An Annotated English Translation of *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro*

An Annotated English Translation of *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro*

By Victoria Ocampo

Translated and Introduced
by Nilanjana Bhattacharya

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

An Annotated English Translation of *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro*

By Victoria Ocampo
Translated and Introduced by Nilanjana Bhattacharya

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-7086-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7086-3

To
Ma and Baba

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

These lines are being written in November in a sunny and warm Buenos Aires, when the *jacaranda* and rosewood trees bloom throughout the city and its outskirts. In a month like this one, almost one hundred years ago, Rabindranath Tagore arrived in Argentina and was hosted by Victoria Ocampo.

Many things have changed since then, but not the lilac, blue and yellow flowers of those trees lining the streets and, most importantly, the road that still connects the heart of the city with San Isidro. Many of them are the same trees that Tagore saw while he lived in San Isidro. Perhaps we should say that those are the same trees that looked upon Gurudev while he was being taken around by Vijaya, back in 1924. The only difference is that *jacarandas* and rosewoods are now taller and larger than they were when those two fascinating characters met.

Now, through the excellent translation and analysis carried out by Nilanjana Bhattacharya of *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro,* English-speaking readers of India, or, for that matter, anyone interested in the Indo-Latin American relations, will be able to have a vivid impression of what that encounter meant for the two of them and, largely, what that clash of cultures brought to these two brilliant intellectuals.

One of them, Tagore, the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize, an outstanding poet and man of ideas. The second one, Ocampo, at that time a young woman only 35 years old, a *dame of letters* who changed the way in which her fellow compatriots could assess what laid beyond the boundaries of Argentina. At different levels and at different times, Ocampo and Tagore did something quite similar: they were able to change the way in which the entire world perceived far away cultures of distant continents. Most importantly, they opened doors; they let their readers learn that intellectual boundaries did not matter much, that the values of humanity could defeat languages, barriers and misconceptions.

Tagore attracted universal attention through his writings to a rich cultural tradition. Victoria—perhaps at a smaller scale, given the fact that she was a woman when women could not have similar repercussions and lived in a country off the main literary roads of the time—attracted her readers to the literature of the entire world through writers she helped become known and appreciated.

When Argentine schoolchildren find in their elementary school textbooks fragments of Tagore's work, he is not just another foreign writer from a distant land: he knew Buenos Aires, he spent time with us, he loved our rivers and flowers, and he got a glimpse of the Pampas. That makes him immediately close to our heart. We wish that Nilanjana Bhattacharya's work might have a similar effect in India.

For the Board of Trustees of Fundación Sur (created by Ocampo in 1963), it has been an enormous pleasure to assist Nilanjana Bhattacharya in her prodigious literary and investigative feat. We must thank her for her highly professional and respectful approach to Victoria Ocampo, her world and her work. Throughout the long process that ends today when these lines are read, God knows where, Nilanjana (as she humbly asked us to call her and not Professor Bhattacharya) showed sincere appreciation and affection for this distant part of the world where, we are proud to say, Tagore received warmth and inspiration. We must deeply thank her for this.

Juan Javier Negri
Chairman,
Board of Trustees
Fundación Sur
Buenos Aires, November 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Officially, this journey began around 2011-12. Looking back, I realise how supports from so many sources have shaped this yet-unfinished project–and I will never be able to acknowledge all those sources formally. The constant prodding and motivation from my mentors, the late Professor Swapan Majumdar, and Professor Kavita Panjabi, gave me the courage to begin this journey. I am deeply indebted to both of them. The work would have been impossible without the support, suggestions and interventions of Juan Javier Negri. I also gratefully acknowledge the years of support and encouragement I have received from Professor S.P. Ganguly. Special thanks are due to María Rosa Lojo, German Ferrari, José Paz, and Axel Diaz Maimone. And I sincerely thank all those who have made me part of their world.

Funding from the Charles Wallace India Trust and the Indian Council of Social Science Research enabled me to carry out research work in the UK and Argentina, respectively. I am grateful to them for their support, as I am to the British Centre for Literary Translation, University of East Anglia, and British Council, Kolkata.

I thank the staff of Rabindra Bhavana and the Central Library, Visva-Bharati; the National Library, Kolkata; Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, Buenos Aires; Observatorio UNESCO Villa Ocampo, San Isidro; Casa de Ricardo Rojas, Buenos Aires; Academia de Letras Argentina; the University of East Anglia library; the Taylor Institution Library, University of Oxford; and Devon Record Office, UK; for granting me access to their resources.

Finally, I am grateful to Fundación Sur for readily granting me permission to translate and publish this book. In fact, their enthusiastic involvement in this entire project over the years has made me comprehend fully the strength of the bond that two litterateurs forged, crossing many borders, almost a hundred years ago. I repeat, after Ocampo, “There is only the history of the soul.”

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

NILANJANA BHATTACHARYA

> For the comparatists, the concept of *intertextuality* … is particularly helpful. Finally, here is a means through which we can think of dispelling so much ambiguity, so much misunderstanding which the notion of influence brought with it. (Guillén 1985, 309)

> In negotiating the *dérive* of literary works, the translator is an agent of linguistic and cultural alienation: the one who establishes the monumentality of the foreign text, its worthiness of translation, but only by showing that it is not a monument, that it needs translation to locate and foreground the self-difference that decides its worthiness. (Venuti 1995, 307-308)

In Bengali, a title is often bestowed on Rabindranath Thakur (Rabīndranāth Ṭhākur, popularly known as Tagore in English, and pronounced Tagoré in Spanish)–and on Rabindranath alone–*visvakavi*, the poet of the world. To a non-Bengali reader (that is to say, a person not familiar with the Bengali language/culture, irrespective of her/his geopolitical location/identity), it might sound like hyperbole–how can a poet, who wrote mostly in a regional language of a British colony, become "poet of the world"! No doubt, it manifests the colonial Indians' wild fervour about the first non-European (also, non-White) Nobel Laureate of the world, who, in certain ways, made them feel triumphant over the colonisers. Nevertheless, a look at the poet's travel-history would reveal that he was one of the very few poets of the world who travelled extensively across four continents–Asia, Europe and the Americas; and almost everywhere he went, he received ardent welcome and admiration from common people. His works have been translated into numerous languages of the world, and in a way, he has become the cultural icon of India. And perhaps, therein lies the true significance of the title *visvakavi*.

Yet, for some reason, despite the infinite number of works on Rabindranath, relatively few focus on Rabindranath's reception in various parts of the world, and his impact on the literature and cultures of these countries. Victoria Ocampo's *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* is the only detailed account of the poet's Argentine adventure, especially so because

this is one of the very few instances where the poet himself did not write any travelogue.[1] Therefore, *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro* can prove to be a valuable document for exploring certain aspects of Rabindranath's reception in Latin America in general and Argentina in specific; and a study of this text could help in understanding the *visvakavi* Rabindranath and the author Victoria Ocampo.

Rabindranath Thakur (1861-1941) and Victoria Ocampo (1890 -1979)

To readers interested in either Latin American or Indian literature, the name Victoria Ocampo is well known, though for different reasons, perhaps. Most Indian readers have heard the name in connection with Rabindranath–the woman who looked after the poet when he fell ill in Argentina and to whom he dedicated a book of poems, *Purabi*. Apart from being the subject of some excellent works by Ketaki Kushari Dyson, S.P. Ganguly, Shankho Ghosh and others[2], the relationship between the two has also been one of the most popular topics of "literary gossip" in India. Anyone interested in the field of Latin American Studies, however, would know–as Ganguly and Dyson have mentioned repeatedly–Victoria Ocampo as one of the most important personalities of modern Latin America, "la señora cultura" (Meyer, 1990). She was the editor of *Sur* (South), a ground-breaking Latin American journal, and also the founder of the Sur Publishing House. A forerunner of Latin American women's liberation and one of the founders of the Argentine Women's Union (1936), Ocampo always took an active interest in the socio-political issues of Latin America. Despite her privileged financial and educational background, this woman spent almost all her energy and wealth on the development of Latin American society. In fact, she was one of those few personalities who dared to protest against Juan Domingo Peron's authoritarian regime and was even incarcerated for that.[3]

Interestingly, the early lives of Ocampo and Rabindranath had much in common. They were both born in very affluent and important families of their respective countries (Ocampo in 1890, Buenos Aires; and Rabindranath in 1861, Kolkata), and along with their siblings, received a non-conventional education largely through private teachers. Ocampo, like most other "porteños" of the era, received European education, primarily in French.

---

[1] In fact, he wrote very few letters during this voyage. He was immersed in poems and songs, which were published later as *Purabi*.

[2] For a detailed list, see bibliography.

[3] It is said that Nehru played a role in her release. For details, see (Meyer 1990).

She mastered Español much later in her life.[4] Rabindranath, however, right from his childhood, was exposed equally to Indian and foreign, mainly English, literature.[5]

Ocampo's multilingual background definitely broadened her range of reading; as early as 1914, she came across the works of Rabindranath and later got acquainted with those of Gandhi. It must be noted here that Ocampo's range of contacts was surprisingly wide, and like Rabindranath, she also shared close relationships with many other authors or important personalities from all over the world.[6] Like many Latin Americans of her time, Ocampo also took a keen interest in Indian culture and politics. She followed the Tagore-Gandhi debate carefully, and her analysis of their philosophy was startling with all its insight and empathy. Though she steadily refused all invitations (from Rabindranath, and later, from the Indian government) to visit India, she always maintained her contact with India, even after the poet's demise, be it through Krishna Kripalani or Jawaharlal Nehru, or others.

Ocampo began her formal literary carrier in the early 1920s with an article on Dante in one of the most prominent Argentine newspapers, *La Nación.* Doris Meyer, who in 1979 published an extensive biography of Victoria Ocampo in English, narrated an interesting anecdote about this first article–an anecdote that helps us connect Ocampo's literary carrier to her activism:

> When she finished her book [*De Francesca a Beatrice*], it occurred to Victoria that she might ask her father's friend Paul Groussac, the director of the National Library and a notoriously severe critic, for his opinion. So she took a portion of her manuscript to him, fully expecting his blunt criticism. …he advised her to write about a less pedantic, more personal subject. She was shocked. Nothing could have been more personal for her at the moment than the *Commedia*, her spiritual companion. But Groussac was unable to see this, blinded as he was by the conventional notion that women should devote themselves to only certain kinds of writing (novels, poetry, memoirs) provided they were appropriately "feminine" in inspiration. The implication, of course, was that no woman–and certainly not one lacking scholarly training–could possibly have anything worthwhile to say about such

[4] For a concise biography of Ocampo, see (Vazquez 1993).

[5] There are various biographies of Rabindranath, of varied length. Arguably, the best one is by Prasanta Kumar Pal.

[6] María Rosa Lojo, a contemporary Argentine author, has explored some of these relationships, including that with Rabindranath, in her historical novel *Las libres del Sur.* (Lojo 2013)

> profound subjects as Dante's *Commedia*. …This, essentially, was Groussac's criticism.
>
> Victoria knew his reaction was prejudiced and unfair; just the same, it made her have second thoughts about a literary career. …She made up her mind to keep going…Her writing would certainly be personal, but not in the sense he [Groussac] suggested; she would not limit herself to so-called feminine subjects. She would personalize her writing by saying honestly and directly what she believed and how she felt about her discoveries. She would be a witness. She would testify. (Meyer 1990, loc.1215-1232)

Therefore, most of the articles Ocampo wrote for various journals and newspapers were later compiled in her ten-volume *Testimonios*. These were accounts of her perception of reality, her reading of reality or events. Her *Autobiografía,* however, was different. It contained facts about her life. This distinction between *testimonios* and autobiography that Ocampo made successfully in the early twentieth century, would later become particularly important in the context of Latin American literature.[7]

Ocampo on Rabindranath

However, when Ocampo met Rabindranath for the first time in 1924, she was yet to become an important literary figure. In her autobiography, Ocampo considered the year 1924 a landmark in her life for several reasons. Firstly, she said, this was the year when finally, being separated from her husband, she began living alone, and "regained (or gained), to a certain extent, the freedom that was lost in matrimony, on leaving the family convent." (Ocampo 1982a, 7). And secondly, she got acquainted with Rabindranath and Ernest Ansermet. Ocampo was familiar with Rabindranath's writings since 1914, having first read André Gide's French translation of *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*,[8] and then almost all the English texts of Rabindranath which were published by that time. In 1924, she had also published an article in *La Nación* on "The Joy of Reading Tagore", emphasizing how easily comprehensible Rabindranath's works were to his readers, unlike the works of Marcel Proust. (Though, she did not provide any specific reason for comparing Rabindranath to Proust.)

It was strange, nevertheless, that she would not write much on Rabindranath until 1941, when she got the news of the poet's death. This

---

[7] For a detailed debate on the truth-claim of these genres, see (Arias 2001).

[8] All references to *Gitanjali* in this book, are references to the English book, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* or its translations. It is not to be confused with the Bengali *Gitanjali,* which is an entirely different text. For details, see (Tagore 2015).

article, "Tagore", was first published in *Sur* and later included in her *Testimonios*. Meanwhile, she had given talks on Rabindranath, probably had translated (without any signature) some of his English writings in Spanish; however, whether any of these talks were published was not clear.[9] Strangely enough, she did not even publish any of his writings in *Sur* before 1959, when, on the eve of Rabindranath's birth centenary (1961), she brought out a special issue of *Sur* on India. In the introduction to this issue, Ocampo reiterated her debts to Rabindranath and Gandhi, clarifying that her love for India, by no means, diminished her love for France or England: "For a while, we have been trying to bring out this issue of SUR dedicated to India…I can never speak enough of how much I owe to India. Spiritually, I owe to her much more than I owe to any other country. I refer to the India represented to me by two men: Tagore and Gandhi. By this means, I rediscovered certain Evangelical truths: the truths I have seen embodied." (Ocampo 1959a, 1).

In the same year (1959), *Indian Literature*, a journal published by the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters), also published an article by Ocampo, "West Meets East: Tagore on the Banks of River Plate". This article was mainly a translation of Ocampo's first article on Rabindranath, "The Joy of Reading Tagore".

In 1961, the birth centenary year of Rabindranath, *Sur* brought out a special issue on the poet. It was in this issue that the earliest version of *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* first appeared. This 20-page article was divided into two major sections: El Balcón (The Balcony) and El Solitario de Punta Chica (The Recluse of Punta Chica).

Also in 1961, another article on Rabindranath appeared in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume (1861-1961)*, brought out by the Sahitya Akademi. This English article "Tagore on the Banks of River Plate" (henceforth referred as the Centenary Volume article) was divided into four sections: East Meets West, The Balcony, The Recluse of Punta Chica, and Bhalobasa. Length and content-wise, the Spanish and the English articles are quite similar to each other. Yet Ocampo was not at all happy with the English publication, as she mentioned to Shankha Ghosh–who, along with Richard Barker, translated *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* into Bengali in 1973–later that, "there are many things missing in it." (Ghosh 2010: 7). The English article by Ocampo did not mention any translator's

[9] Dyson mentions an article "Algo sobre Rabindranath Tagore" by Ocampo, published in *La Nación* on November 15, 1925, which was based on a talk she gave at Amigos del Arte, Buenos Aires. I have not been able to locate this issue of the newspaper in the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, and have not come across the article anywhere else. More about the article can be found in (Dyson 2009).

name, but perhaps the editor/publisher edited Ocampo's text. In fact, two letters of Ocampo to Krishna Kripalani (dated July 24, 1960, and December 6, 1960) indicated that they discussed editing Ocampo's language, and probably also the content of the Centenary Volume article.[10]

In the English article, Ocampo mentioned that she had "always intended to dedicate a separate book to him [Rabindranath]." (Ocampo 2010, 27). It was interesting that 1961 also saw the publication of this long-awaited book on Rabindranath by Ocampo, *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* or *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*, brought out by Sur Publishing House in Buenos Aires, with Ocampo's reaffirmation that, "I always had an intention to write an entire book on Tagore (small or huge, does not matter)." Almost four times longer than the previous two articles, this book was reprinted again in 1983. Content-wise, the two editions are identical, and this book is the one I have ventured to translate here.

On the poet's birth centenary year, various programmes were organised all over the country, and All India Radio (AIR) also broadcast a few special programmes, including an almost half-hour talk by Victoria Ocampo on Rabindranath,[11] which seemed to be a shorter version of the Centenary Volume article.

Apart from these versions, in the fourth volume of her autobiography, which was published posthumously in 1982, Ocampo also included a short section on Rabindranath, which was largely similar to the previously mentioned articles.[12]

In 1961, a few poems of *Purabi* were translated into Spanish by Alberto Girri and was published as *Canto del sol poniente.* Ocampo wrote an introduction to this volume, "Al margen de Puravi", where she referred to the days Rabindranath spent in San Isidro, his admiration–and also her own–for Hudson, and how she witnessed many of these poems taking shape. Though in this connection, it should be remembered that the Bengali book *Purabi* contains 77 poems, written roughly between 1918 and 1925, out of which some 26 were composed during the poet's stay in Argentina.

In the same year, that is 1961, on May 7, the poet's birthday, a street adjacent to Miralrío was named after Rabindranath. Ocampo delivered a brief speech on that occasion, which was later published in *Sur.* (Ocampo 1961a). In the sixth volume of her *Testimonios*, she included a brief

---

[10] For details, see Kripalani (1982).

[11] The audio tape is available in the Rabindra Bhavana Audio-Visual archive, but I have not been able to find out how this recording was made possible, as Ocampo never visited India in her lifetime. Perhaps, she recorded it in Argentina, and sent it to AIR?

[12] For a translation of this section, see (Bhattacharya 2014).

discussion on Rabindranath and the days he spent in San Isidro. It was basically an amalgamation of the earlier speech and some notes Elmhirst had taken about the poet's idea of Christmas while they spent the Christmas of 1924 in Argentina. (Ocampo 2011).

Out of all these versions, the first eight are strikingly similar. The reason behind the similarities might be that Ocampo was following her diary/notes taken during 1924-25 or immediately after. In fact, in the Centenary Volume article, she mentioned, "The following notes are taken from my diaries (which I do not know whether I shall ever publish)…" (Ocampo 2010, 32), suggesting that she did maintain a diary during those days. The existence of such a common source, however, would not explain the subtle and intriguing differences between these various versions, and these discrepancies would be my points of entry to this text.

The following instance will explain the above point and elaborate on how translation is essentially a process of reading. I would draw attention to the titles of the Spanish and the English texts. While the word "barranca" has been retained in the *Sur*-article and the Spanish book (that is, my source text), the English articles change it to "the banks of the River Plate". In fact, there is no exact synonym of the word "barranca" in English as it is used in this context. Most dictionaries translate it as precipice or ravine or gully or hill. However, none of these words connotes the exact idea of "barranca," which is–or at least, during the 1920s, it was–something like vast sloping riverbank. Perhaps, due to the untranslatability of this term, Ocampo altered the title in her English article calling it "Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate". Nevertheless, I retain "barranca" (and also, river Plata, instead of the accepted geographical *English* name River Plate, where the silvery transparency of "río plata"[13] is lost entirely), trusting that my readers, if any, would like to be familiarised with such cultural specificities of the source language and culture.

"Gloves of Translation"

The last chapter of *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro* contains an interesting critique of translation. While staying in San Isidro, Rabindranath would sometimes translate some of his Bangla (Bengali) poems to Ocampo in English. Some of these were new poems he wrote there, and some were earlier compositions, newly translated. One afternoon, he translated, verbally and impromptu, a newly written poem, "A Skeleton", which intrigued Ocampo. She felt, "…as if by some miracle or by chance, I entered

[13] "Plata" literally means silver.

into a direct contact with the poetic matter of the writing, without the gloves of translation." Nevertheless, not being satisfied with this momentary "direct contact", she requested a written translation of the poem. The very next day, the translation was handed over to her, which greatly disappointed Ocampo; she questioned the poet about the differences, and his explanation left her stupefied:

> "But certain things you mentioned yesterday are not here", I reproached him. "Why have you deleted those things which were like the bone marrow of the poem?" He told me that he believed those things would not interest the Occidentals. I felt blood rushing to my face as if someone had slapped me. Because, Tagore had answered my question with conviction, without any intention of hurting me. I told him, with a vehemence I had never permitted myself with him, that he was ***horribly*** wrong.

Ocampo did not spell out, but clearly, she was hurt by the poet's preconceived notion of what would interest the "Occidentals" and what would not, and what she, perhaps, considered to be a poor judge of her intellect and literary taste. It is evident here that Rabindranath–despite all his warnings to Latin America against imitating Europe–had a certain notion of the "west" and "westerners", although these notions would gradually evolve. Interestingly, Ocampo also had certain notions about the Occident and Occidentals, but these were, to some extent, different from Rabindranath's; and this difference could be ascribed to a somewhat similar, yet largely different, colonial history and comparable experiences of exploitations and cultural hegemony.

These similarities notwithstanding, it becomes evident that the West or Occident[14] played an important role in this South-South encounter–no matter how invisible or "gloved" it appears. This voyage of an Indian poet to a South American country has been exploited in various ways. One of such ways was pointed out by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (1998). In her *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden,* she quoted a newspaper article to show "…how truly Tagore could be used by different men in different ways for their different purposes…" (2009, 190). This newspaper, *The Standard*, incidentally, was one of the very few English papers published from Argentina. Referring to Columbus' haughty mistake, the article compared the *indios*–the Spanish subjects–to the Indians–the British subjects; presenting Rabindranath as the "ideal" British subject in India and camouflaging entirely his anti-colonial actions and speeches, including his strong response of renouncing the Knighthood in protest against the

[14] I will come back to this point later in the introduction.

massacre at Jalianwalabag in 1919. The article in *The Standard* simultaneously projected the British colonisers as superior to the Spanish colonisers, and Indians as superior to the *indios,* thus killing two birds with one stone. It is in the backdrop of such "gloved" international politics that I venture to read *Tagore in the barrancas of San Isidro.*

Translation as Reading

In a letter written to Virginia Woolf in 1934, which was later published in the first volume of her *Testimonio,* Ocampo spoke about her desire to write not like famous male authors, but "like a woman":

> My only ambition is to be able to write one day, more or less well, more or less poorly, but like a woman. If, like Aladdin, I had a marvellous lamp, and through its mediation, I was bestowed with the style of a Shakespeare, a Dante, a Goethe, a Cervantes, a Dostoevsky, I would really not take advantage of that bargain. I understand that a woman cannot be relieved from her sentiments and thoughts like a man, and likewise, she cannot speak in the voice of a man. (Ocampo 1981, 9-10)

This letter, however, does not exactly clarify what she meant by writing "like a woman", which is explained in a lecture delivered two years later, in 1936, "La mujer y su expresión" (Woman and Her Expression). Later published in her *Testimonios,* this article elaborates that by male writing, Ocampo refers to an uninterrupted speech, primarily monologue, which does not take into account the presence of the Other. As opposed to such monologues, Ocampo marked her own writing, or women's writings, as expressions which are based essentially on dialogues, which always invite "interruptions", for "interruptions" acknowledge the presence of the Other. *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro* also contains various kinds of interruptions, which, therefore, must be read carefully.

A close reading of the Spanish and English versions of all her writings on Rabindranath gives interesting insights into the mind of the author and editor Victoria Ocampo, depending on how she chooses to intervene in her writings and how much. In the *Autobiografía* version, for instance, Ocampo would provide footnotes for certain terms like "ahimsa", "swaraj", etc., explaining the meaning of these terms to her Argentine/Latin American readers. On the other hand, in the Centenary Volume article, with the Indian readers in her mind, she would clarify that "*La Nación* and *La Prensa* are the two most important newspapers in Argentina and South America." (Ocampo 2010, 27). As I have already explained earlier, the different titles of the Spanish and English texts–*Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* and

"Tagore on the banks of the River Plate" also speak volumes about her awareness of her target readers. Perhaps this awareness, consciously or unconsciously, influenced her editing process, which to a certain extent, explained a few differences between the different Spanish and English versions of the text.

In fact, it would be interesting to study how, in each of her writings on Rabindranath, Ocampo's depiction of the same event becomes slightly different, depending on her purpose, target readers and genre. I cite one example here, where Ocampo talks about her first encounter with *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* in five different places:

> I was telling myself all these things while reading those poems one afternoon, in a small room upholstered with grey silk, on 675 Tucumán Street. There was "bleus de Chine" over the white marble fireplace. The house no longer exists. Neither do the major characters of the drama, nor those whom I was too afraid to hurt (my parents), nor he from whom I wanted to run away so that I would not hate him too much (M.), nor he whom I loved (J.), nor the poet whose poems bestowed me with precious tears. The white marble fireplace was later transplanted to Villa Ocampo. The rest exists only in my memory. My memory, in its turn, will soon cease to exist, like those who have preceded me into nothingness. (Ocampo, *Autobiografía* 1982, 20-21)

> I remember the time and the place where it all happened. I was leaning on a white marble fireplace in a room upholstered with light grey silk. The house no longer exists. Neither do the people who surrounded me in those days. Nor does the poet whose voice bestowed me with the gift of my own tears, which no affectionate hug from the most intimate friend could have done. The images which still agitate my memory will cease to exist; they will also follow, so easily and irremediably, those which have preceded them into nothingness. However, the *Gitanjali* that made me cry, will remain. (Ocampo, *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro* 1983, 35-36)

> I remember the moment and the exact spot where this took place. I was leaning against a white marble fireplace in a room upholstered in light grey silk. The house no longer exists. Neither do those I was afraid of hurting, nor those who were hurting me. Nor does the poet who was bringing me the gift of tears, as not even the closest friend would have been able to do. The images which now live only in my memory will cease to exist together with it, as easily, as irrevocably as all that has preceded them into nothingness.
>
> But the *Gitanjali* over which I was weeping (Gide's translation published by Gallimard) will remain. (Ocampo, Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate 2010, 28-29)

> I remember the moment and the place where it happened. I was leaning against a white marble fireplace in a room upholstered with light grey silk. The house no longer exists. Neither do the people who surrounded me in those days. Nor do the poet whose voice brought to me the gift of my own tears, which even an affectionate hug from the most intimate friend could not have done. The scenes which still stir my memory will cease to exist; they will also follow, so easily and irremediably, all that has preceded them into nothingness. But the *Gitanjali* that made me cry will remain. (Ocampo, Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro 1961, 63)

> First encounter with Tagore: the *Gitanjali,* translated by Gide. I return home, having bought the book. It is time for my lessons in singing. Mme. R. has not arrived yet. I read the poems, leaning on the piano, in a gloomy room, upholstered with grey silk. It is winter. The noise of the Buenos Aires roads has followed me, now submerged by the windows and curtains. My youth is also with me, standing next to the piano. (Ocampo, Tagore 1941, 10)

Despite the minor modifications in these retellings, they can be easily deduced to be depictions of the same event. In each of the first four examples, the account of the past event–that is, Ocampo's first reading of the *Gitanjali* in 1914–is followed by her later–that is, roughly, the late 1950s–thoughts, which lend an identical poignancy to every retelling. Significantly, this later-musing is absent in the obituary article. The Autobiography-account, however, stands out, as that carries more *facts* than the rest. The house's exact location is given here, 675 Calle Tucumán, where Ocampo lived for some time with her husband when ties between the two were already torn. Only in this version, she refers to her parents, her husband and her lover in an almost-direct manner. Anyone acquainted with Ocampo's biography could easily equate "M." with Monaco Estrada, her husband; and "J." with Julian Martinez, a cousin of Estrada, whose "secret" affair with Ocampo was a much-discussed topic in the "elite" circle of early twentieth century Buenos Aires. A piece of apparently irrelevant information–that the fireplace was later relocated to Villa Ocampo (the house in San Isidro where Victoria used to live with her parents, and very close to Miralrío, where Rabindranath stayed for two months)–is also given in the Autobiography-account. These facts related to Ocampo's life have been excluded from all other versions, where the focus is on Rabindranath and the *Gitanjali,* and not on Ocampo herself, thus clearly marking the generic characteristics of an autobiography and a memoir. In fact, the English essay clarifies for the Indian readers (that too, in a different paragraph) that Ocampo read the French translation of the *Gitanjali*, an explanation that has not been highlighted in such a way in the Spanish versions.

The fifth example, which Ocampo wrote in 1941 as an obituary to Rabindranath and later included in her *Testimonios,* is different, however. Here, the paragraph cited above is followed by her readings of *Gitanjali,* while in all other examples, the readings precede the cited paragraphs. This is also the only article to cite *Gitanjali* in French; all the other articles cite lines of *Gitanjali* either in English or Spanish or both. French has been a more or less well-known language among the educated people of Buenos Aires, who were probably Ocampo's target readers. Neither does this article contain many facts–which the *Autobiografía* does–nor does it emphasise the author's position or sentiment–which the other examples do. This article is the only one to find a place in Ocampo's *Testimonios.* A reading of this entire article shows deft use of mimetic mode to conceal the "I" and to testify from the background; whereas in *Tagore in the barrancas of San Isidro,* she explains her use of first-person by quoting authors like Victor Hugo and Teilhard de Chardin, and then asserting that, "Any attempt to bear witness to these experiences taking place in the internal laboratory of human beings, demands the first person"; thus, marking the generic differences between these works. Various such examples can be cited from Ocampo's writings to prove how cognizant a writer she was, which makes the task of the translator even more challenging. However, there is another small detail that attracts attention: this is the only article where Ocampo claims to be leaning against a piano, and not a fireplace, while reading *Gitanjali*–a point that directs us, once again, to the question of whether she used a common source for all these writings.

However, even if we consider *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro* to be an isolated text, there are several inconsistencies–"interruptions", in other words–within this text which are bound to draw the readers' attention. Ocampo has, for instance, cited lines in French, English and Italian; but rarely indicated her sources. Some quotations have been explained in parentheses or footnotes, most, however, have not. In fact, sometimes, she has also cited lines from different texts of Rabindranath as a single quotation. Considering these as significant aspects of her writing style, in this translation, I have followed her cues closely and accordingly provided in-text translations or footnote, as is indicated in the source text. For the same reason, I have also retained her sentence structure and paragraph division as much as feasible.

Apart from such technical aspects, the apparent contradictions in her content can also speak volumes about her literary style. Take, for example, music. It is known from Ocampo's biography that music and literature have always been her special interest, and in *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*, while talking about literature, Ocampo frequently refers to music.

For instance, (on page 14 of the source text), Ocampo talks about "our ability to convert ourselves into the music that we listen to" and emphasizes that the "profoundness of music is unfathomable and impenetrable". On page 31, however, she takes up this topic once again and confirms that "our occidental music seemed to him [Rabindranath] as complicated and devoid of any rhyme or reason as the Bengali songs he used to sing to me initially appeared to me–intolerably monotonous. Thus, I discovered that music is not a universal language, like I had imagined." And then she goes on to add, "Later, I became rather fond of Bengali songs." Apparently, these two statements seem contradictory, and the text is fraught with such contradictions. It is, nevertheless, important to remember that the text–although it is dated June-July 1958–was probably written and edited over a period of time. Her thoughts had obviously changed and evolved during that course of time, but her writing often fused her present and past thoughts in such a way that, at times, it was difficult to distinguish them. A close reading of these lines illustrates that once–in her remote past, before 1924-25–Ocampo believed music to be a universal language. Later, during her close interaction with Rabindranath during 1924-25, however, she realised that music was not a universal language. And the last sentence, "Later, I became rather fond of Bengali songs", referred to an unspecified time after 1924-25. If taken as something more than a polite statement, it revealed what Ocampo had not spelt out: that music, like any other language, must be acquired. Only a trained ear could appreciate music. Thus, the apparent contradictions, which perhaps characterise Ocampo's style, can be used to trace the progression of her thoughts and beliefs.

Ocampo's reaction to how Rabindranath referred to her in India can illustrate the point. Ocampo confesses that she came across these details through a translation of a book that Kshitish Roy sent her, and she adds in a footnote, "I discovered this in 1960, after writing these pages in 1958."; though correspondence between Ocampo and Roy indicate that he probably sent her the translations in 1956. Complicating the matter further, she adds within parentheses that the book, *Alapchari Rabindranath,* was "translated into English by Kshitish Roy in 1942." Actually, the Bengali book was published in 1942, and to the best of my knowledge, so far, it has not been translated into English in its entirety. Roy translated for Ocampo only the sections where Rabindranath referred to her. This constant shift in time, however, is a characteristic of Ocampo's writings–a technique that probably better allows her to accommodate various kinds of "interruptions".

Throughout this text, Ocampo oscillates between past and present, using two different tenses. Especially when she talks about her direct contact with Rabindranath, her use of present tense helps her readers re-live the moments

and draws attention to the dual purposes of the book (which I shall elaborate on shortly): public remembrance and personal letter. The section where she met Rabindranath for the first time can illustrate this point. Ocampo narrated in past tense how she heard about the poet's arrival in Buenos Aires, and "decided, with X., to go and see him", how the English secretary "received" them, and finally they "went upstairs to Tagore's suite", and the poet "entered the room". Then, Ocampo provides a long description of Rabindranath in the present tense. Perhaps, the sudden shift to the present tense here brings the moment alive more vividly, not just for the readers but also for the writer who gets to re-live her memory.

Why *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*

Towards the end of the first section of *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*, Ocampo tried to explain her several reasons, sometimes seemingly contradictory, behind writing this book:

> Now, in his centenary, it seems necessary to *remember publicly* what many of *us Occidentals* owe him, and I would like to see that these words have *reached the people of that land where he was born and died*. This is the best method of *writing him another letter, to speak to him*. (Emphases mine).

Writing this book, therefore, was meant to be an act of "public remembrance", to underscore anew what "Occidentals" owed to Rabindranath. It was necessary to recollect that once again, perhaps because it had been forgotten. Now, what exactly did Ocampo mean when she referred to this collective amnesia? It could refer to Rabindranath's "decaying popularity" in the English West, owing to some of his former admirers like W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and others.[15] However, this was not the case in the Hispanic world, where Rabindranath had a steady "popularity" right from 1913 to 1941, and even a few decades after that. The question, therefore, arose, which "Occident" was Ocampo referring to?

The Spanish word "occidente" could mean cardinal west, western in a general sense, and also occident. The latter term has been tinted culturally as opposed to the idea of Orient. The English language, however, lacks such a comprehensive term. In English, "West" usually refers to West Europe and the USA, thus confining itself to primarily English-speaking "first-world" countries; while "occident", sometimes, has a Christian association (Vajda, Pines and Others 2020, Jahanbegloo 2012), both in the English as

[15] This alleged "decaying popularity" has been strongly contested by many. For details, see (Mitra 2011).

well as Spanish languages. The term is a considerably vague one, and in the late 1950s Buenos Aires–decades before the appearances of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), and the subsequent debates surrounding these texts–it was even more nebulous.

The ambiguity was reflected in Ocampo's thoughts when she was planning *Sur*. In *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*, Ocampo quoted her letter to Rabindranath, where she wrote, "We are designing a bilingual journal that would deal with American problems but at the same time *would bring to America the best literature published in Europe*." (emphasis added). However, in her *Autobiografía*, she quoted the same letter, saying, "We are designing a bilingual (Spanish and English) journal that would deal with American problems but at the same time *would have room for the best literature that our two Americas can offer*." (emphasis added). Yet, another variation is found in the Centenary Volume article, where Ocampo quotes again the same letter, "We thought of bringing out a bilingual magazine, dealing with American problems and publishing only the best literary stuff we could get hold of". (Ocampo 2010, 44). Dyson (2009) referred to this dichotomy in her book, lamenting that the original copy of this letter could not be located to clarify it. The purpose of *Sur*, however, could be clarified from Ocampo's explanation given in the very first issue of *Sur*. In a piece called "Carta a Waldo Frank" (Ocampo 1931), Ocampo referred to the long process of conceiving the idea of this journal, the inspiration of Waldo Frank and his *Nuestro América,* and the role of her European friends in the entire process, clarifying towards the end that the journal would put people in search of America, "of that America with hidden treasure" (Ocampo 1931, 17). This declaration, made in 1931, aligned more to the letter quoted in *Autobiografía*, and showed that to bring out "*the best literature published in Europe"*, or the even more general claim of publishing "the best literary stuff we could get hold of" without specifying any geopolitical boundary, was not part of her agenda. The question, nevertheless, remained: why would then Ocampo (mis)quote her own letter in *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro*?

I would ascribe this apparent "inconsistency" to the ambiguous concept of "occidental" and "oriental", which played an important role in the present context. Rabindranath, in the early twentieth century Argentina, was largely regarded as a representative of the Orient, as opposed to the Occident (Gasquet 2008); and Argentina, standing in between its search for its own identity and disillusionment with Europe, was looking towards the Orient in the hope of finding some pointers. Therefore, while talking about Rabindranath, Ocampo found it imperative to enter into this dichotomy,

more so because her intended readers, as it was clear from the passage cited, were from the Occident as well as the Orient, even though she wrote the book in Spanish. Right at the beginning of this book, Ocampo referred to her first article on Rabindranath, where she compared his writings with those of Proust. Here Ocampo introduced Proust as a representative of "our restless Occident" and Rabindranath as the representative of "not only the Orient, but a bridge *"in the making"* between the Occident and the Orient."

"*Our* restless Occident" (emphasis added) seemed significant as in the paragraph cited above Ocampo also included "us" as part of "occidentals". Being born and brought up in Argentina, and with her explicit discomfort with certain religious practices within Christianity, it was not clear how Ocampo could count herself as part of "occidental", unless her "occident" included South America as well. Yet, for Ocampo, "*our* occidental music" (emphasis mine) would not include "Ricardo [Güiraldes] and his guitar." Complicating the dilemma further, Ocampo added, "What I owe (occidental *and* American) to men like Tagore and Gandhi…" (emphasis mine), signifying that "occidental" for her did not include "American". In the English article "Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate" (Ocampo, 2010), the word "occidental" was replaced with "Westerner" almost everywhere, and the above sentence was put as, "The debt that I, a Westerner and a South American, owe to men like Gandhiji and Gurudev…" (47), suggesting that a South American could also be a part of Western. From such examples, it could be surmised that for Ocampo, "Western" was associated more with geographical location, without any cultural or political nuances. Yet, this very letter also held ample proof that Ocampo was conscious of the cultural differences between Europe and South America despite her very Europeanised upbringing. Similar ambiguity was noticed when Ocampo made passing references to "orientalist philosophy" or "orientalist thoughts", never pausing to define the "orient". Believing that acknowledging such ambiguities would be essential to understand Ocampo's text and its context, I have not translated the word "occidental", and also retained the original case (Occidental/occidental) in each instance.

Being a dweller of the geographical west, perhaps it was difficult for Ocampo to discern how the connotation of the term "West" included only the English-speaking "first world" and had always left South America out of its purview. Soon after he arrived in Argentina, and despite spending most of his time in seclusion, Rabindranath became conscious about the Europeanised aspects of Buenos Aires; he tried to point it out to Ocampo several times, and Ocampo, initially, did not like it at all. And when confronted with this question, she did not try to hide her anger and

resentment, claiming, but without explaining, that the situation of the Americas was "totally different" from that of India:

> But where do we go to *buy* our culture if not from the country from which we come, whose children we are, and forced heirs? Is not the European culture our culture too? Can we limit ourselves to the quichua or guarani culture, or the comechingon Indians? Time will tell what will be born among the heirs of these cultures, in the American soil. However, the entire America, from the north to the south, cannot reject the European culture without rejecting itself. The case of India against England is totally different.

If this was what Ocampo felt in 1924, within a few years, however, she would be mature enough not only to confront the question gracefully but also to seek out an answer. The letter she wrote to Rabindranath in 1930 offered a sharp contrast to the above quotation, voicing her angst explicitly:

> We [referring to herself and Waldo Frank] felt like siblings who have suffered in different situations for the same fault and have fought against the same solitude and with the same yearning. Both of us are orphans. And Europe is the cause of this feeling.... (Ocampo 1982a)

This was the primary question that encouraged her to bring out the journal *Sur*, which would make Victoria Ocampo a central figure in the literary scenario of entire Latin America. It was perhaps this debt that she wanted to recollect in public, for this was not just a personal debt, and this was what she "remembered publicly".

Though like any other act of remembrance, it was intensely subjective, yet Ocampo had carefully pruned all "private" elements out of it. In all the Spanish versions, while talking about Rabindranath, Ocampo would use the more formal form of you, "usted", in contrast to Rabindranath, who in all his Bengali writings referred to Ocampo with the informal you form "tumi". Although, it should be remembered here that their only medium of communication was English, where both of them had to be satisfied with the neutral "you". From their personal correspondence, Ocampo purged all elements that might even hint at their much-discussed "amorous" relationship. I would give only one example to substantiate this point. In this book, as well as in the Centenary Volume article, Ocampo cites the first letter Rabindranath wrote to her in San Isidro. The English letter published in Dyson (2009) contains three paragraphs. Ocampo cited the entire first paragraph, almost the entire second paragraph except for the last line, and the first sentence of the last paragraph:

> Last night when I offered you my thanks for what is ordinarily termed as hospitality I hoped that you could feel that what I said was much less than what I had meant.
>
> It will be difficult for you fully to realise what an immense burden of loneliness I carry about me, the burden that has specially been imposed upon my life by my sudden and extraordinary fame. I am like an unfortunate country where on an auspicious day a coal mine has been discovered with the result that its flowers are neglected, its forests cut down and it is laid bare to the pitiless gaze of a host of treasure-seekers. My market price has risen high and my personal value has been obscured. This value I seek to realise with an aching desire which constantly pursues me. …
>
> I feel today that this precious gift has come to me from you and that you are able to prize me for what I am and not for what I contain. (Dyson 2009, 374)

The last line of the second paragraph that has been excluded from Ocampo's public remembrance is: "This can be had only from a woman's love and I have been hoping for a long time that I do deserve it." (Dyson 2009, 374). While such fastidious attempts to eliminate all "private" elements from her "public" remembrance create a tension in the text, they also reveal the clarity of purpose that "la señora cultura" had in mind, which also enabled her to distinguish aptly between a memoir and an autobiography.

However, as mentioned earlier, the book was not just for the "Occidentals". Ocampo also wanted to make the poet's compatriots, Indians, conscious about this aspect of Rabindranath; meaning, her target readers were not only "Occidentals" but also readers of the "Orient". The eclectic use of quotations (Proust, Dante, the *Upanishads,* Baudelaire, Pascal, Gandhi, Péguy; to name a few) in support of her arguments was perhaps deemed necessary to convince such a wide range of readers. Sometimes, very interestingly, Ocampo also inserted her own comments or explanations within the quotes, thus flagging her "interruptions".

From this array of quotations, Saint-John Perse stood out as the only person whose line–the same line–Ocampo quoted twice. *Tagore in the Barrancas of San Isidro* ends with a line from Saint-John Perse, appropriated by Ocampo: "There is only the history of the soul". This line, taken from Saint-John Perse's famous poem *Exil*, was also quoted on page 93 of the source text, "Here I am, restored to my native shore. There is only the history of the soul." The lines were cited in a context where Ocampo explained how "extremely unilateral" her relation was with Rabindranath, the poet having no idea about the intellectual activities of Ocampo. Saint-John Perse was the pseudonym of Alexis Leger (1887-1975), the French poet-diplomat who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1960. The poem, as Calinescu (1998) pointed out, was written when Saint-John Perse