead thing” (Huergo 2023), Pombo’s passport portraits did not function as neutral records of identity, but as posthumous *literary* inscriptions, a kind of metonymic and expanded mirrors: they captured the bodies of Pombo’s members as already exposed to disappearance, transforming their presence into an archive by installing the photographs in a book (and album) proper to Pombo’s prepared 19th century stage.

Formally innovative —while culturally vernacular— passport photos and mirrors preserved *but* transformed the material repertoire of spiritualism for Pombo. Together, they enabled a scenario in which portraits, as square, round or rectangular surfaces suitable for capturing human faces, carried the value of being already aligned with death, thus translating spiritualist ideas about the ways in which certain objects could mediate death and the dead to a literary context. Contrary to the scientific aspirations that guided many contemporary spiritualist groups, Pombo's reception of spiritualist scenic elements and material culture was instead used for the creation of an aesthetic experience for a literary culture in flight from literature. Ultimately, the sustained fiction of a sustained conviviality with the dead gave Pombo a bizarre literary legitimacy not attainable through writing. The dead allowed for an intervention in the canon which, like the spiritualists, did not ask for permission.

LA SAGRADA CRIPTA DE POMBO

LOS QUE HAN PASADO POR POMBO



Jean Cassou. — Gerardo de Diego. — Ramos Castro. — Américo Castro. — Dr. Lafora. — Luis Araquistain. — Ángel Dotor. — Tito. — Oliverio Gironde. — García Mercadal.

Fig. 2. Passport photos of some “pombianos”. Gómez de la Serna, 1923, p. 467

4. DEATH AND THE DEAD: AUTHORS ESCAPING SPANISH LITERARY HISTORY

The questioning of fixed and monumental accounts of the past had already been articulated, several decades before Pombo's activities, in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Unfashionable Observations* (1874). Nietzsche had argued that, in the breakdown of historical narratives, it was possible to mobilize the past for the needs of the present. Contemporaneous with Nietzsche, 19th century spiritualist practices, by canceling the understanding of death as a final withdrawal from the public sphere, had already introduced a radical rupture with so-called "monumental History".

Mediumistic communication, through its performative protocols, actively denied the possibility of an objective standpoint destined to decide what role dead authors were to play in contemporary societies. The spiritualist invocation of deceased authors who, from beyond death, commented on the public narratives attached to their names, biographies, or works, enabled alternative versions of cultural history to emerge. As Karpenko has noted, spiritualism produced a "collapse of temporal parameters" (p. 46), unsettling historical linearity. This logic resonates with Fernández Utrera's interpretation of Pombo's banquets as "counter-banquets" designed to dispute cultural dogmatisms (2024, p. 232). Read together, these perspectives allow for a deeper understanding of the role played by death and the dead within Pombo: as this section shows, they were used as a critical mechanism for intervening in literary history.

Beyond serving as the condition underpinning spiritualist hypotheses, death was a central concern for many Pombians, and arguably the motif that gave coherence to a literary gathering openly suspicious of literary production as such. As a gesture of what might be termed *suprahistorical sincerity*, for Pombo, death exposed the banality of both literary making and authorial celebration. Figures such as Romero-Calvet and Ramón Gómez de la Serna—who shared the project *Los muertos y las muertas*, and engaged obsessively with the theme of death throughout their careers—were far from isolated in Pombo; they were surrounded by many like-minded necromantics: José Gutiérrez-Solana's *La España negra* (1920), Rafael Urbano's *Manual del perfecto enfermo* (1911)—Urbano was a translator of spiritualist manuals and a self-declared theosophist—the heterodox Catholic José Bergamín, Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent (*El secreto de la vida y de la muerte*, 1924), and even Rafael Cansinos-Assens—an early member who had explored the erotic aesthetics of capital punishment (*Estética y erotismo de la pena de muerte*,

1916)— all contributed to a conversational atmosphere in which death operated both as a shared cultural repertoire and as a thematic concern.

However, the figure who most explicitly engaged with spiritualism from a literary and narrative standpoint was not, strictly speaking, a regular member of Pombo. Spiritualism powerfully attracted the feminist writer and journalist Carmen de Burgos —Ramón Gómez de la Serna's partner between 1908 and 1929 (Ubach Medina, 2010)—, who should be considered a key Pombian behind the scenes³. It was Burgos who, in 1922 and from Portugal, published an entire novel devoted to the spiritualist movement. Set in Estoril and illustrated by the Portuguese Pombian artist Leal da Câmara, *El retorno* registers the broad cultural appeal of spiritualism among bourgeois and aristocratic circles. Although Burgos, as an author, maintained a skeptical position regarding spiritualist beliefs (Correa Ramón, 2021), *El retorno* testifies to the imaginative and affective force that spiritualism exerted upon her literary sensibility. Significantly, the novel includes a *séance* in which the spirit of Mariano José de Larra is invoked (p. 46), a figure whom Burgos had already converted into an object of biographical and affective recovery in *Fígaro* (1919) —a book with an epilogue by Gómez de la Serna. The episode corresponds closely to Burgos's trajectory: her 1901 visit to Larra's grave, her interest in spiritualism, and her role in the 1909 banquet all preceded her biography of Larra (Núñez Rey, 2021, pp. 95-98). Burgos's exclusion from Pombo cannot be addressed here, but these earlier experiences suggest that Pombo's performative imagination was already marked by her explorations, as well as by the legacy of female literary salons —including her own—.

The mythologization of Mariano José de Larra at Pombo owed much to the café's 19th century materiality covered in the previous section, particularly its mirrors, which enabled the scenario to formulate the symbolic co-presence of the writer as a permanent *contertulio*. Larra was said to appear every Saturday, alongside the living participants of the gathering. One mirror, in particular, was designated as the reflective surface of Larra's dead authorship: “hay otros dos espejos dorados, los espejos teatrales, y de una elegancia descorazonadora, en que se miró Larra antes de matarse. Uno de los dos es el de Larra” (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 34).

³ Although not a member of Pombo's Saturday nights, she spent many “idas en secreto” there, as beautifully documented in Pombo's books: “algunas de esas noches secretas voy a cenar con una mujer que ha llenado de una amistad única media vida mía (...). Doce años (...) bien merecen que yo perpetúe su presencia en Pombo” (Gómez de la Serna, 1999a, p. 194).

Through his assigned mirror, Larra could be more easily mobilized within the gathering in an open-ended manner, allowing for scenic reactivations and the suspension of official narratives.

The 1909 banquet in honor of Larra was held at Café Fornos six years before Pombo officially began, yet was later described by Ramón as “el preámbulo de las cenas [de Pombo]” (Gómez de la Serna, 1999b, p. 456). It has been consistently included in historical accounts of the group, and provides evidence of a shared interest in spiritualism cultivated by Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Carmen de Burgos. Drawing on both 19th century banquet traditions and spiritualist ritual forms, the tribute gathered over a hundred guests around a table presided over by a chair reserved for Larra’s spirit, and included “un cubierto preparado” (p. 450) for the dead.

In his chronicle of the event, Gómez de la Serna described the “ágape” as a “valiente cita con las sombras” (p. 451), in which “todos somos como videntes” (p. 454). Again, if the mirrors did not contain a literal image of Larra, but allowed him to be imagined, the shadows emphasized a particular, emotionally charged vision that replicated the restlessness and heightened attention characteristic of mediumistic séances. In her speech, transcribed in *La sagrada cripta de Pombo* by Ramón, Carmen de Burgos explicitly acknowledged the spiritualist genealogy of the event: “Temblorosa como en las sesiones de espiritismo en que hemos visto aparecer bajo todas las luces al muerto que hemos evocado, me levanto a hablar con él, frente a frente. ¿Qué decirle?” (p. 451). The references to the materiality and embodiment of spiritualist séances, here, served to mark the prerequisites for collective *literary* meaning-making, while the question seemed to invert the usual communicative procedure of spiritualist séances: Larra was summoned not to speak, but to be spoken to.

Larra embodied a mode of authorship structurally compatible with spiritualism: his premature death and his social radicalism allowed for a fruitful appropriation. Just like in the séances described in *El retorno*, participants of Larra’s *ágape* spent hours gathered “alrededor de la mesa” (Gómez de la Serna, 1999b, p. 451). Yet, unlike spiritualist séances, the *ágape* demanded a more explicitly active participation through *literature*: the spiritualist estrangement of attention was combined with the creative handling of banquet conventions, as far as sociability was concerned. At the same time, the invocation of literature, history, and their commonplaces — together with Larra’s spectral return as a figure damaged by literary history itself — inevitably altered the perception of what literary history could be, but still was not. Larra’s invoked return enabled the gathering to reclaim him

as an *unfinished author*, open to reinterpretation, resistant to historical closure and therefore resistant to the canon “as a sign of [biased] tradition inherited by all” (Davis, 2012, p. 63).

Far from unprecedented, the self-assignment of a canonical author as the symbolic guardian of a recurring gathering had long been a core mechanism of spiritualist culture. As Enns (2012) pointed out, making an author “undead” through spiritualist speaking/writing succeeded in borrowing that ghost’s “prestige”. The Spiritualist Society of Zaragoza can serve as a good example of this mechanism: according to their own records, their séances were safeguarded by Cervantes himself (Bassols, 1872). From the point of view of techniques and procedures, when passed on to literary cultures, the ecstatic charisma of spiritualist mediums was just a toolbox to *literarily* play with; after all, authorship was hardly foreign to literature. The innovation, though, was its revelation as a circumstantial performative instance, open to play. In the case of Pombo, instead of social revolution, dead authors served the construction of a counterpower capable of rewriting Spanish literary history from within.

The personification of the dead in Pombo was not limited to Larra, but extended to many “contertulios del pasado” from whom Pombians should learn, and who, in turn, could learn from the living members of the gathering (1999b, p. 264). This blurring of living and dead Pombians became explicit in the “Banquete de fisonomías y trajes de época,” staged in 1923, which deliberately displaced the 20th century into the 19th. Participants, asked to choose cultural aspects from their predecessors, combined 19th century dress and conduct codes with music, food, wigs, and recitations of the “versos peores de la época” (1999b, p. 536).

As an expanded and rewritten séance, the banquet allowed the Pombians to become mediums at will and embody the anonymous or authorial presences of “unos resucitados” from the past, who, as dead, would finally be capable of “darse cuenta de la realidad” (p. 536) regarding history, time or social conventions. The somewhat comical fusion of the real-life *literatos* —among them, Tomás Borrás, Edgar Neville or José Bergamín— with the imagined rebellious figures of cultural Romanticism —including Larra— transformed Pombo into a performative fiction, a scenario where the literary past could be reworked. Moreover, the performative force of the gathering, imbued with the power of a collective representation of the past, would even spill out into the streets that night. Wandering around Madrid, a group of four —Neville, Chabás, Bergamín and Gómez de la Serna— paraded their death through the city:

Nos dedicamos a saludar las lápidas conmemorativas que hay en las casas en que murieron o nacieron nuestros antepasados, pasando frente a ellas en la rauda calesa del automóvil. Nos quitamos los sombreros de copa ante la lápida de Cervantes, de Larra, de Lope de Vega, de Arrieta, de Castelar, de Zorrilla, de Campoamor y hasta ante la de Núñez de Arce.

Llegamos hasta el cementerio de San Martín. Era el cementerio en que estaban enterrados los que llevaron nuestros mismos trajes y nuestros mismos sombreros de copa grises y que sentimos con emoción contestativa cómo agradecieron nuestra visita. (...) . Nos dieron ganas de decimos unos a otros:

—Qué, se queda usted?

—¿Qué, nos quedamos para siempre en nuestra caja correspondiente o nos volvemos? (Gómez de la Serna, 1999b, p. 387-388)

The *Banquete de fisonomías y trajes de época* radicalized Pombo's engagement with death by shifting from the invocation of ghosts through objects to the collective, performative and historical embodiment of dead authors by the very members of the gathering. By dressing as figures from the 19th century and deliberately adopting outdated aesthetic and social codes, the participants ceased to summon the dead from the outside—they became the dead themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Through an analysis of the performative literary culture of Pombo, this article has explored the material and technical characteristics that spiritualism transferred to Spanish literary culture of the early 20th century. Read against the background of spiritualist practices—particularly as studied in Anglo-American contexts (Rainey, 1998; Sconce, 2005; Natale, 2016)—Pombo emerges not merely as an unimportant literary gathering or minor avant-garde movement, but as a performative response to the tensions surrounding technology, authorship, mediation, the canon and the logistics of the public sphere in early 20th century literary culture. Its rejection of modernity, its reliance on an outdated material setting, and its insistence on repetition and presence displaced writing from the center of literary life, favoring instead forms that resonate with the protocols of spiritualist cultures and their séances.

In this regard, Rosenheim's observation that Lizzie Doten's spiritualist writing constituted not a plagiarism of texts but of a "cultural space" (1996) proves particularly illuminating to trace the transition from spiritualist dead authors to the dead of Pombo. What spiritualism had appropriated from the

literary system was not authorship in the strict sense, but its instability across the boundaries of life and afterlife. Pombo, in turn, constituted a space in which objects, bodies and the insistence on death produced a *literary* mode of being-together irreducible to textual production. In this sense, Pombo adopted elements of spiritualist performativity to negotiate its own place within the literary system, redefining *literary belonging* beyond writing and publication. This illustrates a further turn in the aforementioned plagiarism: Pombo, an appropriation of spiritualist appropriation, by reinserting “undead authors” like Mariano José de Larra back into the literary system of the 20th century, transformed spiritualist authorship into an artistic experience and a simultaneous political intervention. The scenario it constructed around the dead functioned as a rejection of the mandate to produce texts, while also functioning as a toolbox to question and reinterpret the value and meanings of literary history. Taken together, the findings of this article suggest that links between spiritualism and literature go far beyond thematic and representational concerns, being present in performative terms through different experimental practices. As a repertoire of practices, literary interpretations of spiritualism had the power to shape sociability, authorship, and the historical imagination of the canon.

In relation to the Spanish territory, recent scholarship has productively examined both the literary relevance and ideological positioning of some specific Spanish spiritualist figures (Correa Ramón, 2021; Lecointre, 2025), and the impact that spiritualism exerted on the imaginaries and practices of already acknowledged authors (Durán López and Flores Ruiz, 2020; Regueiro Salgado, 2014). The present article has sought to complement these findings by offering a focused case study that, although far from attaining a desirable overarching synthesis of Spanish literary spiritualism, advances the state of the art by putting the history of Pombo’s literary culture and its *unwriting* in dialogue with the technical history of early spiritualist cultures.

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