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The Early (Feminist) Essays of Victoria Ocampo

Abstract

This study examines the essays written by Ocampo between 1920 and 1934, prior to the time when she publicly voiced her adhesion to feminism and the rights of women in Argentine society. In these works from her *Testimonios* in which Ocampo struggles to find her voice as a female writer, the malleable essay serves her need to engage in discursive dialogues from the margins of the literary culture of her time. Both as a woman and a member of the oligarchy, she questions cultural assumptions and gender-based binary structures common among the male writers of her time, many of whom she knew personally. Using rhetorical strategies that show the self-reflexive and subversive nature of her writing, Ocampo reads and reinterprets these works from a parenthetical feminist perspective, contesting their intellectual and aesthetic biases. The active agency of the reader as writer in these early essays shows Ocampo's awareness of her own unorthodox subject position—alienated from the conventions of her class, her gender, her national culture and language. Her autobiographical musings and her engagement with literary modernity in the 1920s and 1930s reveal a woman who accepted the liabilities of articulating an autonomous self, both in a European and a Latin American context. The influence of family bonds and patriarchal morality decisively shaped, but did not ultimately control, the way Victoria Ocampo eventually defined herself as a feminist author.

Keywords

Victoria Ocampo, feminism, feminist writings, women's rights, Argentine literature, society, *Testimonios*, aesthetic bias, self, autobiography, autonomy, family

The Early (Feminist) Essays of Victoria Ocampo

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Victoria Ocampo is a major feminist writer of the precursor period who broke the molds of her gender and class in Argentina in the early part of this century. The way in which she and other early feminist writers negotiated the difficult terrain between the private and public spheres of their society is an important part of Latin American intellectual history which has yet to be fully documented. Recent studies point out that Latin American women have historically experienced their gender identity differently—particularly the family-connected aspect of their personal lives—and that this must be taken into account when interpreting their public participation.¹

Ocampo's experience as the eldest daughter of a prominent family of the Argentine oligarchy is central to an understanding of her development as a feminist. Isolated both by gender and class, her early years were socially and intellectually circumscribed.²

The frustrations she suffered in her late teens as a consequence are documented in her 1906-1912 letters to Delfina Bunge, a young woman of similar background a few years her senior. In this intimate correspondence, originally written in French, Ocampo expressed the private self even her family did not know or understand. The following excerpt from a letter written to Delfina when Victoria was nineteen shows how her intelligence was a curse in a frivolous oligarchic society:

Te escribo, como siempre, para quejarme y decirte que la vida es estúpida, el mundo injusto, el destino ciego, la *Sociedad* idiota, y nada más. . . . tengo casi todo lo que se puede tener; una cosa me molesta: la inteligencia. *Bête ou ange*; acepto lo uno o lo otro. Pero no acepto tener patas y alas al mismo tiempo. Y eso es lo que me pasa. . . . Si existe Dios, ¿por qué es tan cruel? ¿Por qué imponerle a uno un combate entre la cabeza y el corazón; por qué un poder de razonamiento y una intensidad de sensaciones contradictorias?

As always, I am writing you to complain and say that life is stupid, the world unjust, destiny blind, "society" idiotic, and nothing more . . . I have almost everything anyone could want, but one thing disturbs me: intelligence. *Bête ou ange*; I can accept one or the other. But I cannot accept having paws and wings at the same time. And that is my problem. . . . If God exists, why is He so cruel? Why impose on someone a battle between head and heart? Why a power to reason and an intensity of contradictory emotions? (*Autobiografía II*, 122)

Giving in to convention, Ocampo married at age twenty-two and soon repented the decision. Divorce was not an option, so for eight years she lived in the same house with her estranged husband, hiding her private life in order not to upset her tradition-bound parents.³ It was during these years that Victoria turned to writing in order to find self-understanding. Always a voracious reader, she penned her first essays in reaction to books she found personally meaningful. A few pieces were published in *La Nación* in the early 1920s, an important first step toward achieving intellectual identity in an atmosphere that was hostile to the notion of women as thinking subjects.⁴ Within her own class Ocampo found a few women like herself who shared a passion for literature, but the nature of her cultural formation also separated Ocampo from women writers of other social classes, such as her contemporary, Alfonsina Storni.⁵

The sense of intellectual solitude she felt in these years was compounded by the schizophrenic nature of her cultural position as an Argentine woman educated in the European

mold who felt most comfortable writing in French not Spanish. This was not unusual among the upper classes; but whereas men could move freely between the private and public literary spheres of the twenties, women of the oligarchy were expected to confine their meager knowledge of foreign languages and literatures to acceptable modes of female cultural consumption and adornment. Ocampo transgressed this norm by using her knowledge of French and English for intellectually ambitious objectives.⁶ She may also have realized that writing and publishing in French was a way of emphasizing her alterity and claiming legitimacy as a transnational writer whose primary linguistic affiliation was with a language and culture considered more prestigious than Spanish.⁷

The struggle from the margins to interrupt male monologues and inject a female voice is the constant subtext of Ocampo's early essays, written between 1920 and 1934, some for publication and others delivered as talks. Most of them can be found in Ocampo's first volume of *Testimonios* (1935). This collection of essays appeared at the same time as her active engagement in feminist politics in a campaign mounted by the Argentine Women's Union, of which she was president, to preserve women's civil rights.⁸ The public emergence of her feminist voice in writing is found in the preface to this first volume of *Testimonios* and entitled "Carta a Virginia Woolf" 'Letter to Virginia Woolf.' This pivotal essay, which I have analyzed elsewhere, was inspired by meeting Woolf in 1934, although Victoria had first read *A Room of One's Own* five years earlier.⁹ The decision to place it at the head of her first volume of *Testimonios* is extremely significant. In these pages Ocampo declares her intention: "Ilegar a escribir un día, más o menos bien, más o menos mal, pero *como una mujer*" 'to be able to write one day, more or less well, more or less poorly, but *as a woman*' (12). The obstacles in the path of a South American woman writer, says Victoria citing Woolf, "in the midst of a purely patriarchal society," are akin to those of her English counterparts, "semejante, pero peor, Virginia" 'similar, but worse, Virginia' (16). To the reader of the essays that followed, Ocampo seems to say that she *is* writing like a woman in this volume, despite the low-key approach of her early essays. In fact, the interpretive act of reading between the lines of these first writings is analogous to the sensitive

ment of her female voice within the dominant male discourse of her time.

An important element in the scenario of her early career as a writer is the fact that this first volume of her essays was published in Spain by the *Revista de Occidente* Press, directed by José Ortega y Gasset, with whom Ocampo had maintained a long friendship.¹⁰ Ortega's traditional ideas about women and gender roles had created tensions between them on numerous occasions, not the least being his epilogue to her long essay on Dante, published in 1924 also by the *Revista de Occidente* Press. In that epilogue Ortega had praised her writing, but his remarks were couched in such chauvinistic prose that Victoria felt compelled to write a public reply in 1931, later published in this first volume of *Testimonios*. Respectful in tone and indirect enough to spare his masculine dignity, her "Contestación a un epílogo de Ortega y Gasset" 'Answer to an Epilogue by Ortega y Gasset' actually *contests* Ortega's concept of a "nueva salud"—or new moral hygiene—on the basis that he does not recognize the integral relationship of flesh and spirit in his dualistic philosophy.¹¹ This was not the only essay in the collection to call Ortega to task for his androcentric ideas; in "Anna de Noailles y su poesía" 'Anna de Noailles and Her Poetry,' written in 1933, Ocampo's remarks on Noailles' antifeminism include an explicit criticism of Ortega's notion of women's creative talents—a lengthy passage that directly challenges the eminent *Pensador's* 'Thinker's' theories of gender. Ortega, known to be sensitive on this subject, took offense when he read it, so Ocampo deleted one especially tough passage when the essay was published by Ortega's press.¹² Considering the overt feminism of Ocampo's preface and some of the later essays in the book, its publication was a coup for women's expression within the literary domain of the master-writer himself.

In her early essays, from 1920 to 1934, we can see how Ocampo gradually articulated a gendered identity through dialogic interaction with writers, readers, critics, and imagined interlocutors. Unlike her early private letters to Delfina or her openly feminist essays of 1936, these first forays into public writing are obliquely gender-focused. As a thinking female, Ocampo is constantly aware of her subject position, sensitive to the androcentric ideologies of her time and to the

risks of challenging them head-on. Negotiating this intellectual borderland, her self-assurance gradually grows as she brings her gendered voice into the text, gingerly questioning hierarchical and sexist binary structures with brief digressions, anecdotes, and asides that interrupt and inject the female perspective. In these essays Ocampo's feminism is parenthetical; she seems to discover, as Hélène Cixous put it forty years later, "that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live." (254).

The feminist nature of her early essays has escaped the critical attention of scholars who often chide Ocampo for being ambivalent, of speaking too often "if not *with* a man's voice, *through* men's voices" (Molloy 74), or for being "torn between adherence to male models and the need of self-affirmation" (Greenberg 8). I don't subscribe to this theory of conflicted gender identity in Ocampo's case or to the suggestion that she still supported patriarchal values of the ruling class. Ocampo could be patrician and even arrogant at times, but she was not sympathetic to the patriarchy. A close reading of her early essays proves that her writing was consciously differentiated by gender, even in the early years, and that her admiration for male authors did not involve silencing her own voice. These essays—texts that must be seen in their cultural context—can tell us a great deal about conjunctions between gender and class in Argentina; they also indicate how Ocampo negotiated the formidable literary prejudices of her time to emerge, after the founding of *Sur* in 1931, as one of the most powerful and admired literary women in Latin America.

There are eighteen essays from these early years published in her first volume of *Testimonios*.¹³ The first three, from 1920 and 1921, show the work of a tentative writer gradually building the confidence to share ideas that she found compelling. The self-reflexive nature of these pieces allows us to see how they constitute not only a justification of her entry into literary discourse but also the personal testimony of her experience as a woman consuming and producing literature from a particular Latin American perspective. They show how Ocampo appropriates modern ideas—particularly Ortega y Gasset's philosophy of "la razón vital," but others too, such as Henri Bergson's "spiritual energy,"¹⁴ C. G. Jung's theory of

psychological types, and Waldo Frank's notion of "Our America"—and molds them to the individual female perspective.¹⁵

Chronologically, the earliest essay in this volume is from 1920 and entitled "Babel," a reference to the biblical story of mankind's hubris in trying to build a tower to the heavens. Jehovah's punishment, says Genesis 11:7, was to "confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." Ocampo begins this essay in a conversational, autobiographical voice, inviting the reader to meditate, as she herself has since childhood, on the meaning of the story of Babel. The counter-interpretation she then offers is that God did not create many languages but that He modified the *perception* that each person's brain had of the same words: "Las palabras continuaron, pues, siendo exteriormente lo que hasta entonces habían sido; pero, internamente, se diferenciaron para cada hombre" (46). 'The words, then, remained externally what they had been before, but internally they became different for each person.' In this circumstance, language is not the issue but rather personal point of view—presumably a point of view acquired through social experience. If each perspective is equally viable, then meaning is no longer singular but plural.¹⁶ To make her point, Ocampo aduces the pointed example of the word "equality," which itself has different meanings for different speakers, proving that the fundamental nature of human experience is difference not sameness. Positing this multiplicity of truths at a time when women were politically, socially, and intellectually denied any right to define meaning for themselves, Ocampo implicitly affirms the right to express an ex-centric female perspective. She cites Dante ("Quanto natura a sentir ti dispuose . . .") to claim that equality is based on the law of nature, not of man. If all human experience is fundamentally unequal, any imposition of normative values is both illogical and unjust. This important first essay sets the tone for other essays to follow. From her subject position, it is both defiant and subversive, but to capture its full meaning one must read from a perspective sympathetic to her own.¹⁷

In another essay from 1920, "Al margen de Ruskin (Algunas reflexiones sobre la lectura)" "In Ruskin's Margin (Some

Reflections About Reading),’ Ocampo uses a technique that will become one of her stylistic trademarks. First she expresses profound admiration for a writer (usually a male writer), and then she points out a discrepancy between her way of understanding something and his. In John Ruskin’s case, the topic is the correct way to read books. According to him, one should read to be instructed and read only books that teach what you don’t already know. Victoria argues, however, that reading can be a mirror for reflecting latent thoughts, a means to describe more clearly what one already senses, not just to inscribe, as on a *tabula rasa*, the thoughts of others. Her way of reading includes the active agency of the reader—in this case, the female reader, for whom Ruskin’s book, *Sesame and Lilies* (1871), was partially intended. It also recognizes that silence and ignorance are not synonymous (*pace* Sor Juana!):

comprender de primera intención (es casi “re-conocer” lo que quiero decir) es de seguro, lo repito, haber llevado oscuramente, en silencio, lo que otros, más fuertes que nosotros, supieron arrancar de las tinieblas y formular en alta voz. ¡Qué más natural que sentir, cuando uno de estos seres privilegiados nos habla, que hemos vuelto a encontrarnos?

to understand at first reading (to “re-cognize” is almost what I mean here) is surely, I repeat, to have carried deep within, in silence, what others stronger than ourselves managed to grasp in the dark and articulate aloud. What is more natural than to feel, when one of those privileged beings talks to us, that we have found ourselves once again? (60-61)

The essay on Ruskin begins and ends with explicit references to gender difference. In both cases, Ocampo comments on Ruskin’s approach to works of art—which was manifestly masculine in perspective—and in both cases she postulates another, feminine vision of the same image. Most telling is the example that begins her essay: Ocampo cites Ruskin’s affirmation that a beautiful human creature “also possessing a brain” is a more marvelous thing than the most perfect work of art (55). She then says that the splendid image of Ruskin, in

a portrait that she has seen of him, makes her think that that author himself was just such a creature. The aesthetic table has been turned and once again, from the margins, the female reader gracefully challenges the great master and contests his biased perspective. Her message, although not overtly feminist, is unmistakably oppositional. As she says quite sincerely and frankly near the end of the essay: “Es singularmente deprimente creer que tenemos razón contra aquellos a quienes admiramos” ‘It is singularly depressing to believe that we are right and those we admire are not’ (62).

Two subsequent essays in this volume, written in 1926 and 1927, further articulate Ocampo’s approach to literature and the arts from a gendered perspective. In “Jacques Rivière (*A La Trace de Dieu*),” she prefaces her thoughts about Rivière with a brief personal rejoinder to remarks made in Argentina about her way of reading and writing:

Alguien decía en una ocasión, a propósito de no sé qué fragmento de prosa firmado por mí: “¡ Qué bien se ve que, a pesar de todo, es una mujer! Su admiración está siempre hecha de acquiescencia; su crítica es una adhesión incondicional.” A esto debo responder:

1. ¡ Qué bien se ve, a pesar de todo, que es un hombre!
2. Que yo escribo para mí, para explicarme a mí misma las cosas, y que no experimento placer al hablar de un libro sino cuando me gusta.

Someone once said, with regard to some fragment of prose signed by me: “How clearly one sees, after all, that she is a woman! Her admiration is always born of acquiescence; her commentary is an unconditional allegiance.” To this, I must respond:

1. How clearly one sees, after all, that he is a man!
2. That I write for myself, to explain things to myself, and that I do not find any pleasure in speaking about a book except when I like it. (79)

As her rejoinder shows, gender stereotyping of women's writing was a common put-down. Ironically, her first essay on Dante had led one famous male critic to warn her against being too pedantic and another against being too personal! In the present case, she draws attention to the injustice of these shallow judgments by showing that her way of reading and writing was shared by the respected French writer, Jacques Rivière. The subject of his book is the search for God, a spiritual and intellectual need born out of personal despair when he was interned in a German prison camp. As she confesses in her comments, Ocampo identified with Rivière's existential crisis and with his need to find solace in a direct relationship with God. When she quotes Rivière, she is also telling us about herself:

“El espíritu es en mí mucho más hambriento que el corazón; mi necesidad más profunda, más urgente es, en el fondo, una necesidad intelectual.” Pero, en el prefacio de *L'Allemand*, hay esta declaración, que conviene recordar aquí: “Los esfuerzos de mi espíritu han estado siempre en estrecha dependencia de mi sensibilidad: o secundados por ella, o contrariados.”

“In me, the spirit is much hungrier than the heart; my deepest, most urgent need is essentially an intellectual need.” But in the preface to *L'Allemand*, one finds this statement, worth remembering here: “The efforts of my spirit have always been closely attached to my sensibility: either supported or negated by it.” (87-88)

Ocampo's particular reference to *espíritu* is fundamental to understanding her approach to life and literature. *Espíritu* is intellectual hunger linked to a keen spiritual and emotional sensibility. She cannot separate the intellectual imperative from the feeling side of her nature, and thus she only writes about what seizes her imagination in a visceral way. Her style reflects this organic, impetuous way of engaging with ideas—not at all the style of male literary critics of the 1920s.¹⁸ As she says about Rivière's work in her specular way:

En él prefiero ese patético abandono de preocupación literaria. En él prefiero ese fervor de la inteligencia que confiere sosiego al corazón. En él prefiero, por último, la huella de esa alma en ignición que conduce a las regiones del espíritu, donde se respira mejor.

In him I prefer that pathetic abandon of literary concerns. In him I prefer that fervor of intelligence that gives rest to the heart. In him I prefer, lastly, the imprint of that ignited soul which leads to regions of the spirit where one breathes easier. (92)

Ocampo often found self-authorization in the works of male writers with whom she identified, but she also learned early on the power of rhetoric to validate her female identity as an author. Her grasp of the dramatic potential of language undoubtedly stemmed from her intimate familiarity with classical drama and dramatic technique.¹⁹ An essay from 1927 shows this very clearly and carries the simple title "Correspondencia." Divided into two sections, the essay is an invented series of letters between a young male reader/admirer and herself. The subject is their "mutual" preference for modern music (Debussy, Ravel, Honneger, Stravinsky) and their repudiation of a certain segment of society for whom such preferences represent "el snobismo." This epithet had often been directed at Ocampo whose modern tastes, social status, and financial means aroused many resentments beside gender bias. In this essay, originally published in *La Nación* in response to an article by a well known critic, she initiates rhetorical strategies that would become familiar stylistic markers of her work: the open letter and ironic humor. Her invention of a sympathetic interlocutor of the opposite sex with whom she can share witty and sarcastic comments enables Ocampo to put down her critics without directly confronting them. This oblique posture, with its dual-gender disguise, was a concession to the literary mores of a time when women writers were treated with condescension and a direct rebuttal of her critics would have merely provoked disdain. But it was also a way of turning the tables on them: she could make fun of her detractors "in confidence," in an exclusionary interchange that made private thoughts public but invited no

outside response. This time she would be the “insider” and her critics would be exiled by language’s power to reconfigure discursive boundaries.²⁰ An imaginary epistolary dialogue thus allows Ocampo to *be* herself in a more frank and intimate way. The fact that she has to mount a performance and don the mask of a sympathetic interlocutor serves to underscore the otherness (and therefore questionability) of all critical response; as she says to the young man in the last lines of the essay: “Toda crítica, toda censura, equivale a decir: yo no soy tú. Medite usted sobre este pensamiento de Paul Valéry, y ya verá como tengo razón” ‘Every commentary, every criticism, is equivalent to saying: I am not you. Meditate on this thought of Paul Valéry, and you will soon see that I am right’ (111).

Every essay in this first volume of *Testimonios* offers similar evidence of Ocampo’s feminist consciousness as a woman writer. The ones she wrote after a long-awaited return to Europe in 1928 show that her ex-centric feminist awareness was compounded by a sense of otherness on two additional fronts: first, by being Argentine and therefore misunderstood by many European intellectuals; and second, by being more comfortable expressing herself in French than in Spanish. This multiple unorthodoxy—beyond gender, class or nationality—made Victoria feel like an amphibian: at home in many locations and yet never able to be fully herself in any one location. Francine Masiello has identified similar characteristics in nineteenth-century women writers in Argentina; of Ocampo, she has aptly observed:

[The] metaphoric reinterpretation of national territory as the space of feminine imagination repeatedly informs Ocampo’s earliest texts and essays. Time and again, she reads her body as the geography of an autonomous nation in formation. In this way, by suggesting the equivalence of self and nation, she forges an alternative female autobiography in which the individual determines national destiny. (164)

This emerges most clearly in a remark from Ocampo’s 1928 essay entitled “Claude Debussy” in which she recounts a European acquaintance asking her: “Pero, en suma, qué es un argentino?” ‘But, all in all, what is an Argentine like?’ To this

query she could only think to reply quite spontaneously “Yo” ‘Me’ (130).²¹ Rejecting the normative, she opts for the specific. Her emphasis on the multiple perspectives from which identity can be defined and the benefit of transnational dialogues shows Ocampo’s rejection of monologic interpretation in matters of nationality. It also posits her own right to define Argentineity.

Three years later, in 1931, Victoria Ocampo wrote “Palabras francesas” ‘French Words’ which, significantly, she would place after “Carta a Virginia Woolf” ‘Letter to Virginia Woolf’ at the head of this first collection of essays. “Palabras francesas” addresses her personal problem of language which, together with gender and nationality, constitutes the triangular nexus of her identity formulation. Responding again to male criticism—this time from a Frenchman writing about Hispanic American literature—that her writing in French was a “coquetería” ‘coquetry’ practiced by other upper class Argentine women, Ocampo says that French is the language in which she first began to express herself and in which her memories are embedded as deeply as they are in the landscape of Argentina. Her friend and social equal, Ricardo Güiraldes, had a similar upbringing but it did not prevent him from frequenting the Argentine literary circles of the twenties or from traveling the world on his own in search of self-knowledge and expression.²² Ocampo’s confinement to the company of books and a few well-read friends of her social class only reinforced her natural inclination to write in French and then have herself translated for publication in Spanish. But the cost to her authentic self-expression was enormous: she could not recognize herself in the Spanish translation. Just as in her childhood when the name Geneviève lost all its allure for her when it became Genoveva in Spanish, she was frustrated as a woman to see that the translations of her essays into Spanish changed something essential in her writing: “Yo ignoraba entonces que esta historia iba a repetirse indefinidamente para mí” ‘I did not know then that this story would repeat itself indefinitely for me’ (22). This essay, perhaps more than any other, captures the multiple layers of Ocampo’s struggle to achieve authentic self-expression; the paradox of having to compromise one cultural self in order to express another was

her “personal drama,” she often said, as a woman, a writer, and a Latin American.

I would like to comment on one other essay in this first volume of *Testimonios*. Written in 1934, after Ocampo had been to Europe and other parts of the Americas on several trips abroad, this essay is about the work of her friend, the English author Aldous Huxley. Entitled “Huxley en Centroamérica,” it directly confronts the problem of a reader and writer of different temperaments with Ocampo, as the reader, confessing: “Para estar bien con él, tengo que enojarme conmigo misma; para estar bien conmigo misma, tengo que enojarme con él” ‘To get along with him, I have to be annoyed with myself; to get along with myself, I have to be annoyed at him. (361). Huxley can seduce her, she says, but not convince her—a telling metaphor which she repeats a few pages later, adding: “Seducir sin convencer, en el dominio del espíritu, es algo parecido a la atracción física en el dominio del amor total: fabulosamente importante, pero que no basta” ‘To seduce without convincing, in the domain of the spirit, is rather like physical attraction in the domain of complete love: fabulously important, but not enough’ (376). This statement strikes me, a woman reader in the 1990s, as something only a female would say—especially back in the 1930s—but I could be mistaken. Nonetheless, the fact that Ocampo stresses the subjectivity of the reading experience and cites Jung’s theory of psychological types to differentiate herself (introverted feeling type) from Huxley (extroverted thinking type)—is convincing evidence that her feminist consciousness influenced her reaction to Huxley. The seriousness with which she calls for an ethic of criticism that would identify temperamental discrepancies between critic and author up front rather than “callarlo, como si fuera una inconveniencia su mención” ‘keep it quiet, as if to mention it were inconvenient,’ undoubtedly stems from injustices she suffered or observed as a young female writer (364).

Underlying her reading of Huxley’s texts is another basic difference Ocampo admits to having with him and writers like him (e.g. Ortega, Valéry): from her perspective his works suffer from an excess of intelligence and a lack of feeling. In his travels in Central America, especially among indigenous

populations, Huxley sees only an overabundance of “vida animal” ‘animal life’ and a lamentable “omisión de lo mental, de lo espiritual” ‘omission of the mental, the spiritual’ (370). But Ocampo suggests that, because he himself commits a “grave pecado de omisión, omisión del elemento emocional” ‘grave sin of omission, omission of the emotional element,’ (371) Huxley cannot truly understand Latin America. She had a similar reaction upon reading D. H. Lawrence, whom she discusses in another essay in this collection, “El hombre que murió” ‘The Man Who Died’ (1932); in Lawrence’s case, Ocampo saw a man trying to free himself from a puritanical upbringing by using his novels to glorify the flesh: “Intentó poner los derechos del cuerpo y del instinto por encima de todos los demás, y no al mismo nivel” ‘He tried to put the rights of the body and instinct above all others, and not at the same level’ (250)²³ In the essay on Huxley, Ocampo refers to Lawrence’s novel *The Plumed Serpent* in which Indian America symbolizes the domination of “el alma y la sangre” ‘feeling and flesh’ over spirit and intellect—another failed attempt to understand Latin America in the European novel. Here, Ocampo injects a comment which is autobiographically revealing:

No creo que haya en Europa país en que los lazos de la sangre y las pasiones del alma alcancen el grado de intensidad que les es habitual in Hispano-América. De ahí una atmósfera de tensión, de tragedia latente, que desconcierta al extranjero y sobre cuya naturaleza se pierde en conjeturas. El espíritu y el intelecto (distingo entre uno y otro) cuentan relativamente poco, junto a esas cosas sordas, oscuras, pesadas y opacas, a menudo ininteligibles, por consiguiente inexpresables, y de las cuales no es posible librarse. (No me refiero a los indios ni a los mestizos, sino a los blancos de América latina.) *Desafío a que se me pruebe que en Europa—incluso en Italia—los lazos de familia y de amor tengan el terrible peso de sangre que tienen aquí. Los europeos no acaban de entender nuestro modo de sentir. Habría mucho que decir al respecto.*

I do not believe that there is any European country in which the bonds of blood and passions of the soul reach such a degree of intensity as is habitual in Hispanic America. Thus, an atmosphere of tension, of latent tragedy, that disconcerts the foreigner and causes him to conjecture aimlessly about its nature. The spirit and the intellect (I distinguish between the two) count relatively little alongside those deep, dark, heavy and opaque things, which are often unintelligible and thus inexpressable, and from which one cannot extricate oneself. (I do not refer to Indians or mestizos, but to the whites of Latin America.) *I defy someone to prove to me that in Europe—even in Italy—the bonds of family and love have the terrible weight of blood that they have here. The Europeans cannot seem to understand our way of feeling.* Much more could be said in this regard. (381-82, emphasis added)

As a Latin American woman, Ocampo had intimate experience with the “lazos de familia” to which she refers in many of her works. The bonds of flesh and blood had been so strong in her own early life that she felt compelled to hide her fifteen-year affair (from 1913 to 1928) with the only man she ever truly loved, Julián Martínez. She also denied herself the experience of having a child with him so as not to bring grief to her parents. As she wrote to Ortega in 1931:

He sacrificado a mis padres convicciones que no debí sacrificar a nadie . . . fui cobarde por ternura. Y es un defecto que aún persiste en mí. Cada vez que he cedido, que he tomado por omisión (no por acción) una actitud contraria a mis convicciones, es decir torcida de acuerdo con mi código, ha sido casi siempre a causa de ese terror nervioso, irracional, paralizante de la pena que iba a infligir a terceros (mis padres). O más bien dicho, a ese terror que la pena de ellos me iba a dar. . . Además, mi corazón ha estado con frecuencia acaparado por seres que mi inteligencia combatía y cuyas opiniones y principios no aceptaba. Esa fatalidad me ha perseguido. Las traiciones de mi carne a mi inteligencia y de mi inteligencia a mi carne, me han empujado hacia el reino del espíritu. . . . El

espíritu, lo que yo llamo así, no es ni carne ni inteligencia, sino algo que para existir exige el combate y cierto acuerdo de estas dos potencias, como el niño para venir al mundo necesita que se encuentren definitivamente el espermatozoide y el óvulo.

I have sacrificed for my parents' sake convictions that I should not have sacrificed for anyone . . . I was cowardly out of tenderness. And it is a defect that persists in me. Each time that I have given in, that I have taken by omission (not by action) an approach contrary to my convictions, or rather one that deviated from my code, it has been almost always because of that nervous, irrational, paralyzing terror of the pain that it would inflict on third parties (my parents). Or, better put, the terror that their pain would bring to me. . . . Moreover, my heart has frequently been monopolized by people that my intelligence has resisted and whose opinions and principles I did not accept. That fate has pursued me. The betrayals wrought by my flesh on my intelligence, and by my intelligence on my flesh, have pushed me toward the realm of the spirit. . . . The spirit, or what I call by that name, is not flesh or intelligence, but something that in order to exist demands resistance and a certain accord between these two powers, just as a child needs a definitive encounter between sperm and egg to come into this world. (*Autobiografía II*, 175-76)

The reticence of her first essays is partially a function of the intellectual climate of the time, but it also reflects the power these family bonds held over her. Her parents had never approved of her having a career in the arts and, in the 1920s, when they were still alive, Ocampo was careful not to create unnecessary scandals through her writing. Did this involve self-censorship? She curbs her instincts and her tongue, barely containing the frustration she could only allude to in her essays, never attacking the root of the problem openly. Her repeated examination of how other individuals dealt with their inner struggles undoubtedly held therapeutic value for her; it was both cathartic and compelling to see aspects of herself

mirrored in other writers from a variety of backgrounds. A woman of her time, Ocampo also found echoes of her struggle in the larger issues of modernity: the ethical implications of opposing world views, the rise of fascism on the one hand and of pacifism on the other, the anxiety of existentialist philosophy—all of these can be glimpsed in the first volume of *Testimonios*. Perhaps she lived the global drama of her time more fully than most Latin American women writers because she felt incapable of transposing her concerns into fictional narrative or open repudiation.

Throughout these essays, Victoria Ocampo inscribes a self-in-formation. Feminist, but also “cobarde por ternura,” her gendered voice is muted and subdued by the parentheses of those inexpressible “lazos de la sangre y pasiones del alma.” By the mid 1930s, however, her situation had changed and so did her writing. In 1931 she founded her literary review *Sur* and established friendships with writers and artists on several continents. In the larger literary world she had achieved credibility as “un ser pensante” whose gender was not a disqualifying factor. On the personal level, she was legally widowed and therefore socially independent; her parents both passed away (her father in 1931, her mother in 1935), and her long-standing clandestine love affair with Martínez had ended. In a word, Ocampo was finally able to claim openly that gender was of central concern in all her undertakings. Thereafter, her public commitment to the intellectual and social development of women through the defense of human rights was unwavering.

Until her death in 1979, Ocampo wrote openly and frankly about her own experiences and issues relating to women, yet she also resisted unwanted public intrusion into her personal life. Perhaps she sensed the very real potential for being misunderstood in an Argentine climate hostile to her social class and cultural orientation if not also her gender. Only after her death would she let the full story of those years be published in her *Autobiografía*. That fascinating self-narrative, which she often talked about burning but fortunately left for posterity, leaves very little of her early life between parentheses.

Notes

1. According to Francesca Miller: "Rather than reject their socially defined role as mothers, as wives, Latin American feminists may be understood as women acting to protest laws and conditions which threaten their ability to fulfill that role. Moreover, there is an explicit spiritual or moral content to the declarations of Latin American feminists which has strong parallels with feminist thought as it developed in Catholic Europe" (74). And Ofelia Schutte: "I would suggest that, in Latin America, women's linking of the demands they formulate in the public sphere to their identities as family members has represented a consciousness of community gained in the family that they find absent in the public sector and that they seek to see realized there. That many women perceive their growth as feminists as an extension of their family identities does not mean, however, that the family is the only social structure defining the lives of women. The significance of gender issues clearly transcends the issues concerning the family" (234-35).

2. For a biographical overview of this period in her life see Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide*, and Vásquez, *Victoria Ocampo*.

3. From the autobiographical perspective, especially the details of a clandestine, long-term relationship with Julián Martínez, see Ocampo's *Autobiografía* III.

4. Ocampo articulated this problem in her 1936 essay, "La mujer y su expresión," in which she urged women to renounce their submissive behavior toward men and acknowledge their unique female thoughts and feelings. See *Testimonios II*, 269-86. Mary Louise Pratt addresses the issues surrounding this challenge in her essay, "Don't Interrupt Me. . . ." Pratt emphasizes the monological nature of the "structures of exclusion" and the "structures of value" which essentially denied women entry into the intellectual dialogue and the literary canon (11 and passim). During the 1920s, Ocampo was a marginal literary figure, as were most women writers with the exception of Norah Lange. A reading of Christopher Leland's book, *The Last Happy Men: The Generation of 1922, Fiction and the Argentina Reality* (1986), gives a good picture of what the Argentine literary scene was like in those days. With the power of the landowning oligarchy in decline and the immigrant working class increasingly restive, prose literature became the mirror of social alienation and disenchantment with the legacy of the past. The literary circles identified with opposing class sectors of Buenos Aires—Florida and Boedo—found common ground in their portrayal of women. According to Leland, "Women have little or no place in the work of either revolutionaries or vanguardists, except as representatives of treachery, failure, or impossible hopes" (155). In this

atmosphere, in which Leland finds distinct homoerotic strains, a woman of Ocampo's class would not be expected to intrude. Nor would it occur to her to do so.

5. In his epilogue to Ocampo's small book on Dante (*De Francesca a Beatrice*, 1924), José Ortega y Gasset mentions the elite circle of women, including Victoria, who impressed him with their intellectual acumen and taste during his 1916 visit to Buenos Aires (112-13).

6. As Beatriz Sarlo has observed, referring to Ocampo's use of language: "... la subvierte, volviéndola lengua productiva: leer, recibir, pero también citar, devolver" (165) '... she subverts it, turning it into a productive language: reading, receiving, but also quoting, returning.'

7. Francine Masiello points out a similar linguistic and cultural situation in relation to the nineteenth century Argentine writer, Eduarda Mansilla de García, in *Between Civilization and Barbarism* (43-44).

8. Adult married women had been granted equal civil rights with Argentine men in a 1926 reform bill. Ten years later, under a different government, legislators moved to revoke the reform bill and return the legal status of women to that of minors (Carlson 178). The Women's Union was successful in defeating the repeal of this bill. For a detailed discussion of Ocampo's role, see Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo*, 133-40.

9. See Meyer, "Letters and Lines of Correspondence . . ." This article interprets the "Carta" and other early essays by Ocampo. The epistolary genre favored in her early essays is one in which the female author can define a self through discourse in anticipation of a response. What appears to be a private letter is actually a letter/performance, a rhetorical device to engage sympathetic readers and invite them "to enter the subversive dialogic community of feminist readers" (238). My study also points out that Ocampo underscores her Latin American-ness throughout the "Carta a Virginia Woolf" in order to build affinity with Hispanic female readers, whatever their social class. Their otherness, like hers, need not be a barrier to transcultural communication and female solidarity which can effect a transformation of moral values.

10. For an analysis of this platonic but stormy relationship, which began in 1916 and lasted until Ortega's death, see Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo* . . . 50-63.

11. Encoded in her reply are allusions to their relationship that the average reader would not recognize. Fundamentally, Ocampo criticizes Ortega's masculinist perspective, a ethic of possessiveness rather than of mutual respect. Citing Bertrand Russell, D. H. Lawrence and Dante, she calls for a philosophy of inclusion, not separation: "... creo que una humanidad que diera rienda suelta a sus instintos, tipo Otelo, y una humanidad que se

intelectualizara hasta la más lúgubre sequedad, tipo Sir Clifford 'Lady Chatterly's husband,' sería una humanidad profundamente atormentada" (210-11) '... I believe that a humanity that gave free rein to its instincts, like Othello, and a humanity that intellectualized to a point of lugubrious dryness, like Sir Clifford, would be a profoundly tormented humanity.'

12. The offending passage was included in the version of the essay printed in *Sur* in 1934. For further details of this episode, see Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo* (58-59). Also, for other aspects of Ocampo's reaction to Ortega's theories on the epistolary genre, see Meyer, "Letters. . ."

13. Some of these articles were first published in the 1935 volume. All of them were originally written in French and translated into Spanish with the help, in most cases, of a third party.

14. On this subject and its development in Ocampo's essays, see Meyer, "Victoria Ocampo and Spiritual Energy."

15. The authors, composers, movies and artists Ocampo comments on in this first volume of essays reflect her knowledge of the central creative works of the period, primarily those emanating from Europe. A sampling includes such names as Paul Valéry, André Gide, Claude Debussy, Le Corbusier, Anatole France, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, Waldo Frank, Bertrand Russell and Marcel Proust. Ortega y Gasset's name appears in various essays, as mentioned earlier; his theories of "vital reason" or "perspectivism" are found in his book *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923). They would have been very familiar to Ocampo who could be considered a disciple of Ortega despite her disagreement with his male chauvinism. Ortega's insistence that each individual must consciously have a point of view to live an authentic life, and that preferences have a great deal to do with perspective, were important influences on her thinking. The more we understand our own subjectivity, our own inner drama, he said, the better we can, as individuals, live in the world and dedicate ourselves to recreating it. For a discussion of *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, see Gray, 127-35. Ortega expounded this philosophy to Ocampo in his correspondence with her, especially in a 1930 letter (Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo*, 62-63).

16. Another analysis of this essay can be found in Guñazú whose interpretation of "Babel" has been helpful to my own discussion. However, I do not agree with her assessment that "[T]hese first essays, written as general commentaries, at no point allude to the particular situation of woman; had they done so, their publication would have been impossible" (128). This is not true, either in terms of their publication or their content, which is the subject of the present article.

17. The average reader of the time was not on her semiotic wave length. Even from today's perspective it may not be obvious that the Saussurian approach to language as an objective structure (*langue*) would clash resoundingly with Victoria's belief in individual meaning (*parole*); her understanding of language is closer to Bakhtin's notion of dialogic discourse. Making language one's own, according to Bakhtin, involves a constant "struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority" in a socially and ideologically charged discursive process that interests psychologists as much as linguists (345).

18. Alba Omil discusses Ocampo's style of writing in detail (188-225) but does not suggest that it has a relationship to gender experience. "Escribe como habla (o habla al escribir), por eso su prosa está salpicada de exabruptos que, según su propia confesión, se le 'escapan' al hablar, a cada rato. Esta frescura es producto del oficio pero también algo más, que muchos, a pesar de su oficio, no poseen. Tiene mucho que ver con la voluntad de estilo" 'She writes like she speaks (or speaks like she writes), and thus her prose is sprinkled with spontaneous expressions that, by her own confession, "escape" every so often when she speaks. This freshness is the product of her trade but also something more which many in the same trade do not possess. It has a lot to do with the determination of style' (223). This "voluntad de estilo" 'determination of style,' a term developed and explained by the Spanish critic, Juan Marichal, involves rejecting norms and seeking expressive freedom (60).

19. Ocampo had originally hoped to be an actress, but her family disapproved. At that time, women in the theater were considered to have loose morals and were socially unacceptable. See Ocampo, "Las memorias de Victoria Ocampo" (68).

20. Teresa de Lauretis discusses this tactic as the initiation of a feminist critical theory that "begins when the feminist critique of sociocultural formations (discourses, forms of representation, ideologies) becomes conscious of itself and turns inward. . . in pursuit of consciousness—to question its own relation to or possible complicity with those ideologies, its own heterogeneous body of writing and interpretations, their basic assumptions and terms, and the practices which they enable and from which they emerge. It starts by 'recognizing our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted,' as Rich writes in her 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' " (138). This theoretical approach is grounded in a Bakhtinian understanding of social discourse.

21. As I have discussed in my article, "Victoria Ocampo, Argentine Identity and the Landscape of the Essay," Ocampo's "Quiromancia de la pampa" (1929) 'Palmistry of the Pampa' illustrates how she defined Argentine

identity on her own terms. In the vast, empty spaces of the pampas she sees an invitation to interpretation, not just by Argentines but by foreign visitors as well. The metaphor of extending a palm to be read and then coyly withdrawing it at the last minute is her way of saying that Argentines can only deceive themselves by avoiding the truths others might tell: “The rhetorical devices of her essay coax the reader into the shared experience of otherness by establishing correspondences, mediating between points of view, and evoking empathy to show how the void of insufficiency can be filled by reaching out rather than by withdrawing” (61).

22. The fact that Güiraldes felt comfortable enough in Spanish to write the most famous Argentine novel of the century, *Don Segundo Sombra*, leads an Ocampo reader to speculate what she might have written had she felt less culturally alienated by gender restrictions. Another friend of hers, Jorge Luis Borges, grew up speaking English, but was also able to write comfortably in Spanish because his literary career developed in constant interaction with the vanguard groups in Madrid and Buenos Aires.

23. This essay was originally delivered as a lecture in Buenos Aires. In a letter of 29 August 1932 to María de Maeztú, Ocampo vividly describes how her frequent references to sex in the lecture scandalized the audience and worried her sister Angélica and friend Eduardo Mallea, who had tried to dissuade her from being so open about the topic. Some husbands, knowing she was going to talk about D. H. Lawrence, forbade their wives to attend. With considerable glee, Ocampo comments to Maeztú: “Je suis ravie! C’est un succès complet!” ‘I’m ecstatic! It’s a complete success!’ This incident confirms her feminist spirit at the time and her willingness to shock readers and audiences in the interests of “mi verdad” ‘my truth,’ as she put it.

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