

NEW READINGS OF
SILVINA OCAMPO
BEYOND FANTASY

Edited by
PATRICIA N. KLINGENBERG
and
FERNANDA ZULLO-RUIZ

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Introduction

Reading Silvina Ocampo

PATRICIA N. KLINGENBERG AND FERNANDA ZULLO-RUIZ

Silvina Ocampo has been described as having practiced the art of hiding in plain view. She remained a shadowy presence within the literary group which included her sister Victoria, the founder of *Sur*, Jorge Luis Borges, its most famous contributor, José Bianco, *Sur*'s director, and Adolfo Bioy Casares, *enfant terrible* and Silvina's husband, to name just the obvious connections. Once described as Argentina's most underrated writer (King, "Victoria" 18), Silvina Ocampo has more recently received a heightened level of attention from many different quarters. For instance, after many years all her works are back in print and a new critical book on her early work argues for her key position among the writers of *Sur*'s literary elite. As this book was being prepared for publication two new translations of her works into English have been published in the United States, and a book-length biography and numerous film and theater adaptations are appearing in Argentina and elsewhere.¹ These are excellent developments for those of us interested in her work, and make the current volume especially timely as it seeks to look both forward and back, at what has been written about and what still remains unstudied and unheralded in this remarkable writer's extensive oeuvre.

Noemí Ulla, the scholar who pioneered the systematic study of Ocampo's works, pointed out (*Escritora oculta*) that Ocampo was not studied at the Universidad de Buenos Aires until the late 1980s. Indeed, Patricia Klingenberg's 1981 dissertation, written at the University of Illinois, was, to our knowledge, the first in any language. The belated aspect of critical work on Ocampo has persisted even to the present. Part of the answer to why this has been so lies

¹ A series of posthumous publications, discussed below, have appeared, beginning in 2006 and all of Ocampo's important poetry and stories have been issued in complete works format (Emecé) or as separate editions in recent years. Judith Podlubne's *Escritores de Sur* (2012) is the most detailed analysis of Ocampo's relationship to the *Sur* circle to date. Translations of Ocampo's short stories by Daniel Balderston and poetry by Jason Weiss, together with the biography by Mariana Enriquez, are listed in the Works Cited.

with the author herself: she refused to follow what Matilde Sánchez has described as the “career” of the literary author: attending awards ceremonies, serving on panels, granting interviews, and so forth. Silvina Ocampo refused absolutely to discuss her adult life, wrote no account of herself and her opinions, and deliberately allowed confusion to circulate around her, permitting, for instance, errors as basic as her date of birth to persist without correction, and famously signing books written by Silvina Bullrich for people who mistook her for a writer she despised. The shy, sly smile which comes through the photographs of the various gatherings taken of *Sur*'s glittering galaxy of stars can now be appreciated as indicating the conscious choices she was making, to remain aloof, even secretive, like one of her fictional characters. A second compelling reason for Ocampo's relative obscurity arises from the chaos into which her affairs fell following her death in 1993. Her estate was rolled into Bioy's and became part of litigation among the heirs upon his death in 1999. As late as 2014, the destiny of the personal library she shared with Bioy (and on many occasions with Borges) remained uncertain: more than four hundred boxes of books, many with notations by these authors, are in precarious storage as the National Library, the heirs, and other collectors dispute their ultimate fate.² The primary difficulties of her legacy, of course, involve the texts themselves, and this will be the focus of our efforts here.

Biographical Note

Silvina Ocampo was the youngest of six daughters born to one of Argentina's wealthy families. Her sister Victoria, the eldest, inherited the bulk of the family fortune and used it to found and support *Sur*, the literary magazine published from 1931 to the late 1970s, a publication of enormous cultural influence in Argentina and throughout Latin America.³ Silvina first imagined herself as an artist, and studied in Paris with two famous precursors of surrealism, Fernand Léger and Giorgio de Chirico. On her return to Buenos Aires in the late 1920s she met Jorge Luis Borges through his sister Norah, a fellow artist; in the early 1930s she met and fell in love with Adolfo Bioy Casares and in that same period she gradually turned her attention to writing. Borges, Bioy, and Silvina Ocampo would join Victoria in the nurturing of the *Sur* literary project but, as John King pointed out, they formed a kind of subgrupo who never fully embraced Victoria's enthusiasms.

² An article in *Clarín* details the current condition of the books in the former Bioy-Ocampo library; the books are in boxes, unprotected from deterioration, and unavailable to scholars: http://www.revistaenie.clarin.com/literatura/biblioteca-maestros-cajas-deposito-alquiler_0_1212479151.html (accessed 25 April 2016).

³ Readers unfamiliar with *Sur* are urged to consult John King's invaluable study, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture 1931–1970*.



1. Ocampo sisters on the steps of the family estate near San Isidro, c.1911. Victoria (reclining) and (l. to r.) Alejandro Leloir, Pancha Ocampo, Clara Ocampo, a cousin Saenz Valiente, Rosa Ocampo, and Silvina Ocampo (with arm around pet goat).

Silvina Ocampo's first literary work appeared in *Sur* in 1936, a short story that was included the following year in a volume of twenty-eight stories entitled *Viaje olvidado*, itself published by *Sur*'s book publishing house. On the occasion of this literary debut Victoria wrote a review of Silvina's book, which offered some scathing words of criticism and extensive advice. Forty years later, Silvina quoted nearly word for word several passages of this review as part of an interview with Noemí Ulla (*Encuentros*), an indication of how wounding this episode was for her. It would be ten years before she published short stories again.

In 1940 she married Bioy Casares in a small ceremony in which Borges was one of the witnesses. The same year Bioy published *La invención de Morel*, his most famous novel, and the three friends together published what would become a foundational volume, *La antología de la literatura fantástica*, which inaugurated Borges as a short story writer by including his "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In the 1940s Silvina Ocampo published four volumes of poetry plus a detective novel with her husband, the only time they would collaborate directly.⁴ In 1948

⁴ Other collaborations include two fairly unfamiliar plays: *Los traidores* (1956), co-authored with Juan Rodolfo Wilcock, and *La lluvia de fuego*, co-authored with Juan José Hernández, unpublished in Spanish, though published posthumously in French as *La pluie de feu* (1997). See Hernández's discussion of the writing process with Ocampo and why he was inadvertently uncredited: <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/214576-la-obra-de-teatro-que-escribimos-con-silvina-ocampo> (accessed 25 April 2016).

a new collection of short fiction, *Autobiografía de Irene*, appeared. For the rest of her life she would continue to write both fiction and poetry, eventually producing seven volumes of short fiction for adults and several additional ones for children. Her seven volumes of poetry were awarded the Premio Municipal in 1942 for *Enumeración de la patria*, a second place in 1954 for *Los nombres*, and the Premio Nacional in 1962 for *Lo amargo por dulce*. Ironically, her poetry, so highly rewarded during her life, has remained the least studied of her creative endeavors, excepting perhaps her plays and her works for children.

Silvina Ocampo wrote no memoir in the traditional sense, and in interviews throughout her life she refused resolutely to discuss her private life, famously omitting any mention of dates, and firmly placing questions about her husband off limits. Bioy Casares wrote several volumes of memoirs, which are listed in the Works Cited. In addition there are published biographies of both Victoria Ocampo and Bioy Casares, still better-known figures, which we have not listed since they are remarkably reticent on the subject of Silvina either as person or as author. Important sources for biographical information include the book-length interview of Silvina Ocampo by Noemí Ulla, originally published in 1982 (reissued and revised in 2003). *Encuentros con Silvina Ocampo* is rich in detail about Silvina's reminiscences about her childhood, which inform her fiction; her reflections on the practice of poetic vs. prose writing; and her attitudes generally about the imagination. Since the publication of Ulla's interview new information has become available in a memoir by Jovita Iglesias, the long-time housekeeper of Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares, entitled *Los Bioy*. This is the best picture so far of the private life of the couple. It is especially useful in that it takes up their story around 1949, at a time when Ocampo herself was completely silent about personal events. Jovita is sympathetic, intelligent, and insightful; her evident affection for both of her subjects allows readers to see close up that the marriage between them was a real and loving one, despite its differences from conventional arrangements. Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares forged a partnership which, in emotional terms, seems to have sustained them both in important ways for the fifty-plus years of their marriage.

Obviously, many gaps in Ocampo's biography still exist. It would be invaluable to have an account of the Paris years of the 1920s when her perceived failure as an artist was clearly an important experience. The combination of Ocampo's determined silence and the awkwardness of Bioy's written memoirs suggests that both were complicit in maintaining a wall of privacy around their personal arrangements. This tactic has not prevented speculation and rumor from swirling around them. In the years before her death in 1993 Silvina Ocampo suffered from dementia; she died in December, and in January of 1994, not even a month later, her daughter Marta was killed in an automobile accident. Bioy, devastated