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**Friendship, Letters and Butterflies:
Victoria Ocampo and Virginia Woolf**

I'm so glad you write criticism and not fiction. And I'm sure it is good criticism clear and sharp, cut with a knife not pitchforked...I hope you will go on to Dante, and then to Victoria Okampo. Very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies. It is my favourite form of reading.

Virginia Woolf in a letter to Victoria Ocampo, December 22nd 1934

Victoria Ocampo, a dominant figure in Argentine literary society, founded, published and ran South America's most prominent literary magazine and publishing house, *Sur*, providing a literary interface between North and South America, and between the Americas and Europe. In *Sur*, Ocampo published and translated writers such as Faulkner, Joyce, Kerouac, Pound, and Woolf for the Argentine and South American public. Just as the *Hogarth Press* did for Virginia Woolf, *Sur* gave Victoria Ocampo the artistic freedom she could not find elsewhere.

In addition to her publishing achievements, Ocampo was a distinguished essayist who wrote about her life, friends and literature. Her ambition was to 'some day manage to write, more or less well, more or less badly, but like a woman'.¹ Many of her opportunities were born out of her roots in the Argentine upper class, her family wealth, personal library and bilingual governesses. She was beautiful, elegant, intelligent and extremely influential within literary circles, sharing close friendships with renowned writers, including Jorge Luis Borges.

In Virginia Woolf, Ocampo found a mentor, friend and source of inspiration. Woolf's writings encompassed all that Ocampo thought about, worked towards, and strived to be. Woolf was a comrade alongside whom she could fight for women's rights, a heroine to worship, a sister writer to understand her. However, Ocampo's affection for the legendary writer was not entirely reciprocated. Woolf enjoyed Ocampo's company but often imagined her as a fabulous character from a strange and distant land she knew little about. It was as if Ocampo came from the South America Woolf had created in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, where the earth 'was red, purple, green ... [and] the young women, with their hair magnificently swept in coils, a red flower behind the ear, [sit] on the doorsteps'.² Unlike Ocampo who devoured Woolf's work, Woolf managed to read only a few pages of Ocampo's essays.

During the winter of 1929, Ocampo was living in Paris when her friend Sylvia Beach suggested she read *A Room of One's Own*. Ocampo's connection to Woolf was immediate. She identified with the frustrations of a woman trying to write in a male-dominated society. She felt passionate about the empowering thoughts of this great

writer who told women, ‘So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters’.³ Although Ocampo had several quiet rooms of her own in two Argentine estates, as well as an inheritance to provide the freedom for her literary lifestyle, it was Woolf who helped her understand what it meant to write as a woman, wealthy or not. And when Ocampo’s father died two years later, she finally found the courage to begin *Sur*, the real room of her own.

The two women’s paths finally crossed in November 1934, when Man Ray held a photography exhibition in London. Ocampo was forty-four, Woolf fifty-two. Theirs was indeed a triumphant meeting of minds. Although Woolf was an established literary voice at this time, while Ocampo was just starting out, they shared many similarities as writers, publishers, readers and feminists, and an interest in one another’s lives was therefore foreseeable.

In her diary, Woolf wrote that Ocampo was ‘very ripe & rich; with pearls at her ears, as if a large moth had laid clusters of eggs’.⁴ There is a mysterious sensuality to this description, an attraction to the exotic woman whose colour resembles ‘an apricot under glass’. Ocampo, like the exhibition photographs, is on display for Woolf who observes her through the lens of an Old World colonist. Woolf goes on to explain how they conversed in both ‘English & French’ and discussed the current political events—‘Rome & Mussolini’. She is not only impressed by Ocampo but would later admit to Vita Sackville-West that she was ‘in love with Victoria Okampo’. An abruptness in their parting is suggested, as Man Ray asks Woolf to pose for him. Because Woolf did not like having her photograph taken, her agreement to sit for Man Ray is important to note, as it would linger in Ocampo’s consciousness for many years to come.

Much like Woolf’s first impressions of otherness, Ocampo illustrates in her *Testimonios* a sense of mysterious affinity towards Woolf’s uniqueness, then goes on to glorify her image: ‘imagine a mask, which even without life, without intelligence, would still be beautiful. Imagine that mask imbued with life and intelligence to such a point that it seemed to have been molded by them’.⁵ Later Ocampo would admit that Woolf reminded her of her mother, which perhaps fed the dutiful daughter role she assumed in Woolf’s company. There is a kind of worshipping appreciation to Ocampo’s voice: ‘Virginia’s face is beautiful not just because of its expression, but because of its architecture, because of its scaffolding’ (Steiner 136).

Woolf asked Ocampo questions about her childhood, family and home as well as the number of butterflies in Argentina: ‘It was as if we had met on a desert island. She began a regular interrogation, quizzing me about apparently insignificant things’ (Steiner 106). Of course Ocampo answered each question with eloquent delight and felt encouraged to contact Woolf after this meeting. However, Woolf’s preoccupation with Argentine butterflies wove itself through their conversations, becoming the veil through which Woolf would see both Ocampo and Argentina.

Not long after their first encounter, Ocampo sent Woolf a gift to express her pleasure and gratitude in their meeting. On the 27th of November 1934, Woolf wrote to thank ‘Madame Okampo’, spelling her name incorrectly. This careless mistake was recurrent, with various alterations of Ocampo spelled with either a ‘k’ or apostrophe ‘C’. In this letter Woolf insists that Ocampo is, ‘too generous. And I must compare you to a butterfly if you send me these gorgeous purple butterflies [orchids]. I opened the box and thought “this is what a garden in South America looks like!”’⁶ Woolf does

not see Ocampo as a literary equal but as a pretty foreign creature and in a later letter dated the 7th of December 1934 insists that Ocampo accept her ‘heartfelt thanks; but hereafter let me go ungiven. ... Thats what comes of having Scotch clergy in my blood – a detestable race’ (*Letters V*, 351). Much is revealed in this remark, not only with regard to Woolf’s resistance to gifts but also in her feelings towards religion. Woolf is unable to accept gifts without guilt, a feeling Ocampo could sympathise with because she too was raised in a strict religious household, but her desire to give to Woolf could not be dampened. She made light of the situation and Woolf’s puritan ethics by prefacing future gifts with ‘in the hope of annoying you’.

As their relationship grew Woolf’s prejudices, although subtle, still surfaced, but Ocampo would let each remark go without protest. She did not blame Woolf’s lack of knowledge, even if it did bother her. Later Ocampo admitted how ‘Virginia spoke to me in her letters about our immense bluish green plains – what are they called, she would add parenthetically. They must be very impressive, like your wild cattle. And reading her, I would think, Dear God! The trouble our ranchers have taken to breed cows, bulls, horses, and sheep worthy of being compared to the best in England (whence our livestock comes). But if it amuses you to imagine things this way, Virginia, I won’t stop you’.⁷ The commitment Woolf had to Ocampo was limited to her imaginary visions of South America, which she enjoyed indulging in because they brought solace to her troubled mind. Ocampo would write how Woolf ‘felt a certain astonishment when she realised [she] could articulate with words’ because Woolf had always imagined her as a fixture on those fanciful ‘invented’ visions of butterflies, wild cattle and silent beauty.

The letters of Ocampo contrast to Woolf’s not only in length but depth. In this early letter from 1935, Ocampo’s sincerity and regard for Woolf, as well as the relevance both she and her culture hold within her life is unmediated. She asks Woolf: ‘Don’t you think love is our hunger to love?’, then willingly puts forth her mixed feelings about Europe and South America: ‘What frightens me in Europe (France, Spain, Italy) is a kind of failing appetite in people. Where I’m from, there’s appetite...But nourishment is still lacking!’ (Meyer 126) The manner in which she separates England from Europe with its ‘failing appetite’ is significant, as she does not want to criticise Woolf’s country but forge a connection to it.

When Woolf replies, formalities are forgotten and their relationship is strengthened but by no means parallel: ‘I agree about hunger: and agree that we are most satiated, or so famished that we have no appetite’ (*Letters V*, 349). Woolf temporarily sees her environment through the lens of a South American. She then suggests how she is intrigued by Ocampo’s ‘language [Spanish], which has a gaping mouth but no words – a very different thing from English’ (*Letters V*, 349). Perhaps the difference between Spanish and English carries the most weight, a difference Woolf would never attempt to bridge. The following year, when Ocampo sent Woolf a copy of her *Testimonios*, she responded, ‘How tempting it is – I cant read a word of it, and yet every other word is almost one I know. I must wait for the French edition – or shall I begin to learn Spanish?’ (*Letters V*, 372). But she didn’t have to, as Ocampo would do private translations for her, efforts that were often in vain. One exception was an essay she wrote on Aldous Huxley. Woolf commented: ‘I’m so glad you write criticism and not fiction. And I’m sure it is good criticism – clear and sharp, cut with a knife, not pitchforked...I hope you will go on to Dante, and then to Victoria Okampo.

Very few women yet have written truthful autobiographies. It is my favourite form of reading' (*Letters V*, 356).

Woolf invited Ocampo to 52 Tavistock Square for dinner during the winter of 1934. Ocampo arrived stylishly in a chauffeured 'white chariot', eager to immerse herself within Woolf's famous bohemian world. Later she relived her experience, preserving Woolf within the pages of *Virginia Woolf, Orlando y Cía*: 'Often, after the foggy cold of the street, I entered the comfort of that room and above all, of that presence. As soon as Virginia was there, all else disappeared. Virginia, tall and slender, wearing a silk blouse whose blues and greys (was it Scottish silk?) harmonised admirably with the silver of her hair' (Meyer 124). She idolises Woolf as the elegant English woman, combining intellect and grace. 'Virginia Woolf was as capable of speaking marvellously as she was of writing marvellously. With this I am confessing to you that I could not, without effort, leave her side' (Meyer 124). Ocampo would later tell Woolf, 'if there is anyone in the world who can give me courage and hope, it is *you*' (Meyer 124) but her constant admiration wearied Woolf, who felt she was unable to offer much in return.

Although Ocampo was not insulted by Woolf's fantasies, she eventually felt they were in need of clarification. It was at this critical moment that roles were reversed and the invitation for Woolf to visit Argentina was extended. In August 1935, Woolf received a letter from Ocampo explaining that the Buenos Aires PEN would like to pay for her to speak in Argentina. Woolf declined, admitting '... I cant talk about literature, thats not my line; so I cant accept their generosity, which, without any proof to go on, I connect to you. All the same, one of these days I shall come' (*Letters V*, 438–39). She never did. Instead, Ocampo would be the one to travel to London. Perhaps the exchange of fabulous images, the rolling landscapes, vibrant butterflies as well as the safety of a long distance friendship was all Woolf wanted? Ocampo was not only a friend with whom to exchange letters, she was a daydream that took Woolf far away from the everyday. The Argentina she imagined was the best gift Ocampo could offer.

Nearly a year after their first meeting, Ocampo sent Woolf the unusual gift of framed Argentine butterflies. Even if she wanted to educate Woolf on the refinement of her country, she felt compelled to feed her fantasies. Despite the fact that she was encouraging Woolf's outlandish visions, Ocampo desperately wanted to please her and thought that such an offering would be accepted without annoyance or distress. In October 1935, Woolf was greeted at her door by 'two [veiled] mysterious foreign ladies' and later wrote to Ocampo about the unforgettable experience: 'they pressed into my hand a large parcel, murmured some musical but unintelligible remarks about "giving it into your own hands" and vanished. It took me at least ten minutes to realise that this was your present of South American butterflies' (*Letters V*, 438–39). Even the Scotch clergy in Woolf's blood could not refuse such an attractive gift of culture and place. She hung the butterflies above the portrait of her puritan ancestor and the invented Ocampo image became a lasting decoration in the Woolf household. But did this gift, for Woolf, have layers of meaning? Not only did it confirm Woolf's invented South America, it linked to her fascination with moths. *The Waves* was initially titled *The Moths* and Woolf often compared herself to moths with their deadly attraction to light, drab colours and fragility, so by comparing Ocampo to the moth's most beautiful cousin, the butterfly, was she perhaps trying, in her own way, to express a

deeper connection with Ocampo? Did the butterfly represent more than a pretty image?

Woolf continued to encourage Ocampo, but in language suggesting her fantasy of South America: 'I suspect you are one of the people – they are almost unknown in England – who can make a lecture exciting. Is it your Latin blood?'⁸ Ocampo remained steadfast in her admiration. In the essay *Carta a Virginia Woolf*, Ocampo discusses feminism with vigorous pride because she not only saw her mother in Woolf, she saw herself, and tended to mirror her mentor only with an added 'Latin' slant. 'I believe that a woman cannot unburden herself of her thoughts and feelings in a man's style, just as she cannot speak with a man's voice' (Meyer 127). She had a translation posted to Woolf, who cautiously responded, 'I don't usually like appearing as a private person in print, but on this occasion I can find no fault, and like what you say very much and thank you for it' (*Letters V*, 365).

Much of Ocampo's writings are peppered with commentary on Woolf's work. In both *Carta a Virginia Woolf* and *Virginia Woolf en su diario*, she explores Woolf's fiction, drawing comparisons with English and Argentine culture through *Three Guineas*: 'The maid, Virginia observes in *Three Guineas*, had an important role in the life of the English upper classes (and the same was true in Argentina) until the onset of the war in 1914' (Steiner 159). Ocampo writes directly to her audience, linking the class systems of Argentina and England. By analysing the texts and drawing comparisons to her own culture, Ocampo made Woolf's writings more accessible to South American readers. In the same essay, she connects South America's patriarchal fathers to *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, explaining how both novels 'are the true history of the Victorian struggle between the victims of the patriarchal system and the patriarchs, between the daughters and the fathers and brothers. Virginia ended up by telling these despots: Consider, reason, reflect for a moment' (Steiner 160). In discussing the topic of 'the patriarchal system and the patriarchs,' Ocampo not only enables her own culture to experience the work of Woolf but exposes it to her corresponding ideas with the hope of progressive change for all women. Because both writers' backgrounds involved domineering fathers and patriarchal cultures, which expected them to uphold repressive social rules, Ocampo believed strongly in these issues and it was yet another connection she experienced with Woolf, a connection she cherished and wished to share with her readers.

When Ocampo offered to translate Woolf's work into Spanish, Woolf, initially suspicious of the idea, could not understand why or how the South American public would be interested in an English woman's fiction. But Ocampo's tenacity was unrelenting and she argued that if one Argentine woman could be stimulated, then so could others. Eventually, Woolf succumbed, and Ocampo published Borges's translations of *A Room of One's Own*, *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf expressed tepid pleasure in the translations through letters to Ocampo and her thoughts on the matter ended there. In Woolf's biographies by both Hermione Lee and James King, information on their relationship as well as the translations is sparse, limited to a few tidy pages.

The blossoming friendship was ultimately suspended when Ocampo invited herself to Tavistock Square in June of 1939. Without permission or warning, she brought the photographer Gisèle Freund along with her to photograph Woolf. Perhaps she had remembered that magical evening in 1934 at Man Ray's exhibition when he

requested a similar favour? Perhaps she was oblivious to the fact that Woolf hated sitting for photographs and had previously declined Freund's propositions of sitting? But if Ocampo knew Woolf as well as she thought, then she should have realised such an act would send her into deep distress. Ocampo wrote: 'I had sacrificed the pleasure of talking with [Freund] along because it seemed essential that there should be some good pictures of [Woolf] in that period of her life. The threat of a catastrophe was all over Europe... I had to take advantage of the moment' ('Virginia Woolf', 51). Woolf was enraged by Ocampo's rude assumptions, particularly, as King writes, 'when the usually xenophobic Leonard was charmed by examples of Freund's work'.⁹

Woolf felt outnumbered and consequently agreed to sit for Freund the following day. But she would never forgive Ocampo for 'forcing (her) hand' and in what was to be her last letter to Ocampo she wrote, 'Over and over again I've refused to be photographed. Twice I had made excuses so as not to sit to Madame Freund. And then you bring her without telling me, and that convinced me that you knew that I didn't want to sit' (*Letters VI*, 342). Woolf goes on to express irritation then remorse at the time lost to intimate discussion. And after emphasising her dislike of photographs, Woolf tells Ocampo how they won't have another chance to see each other 'till Heaven knows when'. They would never meet again. Woolf committed suicide less than two years after that fateful day.

Ocampo was devastated by the news, and in honour of Woolf published the essay *Virginia Woolf en mi memoria*. In this emotional tribute, Ocampo explains how she never thought that afternoon with Freund would be their last. The fact that she will never again see that beautiful 'face whose image (she) wanted to preserve at all costs' (Meyer 237) deeply affected her. She reflects on their friendship and how communication from then on will only take place only through memory.

Although she could not change the past, Ocampo found peace in the medium she knew best, her 'clear, sharp' language. 'Those last hours that we were to spend together I wasted in argument. In spite of my joy at having obtained the perfect images of you, I wonder if I didn't pay too dearly for them' (Meyer 239). Ocampo would continue to preserve the image of her literary sister and in 1954 wrote *Virginia Woolf en su diario*, in which she admitted, 'I feel closer today to Virginia Woolf; I can talk about this and that with her more freely, laugh at the gilded butterflies with her and peer to the mystery of things as if we were God's spies' (Meyer 129).

The friendship of Ocampo and Woolf was laced, like all friendships, with fantasy and fiction on both sides. And even if Woolf never fully realised the effect she had on the Ocampo, Ocampo would never let her readers forget Woolf, whose lasting words continue to this day to stretch across the great divide: 'So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters.'

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NOTES

1. Victoria Ocampo, 'Carta a Virginia Woolf', trans. Doris Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo Against the Wind and the Tide* (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 127.
2. Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1995), 90.
3. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), 167.
4. Virginia Woolf, *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf Vol. IV: 1931–1935* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 263.
5. Victoria Ocampo, 'Virginia Woolf 1934', trans. Patricia Owen Steiner, in *Victoria Ocampo Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 135.
6. Virginia Woolf, *The Sickle Side of the Moon, The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V: 1932–1935* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), 348–49.
7. Victoria Ocampo, 'Virginia Woolf', *Review 23*, New York, 1978, 50.
8. Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead, The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume VI: 1936–1941* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), 166–67.
9. James King, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 587.