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**Childhood in the Works of Silvina Ocampo
and Alejandra Pizarnik**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of Warwick,
Centre for British and Comparative Cultural Studies

August 2000

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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the following:

My supervisors, Professor John King and Professor Susan Bassnett.

Janet Bailey in the Centre for British and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Warwick.

The Arts and Humanities Research Board for a three-year studentship including six-month research visit to Buenos Aires.

The University of Warwick Humanities Research Centre for a one-year fellowship including one-month research visit to Buenos Aires.

Queen's University, Belfast for granting me time to finish my thesis before taking up my appointment there.

Francis Korn, María Negroni, Cristina Piña, Noemí Ulla and Luisa Valenzuela for useful critical comments. The many other writers and critics in Buenos Aires who gave me so much inspiration and help during my research.

Annalee Pauls in Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections for microfilm of Ocampo's letters and photocopies of Pizarnik's letters.

Alicia Carletti for permission to reproduce her paintings, Myriam Pizarnik de Nesis for photographs of Alejandra Pizarnik and Amelia Biagioni for the sketch by Silvina Ocampo.

John Wainwright in the Taylor Institution Library, Oxford for continued bibliographical assistance.

Marcela Solá and María Chouhy-Villanueva for friendship and hospitality during my research visits to Buenos Aires.

Rod Varty for computing advice in preparing the final thesis.

My parents, sister and friends, in particular Nick Cartmell, for tremendous support and encouragement throughout my PhD.

Declaration

This thesis is my own work, except where otherwise indicated, and has not been previously submitted for a degree at another university.

Summary

This thesis explores childhood as theme and perspective in the Argentine *cuentista* and poet Silvina Ocampo (1903-1993) and traces this thematic and vital link to the Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972). The study looks at childhood not only in relation to their literary texts but also in the writers' construction of self-identity within their socio-literary context, and at the role played by visual art in their aesthetic.

Chapter 1 contrasts Silvina with her elder sister Victoria Ocampo through their differing literary appropriation of a shared childhood. It distinguishes Ocampo from Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges in terms of her fictional logic and her treatment of games, drawing comparisons instead with Julio Cortázar.

Chapter 2 undertakes close reading of various Ocampo texts, including some for children, in order to explore her vision of childhood through nostalgia, adult-child power relationships, aging and rejuvenation, and moments of initiation or imitation.

Chapter 3 turns to Pizarnik and the myth of the child-poet. It analyses her child personae through André Breton's Surrealism, Jean Cocteau and Octavio Paz, through her borrowings from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Nadja*, and through her obsession with madness, death, orphanhood, violation and transgression.

Chapter 4 is comparative. It outlines the context in which Ocampo and Pizarnik's passionate friendship developed, and considers Pizarnik's essay on *El pecado mortal*. It then explores their broad mutual literary and thematic affinities.

My conclusion is that Ocampo's works achieve equilibrium between childhood and age, whereas Pizarnik's much-discussed poetic crisis of exile from language itself parallels her deep sense of anxiety at being exiled from the world of childhood.

This thesis contributes to the study of Argentine literature by drawing revealing comparisons between two key writers through their shared obsession with childhood, arguing that an understanding of their attitudes to childhood is fundamental to appreciating fully their work. I refer to unpublished letters of Ocampo, material from private interviews, photographs and relevant paintings by Leonor Fini, Alicia Carletti and others.

Abbreviations

Cornelia frente al espejo

Cuentos completos I

Cuentos completos II

Encuentros con Silvina Ocampo

Enumeración de la patria

Correspondencia Pizarnik

Obras completas: Poesía completa y prosa selecta

Alejandra Pizarnik: Semblanza

Cornelia

Cuentos I

Cuentos II

Encuentros

Enumeración

Correspondencia

Obras

Semblanza

Introduction

‘Surtout il fallait, coûte que coûte, revenir à cette réalité de l’enfance, réalité grave, héroïque, mystérieuse, que d’humbles détails alimentent et dont l’interrogatoire des grandes personnes dérange brutalement la féerie.’¹

‘La infancia es un lugar exagerado. Infierno, paraíso y paso obligado si es que uno está dispuesto a seguir camino. [...] La niñez se parece a veces a la locura. [...] Nunca los edificios serán tan altos, ni los cementerios tan lúgubres, ni las telas tan suaves.’²

With Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo compiled the landmark *Antología de la literatura fantástica*;³ owing in part to the lasting impact and importance of this anthology, critical reception of her work has often situated her within, or differentiated her from, the genre of fantastic literature.⁴ Whilst there are aspects in common between her narrative and that of Borges, Bioy Casares and other later exponents of the fantastic such as Julio Cortázar, I should like to investigate further the striking originalities of her style in order to uncover less obvious links between her and the poet, Alejandra Pizarnik. Until comparatively recently, her work has been sparsely represented in anthologies, perhaps since with its recurrent themes of childish cruelty and perversity it has a different – and possibly more disturbing – ambiguity to that of many other fantastic short stories. Ocampo’s reticence about promoting her own work has further contributed to this under-representation, as has the predominance of her elder sister, Victoria Ocampo, founder of the influential Argentine literary journal, *Sur*. Nérida Salvador, in her overview of Argentinian literature for the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, lists Silvina Ocampo among those contributors to *Sur* who ‘marked out incontrovertible aesthetic routes’.⁵ Along this aesthetic route I aim to trace childhood as both theme and perspective through Ocampo to Pizarnik.

In an issue of the *Revista Iberoamericana* devoted to women’s writing, Sylvia Molloy explores the question of literary precursors, both from a reader’s and a writer’s point of view.⁶ She describes how a reader discovers traces of other writers between the

¹ Jean Cocteau, *Les enfants terribles* (Paris: Fayard, 1929), p. 22.

² Leila Guerriero in an article in the colour supplement of *La Nación* in honour of ‘el día del niño’, 9 August 1998, pp. 20-28, pp. 20, 23 and 27.

³ *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1940).

⁴ See for example Emilia Perassi’s article ‘Paradigmi e deviazioni del fantastico ispanoamericano: Il caso di Silvina Ocampo’, in *Geografia, storia e poetiche del fantastico*, ed. by Monica Farnetti (Florence: Olschki, 1995), pp. 49-59. Perassi’s assessment of Ocampo’s work highlights some important and interesting differences from Borges yet the fantastic is always her point of reference and departure, as it is for Lucía Fox Lockert in ‘Silvina Ocampo’s Fantastic Short Stories’, *Monographic Review*, 4 (1988), 221-29. Sylvia Molloy, too, comments that ‘En ninguno de los relatos de Silvina Ocampo puede señalarse claramente la intrusión de lo sobrenatural [...] Tampoco hay esa duda [...] que caracterizan los mejores ejemplos de la literatura fantástica, y quizás sea esa la mejor prueba de que lo fantástico se utiliza aquí para otros fines de los que habitualmente se atribuyen al género’. ‘Simplicidad inquietante en los relatos de Silvina Ocampo’, *Lexis*, 2 (1978), 241-51 (p. 246).

⁵ Nérida Salvador, ‘Argentina’, in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 53-64 (p. 62).

⁶ Sylvia Molloy, ‘Sentido de ausencias’, *Revista Iberoamericana*, 51 (1985), 483-88.

lines of a text; Molloy also investigates how a writer seeks to establish a context for herself, either by naming those writers who have marked her, or more revealingly, those writers whose influence she would like to be apparent from her work.

Hay dos maneras de establecer antepasados. Una de ellas poco tiene que ver con nuestra voluntad. Cada texto que escribimos dicta, entre líneas, sus propios precursores, refleja para el lector los meandros de nuestras lecturas previas. [...] La otra manera de establecer precursores es elegirlos. [...] Yo dije alguna vez, sin pensarlo, que Silvina Ocampo me había marcado. Ahora sé que es así. (p. 485)

Molloy confesses to having read fewer women writers than men, and at a later stage. In her conclusion, she wishes to invent for herself a lineage of women writers, to insert herself into a tradition.

Inventarme, sí precursoras: las que hubiera querido que me marcaran y no escuché con atención; fabularme un linaja [sic], descubrirme hermanas. Hacer que aquellas lecturas aisladas se organicen, irradien y toquen mi texto. [...] Es hora [...] de reconocermé en una tradición que, sin que yo lo supiera del todo, me ha estado respaldando.' (pp. 487-88)

Molloy, herself respected as both a writer of fiction and literary critic, thus finds positive value in supportive literary traditions. This thesis will do likewise, taking as a starting point the writer whose name came spontaneously to Molloy, Silvina Ocampo.

Molloy is not alone in singling out Ocampo as an influential writer, since Marjorie Agosín claims that many Argentine women writers of the last century 'están endeudadas con el trabajo de Silvina Ocampo, la mágica maga del desorden o del desdoblamiento del orden doméstico' and that she acts as a kind of mother figure for several of the younger generation.⁷ Whereas Agosín outlines an aesthetic of the domestic fantastic, I shall follow through Ocampo and beyond the thematic thread of childhood, as does Nora Pasternac with respect to Mexican writers in her *Escribir la infancia*.⁸ This comprehensive volume looks at various aspects of childhood, including reconstructing the childhood self, orphanhood, 'ser como' and 'ser en sí', rites of passage, games and child versus adult perspectives, all of which are extremely pertinent to Ocampo and Pizarnik. The analysis by Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco of Elena Garro's *La semana de colores*, 'El regreso a la "otra niña que fui" en la narrativa de Elena Garro' (pp. 109-26) touches upon the myth of childhood as a lost garden paradise; this myth will likewise be examined in tracing Ocampo's aesthetic route. The influence of fairy tales is also important in looking at childhood; Patricia Klingenberg's thesis defines Ocampo's narrative tone in terms of fairy tales: 'tiene la tranquilidad de los

⁷ Marjorie Agosín, *Literatura fantástica del Cono Sur: Las mujeres* (Buenos Aires: Educa, 1992), p. 62.

cuentos de hadas que dicen los horrores más cruentos [...] con una naturalidad carente de escándalo u horror.⁹ Ocampo reads fairy tales, recreating some of their wonder in her own writing for children. Equally important are key works of children's literature such as *Alice in Wonderland*;¹⁰ this book has been through countless editions (Sigmar, Peuser, Acme and Codex, to name but a few) in translation in Argentina, testifying to its extreme and continuing popularity. As Frey and Griffith have noted, 'adults often re-read [children's classics], once again reading a meaning out of or into the children and childhoods addressed by the works' (p. vii). The 'double-layering of adult and child perspectives' (p. viii) which Frey and Griffith attribute to classic children's literature is equally important and apparent in Silvina Ocampo's short stories, as are the 'disruptive energy, rapid and shocking experience, and persistent revelations of contradictions and strangeness at the core of personal, familial, and social life' (p. ix). In this respect, her own writing is supported by the 'meandros de [sus] lecturas previas' (Molloy), that is her readings of children's stories.

Writing about childhood or privileging a child's point of view is not limited to women writers; within the Argentinian tradition, authors such as Julio Cortázar incorporate child vision as an important component of their short stories.¹¹ Juan José Hernández (with whom Silvina Ocampo co-authored the play *La lluvia de fuego*) and Marcelo Pichon Rivière (who Cristina Piña describes as having 'una visión a la vez mágica y terrible de la infancia') are also extremely interested in childhood in their work.¹² Moreover, childhood is a universal theme and as such recurs in every generation. My aim is simply to follow this fascination with childhood through Ocampo to Alejandra Pizarnik, whose texts are 'irradiated' (to use Molloy's image) and supported by a reading of Ocampo. Though essentially very different to Ocampo, she

⁸ *Escribir la infancia: Narradoras mexicanas contemporáneas*, ed. by Nora Pasternac (México: El Colegio de México, 1996).

⁹ *El infiel espejo: The Short Stories of Silvina Ocampo* (doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana, 1981), p. 10.

¹⁰ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Folio Society, 1962; repr. 1993).

¹¹ In this respect, I am somewhat in disagreement with Eva Luz Santos-Phillips who rather sweepingly declares that 'en la literatura femenina hispanoamericana, a diferencia de la masculina, la preocupación por los niños o la niñez es de mayor importancia'. In *La representación femenina en la narrativa de Silvina Ocampo* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 1995), p. 19, my italics. Santos-Phillips names those male writers she considers to be the exceptions that prove the rule, such as Eduardo Barrios and Ricardo Güiraldes, but points out that they mainly consider male children. Perhaps there is a simple explanation for this in terms of familiarity, rather than any deliberate marginalization of female children. Cortázar's 'Final del juego', to be discussed in Chapter 1, further undermines this generalization, since its protagonists are three girls.

¹² Cristina Piña, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: La extranjera', in *Mujeres argentinas: El lado femenino de nuestra historia*, ed. by María Esther de Miguel (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1998), pp. 297-332 (p. 319). *La lluvia de fuego* is as yet unpublished in Spanish, but has been published and performed in France as *La pluie de feu* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1997).

has an affinity with her through their dominant interest in childhood; as well as showing a marked preference for adopting a childlike poetic persona, Pizarnik's admiration for Ocampo rapidly developed a strongly infantile (and simultaneously erotic) character which illuminates aspects of her texts. I shall therefore look at Ocampo's texts and self-positioning, and subsequently read her as a precursor for Pizarnik, a source of support which irradiates and touches both Pizarnik's work and self-image.

Recent publications and research include several major monographic studies of the stories of Silvina Ocampo and one on the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik.¹³ However, there is a gap as regards situating the production of these writers as part of a distinctive literary lineage. As already mentioned, Ocampo has often been located in relation to the fantastic, and Pizarnik has usually been read within a purely poetic tradition. Suzanne Chávez Silverman points out that childhood predominates as a theme amongst writers of the 'generación del '40', of which Olga Orozco is a member.¹⁴ Orozco is undeniably a key poet in Pizarnik's development, and their genealogical links are explored by Jill Kuhnheim, who initially places them in a 'friendship-mentor relationship' but then explicitly reads Pizarnik 'as a descendent of Orozco'.¹⁵ The Argentinian poet Diana Bellessi claims that there is a lineage following on from Alejandra Pizarnik: 'Nos referimos también a una generación de poetas posteriores que han colocado a Pizarnik en la línea mayor de su linaje',¹⁶ although Cristina Piña sees Pizarnik as 'sin posibles seguidores', given the radical nature of her poetics.¹⁷ This framework – incorporating Orozco, Pizarnik and possibly later poets – is valid, but is perhaps too constrained by genre. Ocampo, though primarily known as a short story writer, won many prizes for her poetry and sometimes wrote both poetry and story versions of the same idea.¹⁸ Her

¹³ *Silvina Ocampo: Una escritora oculta*, ed. by Noemí Ulla (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1999); Patricia Nisbet Klingenberg, *Fantasies of the Feminine: The Short Stories of Silvina Ocampo* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999); Belinda Corbacho, *Le Monde féminin dans l'oeuvre narrative de Silvina Ocampo* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Annick Mangin, *Temps et écriture dans l'oeuvre narrative de Silvina Ocampo* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1996); Graciela Tomassini, *El espejo de Cornelia: La obra cuentística de Silvina Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1995). On Pizarnik, Cristina Piña, *Poesía y experiencia del límite: Leer a Alejandra Pizarnik* (Buenos Aires: Botella al Mar, 1999).

¹⁴ See *The Ex-Centric Self: The Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1991), p. 168.

¹⁵ See 'The Struggle of Imagination: Alejandra Pizarnik and Olga Orozco', in *Gender, Politics and Poetry in Twentieth-Century Argentina* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), pp. 64-89 (pp. 67, 87).

¹⁶ Diana Bellessi, 'Un recuerdo suntuoso', *Feminaria*, 8.16 (1996), 22-23 (p. 23). Delfina Muschiatti finds a literary family for Pizarnik in lateral terms, tracing a fraternal relationship with the poet Georg Trakl and likening the contact between their works to 'una sociedad secreta infantil'. 'La conexión Trakl-Pizarnik: Transformación del modelo gemelar'. In press; copy courtesy of the author.

¹⁷ *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, p. 30.

¹⁸ She won the Premio Municipal de Poesía in 1954, the Segundo Premio Nacional de Poesía in 1953 and the Premio Nacional de Poesía in 1962. 'Autobiografía de Irene' appears in verse form in *Espacios*

last published collection, *Cornelia frente al espejo*, contains a mixture of stories and poetry.¹⁹ Pizarnik's poetry moves increasingly towards prose, and her most notorious piece, *La condesa sangrienta*, has been variously categorized as prose, poetry and commentary, or a mixture of all three.²⁰ Furthermore, Cristina Piña devotes an article to the impossibility of generic classification of Pizarnik's *Los poseídos entre lilas*.²¹ Drawing Ocampo and Pizarnik together through their thematic and vital approach to childhood allows for productive comparison across the boundaries of genre, and for a stronger sense of continuity between different existing strands of Argentinian literary traditions.

Viewing this comparison in the wider context of twentieth-century Argentine literature, it can be represented in patterns of belonging and non-belonging, a schema outlined by Susan Bassnett.²² As regards Silvina Ocampo, this schema is applicable in several respects: her relationship to, and construction of, a sense of national identity; her position as a writer connected to *Sur*, but often overshadowed; within her *cuentos*, the crisis of non-belonging experienced by child narrators within a confusing and disturbing adult or adolescent world. This theme of childhood treated perturbingly as a state of non-belonging to the adult world is the major link to Alejandra Pizarnik.

Pizarnik, both in her poetic persona and in the self we glimpse from her published diaries, reveals – or rather confronts the reader with – a desperate sense of non-belonging. She creates for herself the image of a precocious yet deeply insecure child; in her social interactions she revelled in being youthful and shocking, yet her greatest desires and aspirations were to belong, particularly to the artistic community in Paris. On her return to Paris after spending a traumatic time in the United States, she no longer felt that she fitted in; as an Argentine Jewess (representative of the strong Eastern European Jewish presence which forms a notable part of Argentinian cultural life) she experienced otherness as she never had previously. These feelings are parallel to those of her poetic persona who suffers the ultimate non-belonging in exile from language and linguistic communication itself. This is a stage removed from Silvina Ocampo; rather than simply not belonging fully to a literary circle or to a particular language, Pizarnik fails to find a linguistic homeland through any poetic language other than the 'anti-language' of silence and death.

métricos (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1945) and again as the title story of *Autobiografía de Irene* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1948).

¹⁹ *Cornelia frente al espejo* (Buenos Aires: Tusquets, 1988).

²⁰ *La condesa sangrienta* (Buenos Aires: Aquarius, 1971).

²¹ 'Obscenidad y teatralización del inconsciente en *Los poseídos entre lilas*', in *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, pp. 123-32.

Her adulation of Paris as an artistic Mecca is an important aspect of this aesthetic route, since by travelling to Paris, Pizarnik was following in Ocampo's footsteps, as well as in those of divers other prominent Latin American writers. Ocampo first encountered France during her childhood, and she made irregular visits there throughout her life, whereas Pizarnik's four years in Paris between 1960 and 1964 were the fulfilment and culmination of adolescent yearnings fired by reading French poetry and Sartre. This aesthetic route crosses with that of other writers such as Julio Cortázar, who had settled in Paris, and with that of visual artists from both Europe and Argentina, particularly those associated with Surrealism, such as Leonor Fini.²³ Ocampo and Pizarnik initially expressed themselves through both writing and painting and had a strong sense of the visual; indeed Alicia Borinsky says of Pizarnik that 'her writing becomes part of the continuum of the visual imagery of the Pre-Raphaelites and Surrealism' and Borinsky draws parallels between Pizarnik and Fini.²⁴ Leonor Fini and the contemporary Argentine painter, Alicia Carletti, both make extensive use of literary sources which link them aesthetically to Ocampo and Pizarnik. Fini chooses to illustrate bibliophile copies of such authors as Charles Baudelaire, Jean Cocteau, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, Gérard de Nerval and Edgar Allan Poe,²⁵ all read enthusiastically by Pizarnik and Ocampo, and Carletti bases many of her paintings directly on Sir John Tenniel's illustrations to *Alice in Wonderland*, a key text in Pizarnik's library. Reference will therefore be made to paintings by these and other artists, such as Norah Borges, which illuminate the poems and stories being discussed.

In tracing Ocampo's aesthetic route through the thematics of childhood I am prioritizing this aspect of her work over others. It is important to point out, however, that certain features of Ocampo's style other than her preference for the child's perspective are taken up by subsequent writers; to trace exhaustively the continuations of Ocampo's aesthetic route would necessitate following forking paths. The short stories and novels of Luisa Valenzuela, from *Aquí pasan cosas raras* up to the present, provide one such example.²⁶ This fiction is usually set in the context of literary responses to the bleak period of the Dirty War in recent Argentine history. Many of the

²² Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 75.

²³ Fini was born in Buenos Aires of an Italian mother and an Argentine father, and after spending up to her teens in Italy, she settled in Paris just before the Second World War.

²⁴ 'Alejandra Pizarnik: The Self and its Impossible Landscapes', in *A Dream of Light and Shadow: Portraits of Latin American Women Writers*, ed. by Marjorie Agosin (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), pp. 291-302 (pp. 299, 301).

²⁵ Information on Fini's book illustration projects may be found at the end of the Galerie Guy Pieters exhibition catalogue, *Leonor Fini* (Galerie Guy Pieters, Belgium, 1-29 May 1998), [n. p.].

²⁶ *Aquí pasan cosas raras* (Buenos Aires: La Flor, 1975).

elements of Valenzuela's style on which critics focus, however, such as reworking of fairy tales, ironic exaggeration bordering on the fantastic or fanciful and the use of very black humour, can be traced back directly to Silvina Ocampo. Ocampo's story 'Malva', in which the eponymous character suffers from a 'desmedido grado de impaciencia' (*Cuentos II*, p. 74) leading her to eat bits of herself in exasperation, 'Las vestiduras peligrosas' where a woman tries to incite men to rape her by wearing outrageous clothes, and 'Celestina', whose protagonist is a woman who loves bad news so much that she dies on hearing good news, all signpost the aesthetic route which is taken by Valenzuela in her stories 'Artefactos para matar el tiempo', 'Unlimited Rapes United, Argentina' and 'Pequeña historia obvia'.²⁷ Valenzuela herself, when asked in interview about the possibility of an identifiable women's literature in Argentina, suggests Silvina Ocampo as a possible starting point: 'partiendo de una Silvina Ocampo [...] hay muchas mujeres que escriben desde una cosa muy visceral'.²⁸ Returning to Molloy's observation that readers find echoes of other texts between the lines, I suggest that Ocampo is a precursor to Valenzuela who perhaps has not received as much international critical attention, yet who provides for her work an illuminating context and supportive tradition.

Drawing comparisons between writers' use of childhood has inevitable pitfalls, not least that definitions of childhood vary across times, cultures and classes. Childhood is an enormous subject, and many influential theorists in a wide variety of fields including psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology have written at length on the subject. Freud is the most towering example; as Alice Miller observes, 'we owe the fundamental recognition of the significance of early childhood for all of later life to Sigmund Freud'.²⁹ His ideas on dreams, the taboo, and the polymorphous perversity of infants, to name just a few key areas, are lurking as a ubiquitous precursor between the lines of Ocampo's texts;³⁰ as Evelyn Fishburn observes, 'the starker side of childhood,

²⁷ 'Malva' and 'Las vestiduras peligrosas' are in Ocampo's *Cuentos II*, and 'Celestina' in *Cuentos I*. Valenzuela's three stories from the 1970s may be found in her *Cuentos completos y uno más* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1999).

²⁸ Graciela Gliemmo, 'Luisa Valenzuela: Los atributos de la imaginación' in *Las huellas de la memoria: Entrevistas a escritores latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Beas, 1994), pp. 181-205 (p. 186).

²⁹ Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*, 2nd edn (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p. 5.

³⁰ For a detailed exploration of Freud's reception and influence in Argentina, see Hugo Vezzetti, *Aventuras de Freud en el país de los argentinos: De José Ingenieros a Enrique Pichon Rivière* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1996). Vezzetti claims that 'en Buenos Aires, desde los años '20, el nombre de Freud era mencionado insistentemente en ámbitos médicos y literarios'. (p. 8) *Sur* had paid homage to Freud in its 1936 issue, only one year before *Viaje olvidado* was published. Alberto Hidalgo – the most active promoter of Freud in literary circles – was in Buenos Aires from 1932-67, during which time he collaborated with Borges and would almost certainly have had contact with Silvina Ocampo. (Vezzetti, pp. 191-95)

as first suggested by Freudian theories and subsequently developed by Melanie Klein, forms the basis of some of Ocampo's cruellest tales'.³¹ The scope of this thesis is largely limited to literary expression and interpretation of childhood, 'a reading of children and of childhood, a reading of what children and childhood have signified' in the works of Ocampo and Pizarnik.³² I will also be taking into account the intersection of literary representations of childhood with the social positioning of the writers involved and with their own construction of identity and sense of self.

One writer whose identity as constructed by herself and by her peers can productively be seen in terms of a thematics of childhood is Norah Lange, who is contemporary with Silvina Ocampo; a possible 'hermana' in Molloy's scheme. Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia* were published in 1937, the same year as Ocampo's *Viaje olvidado*. As observed by María Gabriela Mizraje, it appears significant that around 1937 Norah Lange, Silvina Ocampo and Delfina Bunge should all produce works dealing largely with their childhood, whether explicitly – as is the case with Bunge's *Viajes alrededor de mi infancia* and Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia* – or through a fictional filter, as are the *cuentos* of the volume *Viaje olvidado*.³³ Lange made a great impression on Argentine literary circles of the time, which were largely male-dominated, and she acquired the image of 'la "niña" mimada por sus compañeros de juegos vanguardistas' (Mizraje, p. 61). Beatriz Sarlo entitles her short study of Lange 'Norah Langue [sic]: La mujer niña',³⁴ and it is fascinating to observe how Lange begins to inhabit this space of child-woman created for her by various male mentors. Sarlo analyses, for instance, how Borges' attitude towards Lange 'la hace más joven de lo que era efectivamente' (p. 132); also, reading Brandán Caraffa's reviews of Lange and Victoria Ocampo in *Proa*, Sarlo carefully observes Caraffa's rhetoric which places the two women in a certain relationship to the poetics of rupture and novelty represented by *Proa*: 'Estas dos mujeres, tan azoradamente niña la una, tan sabiamente femenina la otra, marcan con un gesto inconsciente de vestales, la hora más clara de nuestra evolución espiritual.' (Sarlo, p. 128) So Norah Lange and Victoria Ocampo, though of

³¹ 'Silvina Ocampo', in *Short Fiction by Spanish-American Women*, ed. by Evelyn Fishburn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 101-08 (p. 102).

³² Charles Frey and John Griffith, *The Literary Heritage of Childhood: An Appraisal of Children's Classics in the Western Tradition* (London: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. vii.

³³ María Gabriela Mizraje, *Norah Lange: Infancia y sueños de walkiria* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1995), p. 25. Delfina Bunge, *Viaje alrededor de mi infancia* (Buenos Aires: López, 1938); Norah Lange, *Cuadernos de infancia* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1937); Silvina Ocampo, *Viaje olvidado* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1937).

³⁴ It forms the first section of Sarlo's 'Decir y no decir: Erotismo y represión en tres escritoras argentinas', in *Escribir en los bordes: Congreso internacional de literatura femenina latinoamericana*, ed. by Carmen Berenguer et al (Chile: Cuarto Propio, 1990), pp. 127-69.

influential families, find their literary endeavours marked by gendered considerations. Silvina Ocampo, on the other hand, finds for herself and for her work a unique space between these other highly visible and somewhat hyperbolic subject positions. Filling neither of these roles, admittedly stereotyped by Caraffa, of the knowingly feminine Victoria or the excitedly childlike Norah, Silvina Ocampo shifts seductively between adult and child worlds in her presentation of self and her construction of narrative personae. Pizarnik's adoption of what appears to be a Surrealist *femme-enfant* persona could be reviewed in the light of Lange's precedent, recognizing Pizarnik's alignment with Argentine literary circles as well as European. María Gabriela Mizraje also tentatively aligns Pizarnik with Lange in terms of feeling without a homeland: 'más cerca quizá de Norah Lange, Pizarnik quiere desagregar su contexto'.³⁵

In the arrangement of the chapters of this thesis are reflected the 'meandros de [mis] lecturas previas', in particular Marina Warner's *Managing Monsters*.³⁶ Warner claims that children have long been the conventional image of humanity in its natural state, symbolic of both innocence and its opposite. This image gives rise to conflicting myths of childhood, both equally persistent, as Paradise lost or as an 'unruly and dangerous territory which must be ordered, tamed, even consumed' (p. xv). Contained in such an opposition are the outlines of debates which form the first part of Chapter 1 concerning Victoria Ocampo and the concept of nation as child, and concerning the conflicting reviews of Ocampo's *Viaje olvidado*. The shared childhood of the eldest and youngest Ocampo sisters leads to divergent destinies and differing ways of returning to that childhood; the contrast between Victoria's tendency to use childhood symbolically and Silvina's adoption of it as theme and perspective in defiance of adult reasoning forms the backbone of Chapter 1. Warner goes on to say that

the difference of the child from the adult has become a dominant theme in contemporary mythology. In literature this has produced two remarkable dream figures living in voluntary exile from grownup society – Kipling's unforgettably vivid Mowgli, and J. M. Barrie's cocky hero, the boy who wouldn't grow up, Peter Pan. Both reveal the depth of adult investment in a utopian childhood state. (Warner, pp. 34-35)

A version of Kipling's figure and its symbolic use will be seen in Victoria Ocampo's own fairy tale, *La laguna de los nenúfares*, in Chapter 1,³⁷ and the possibilities or consequences of living apart from adult society discussed in relation to Silvina's 'La

³⁵ 'Alejandra Pizarnik y un canto de dormida al alba', in *Argentinas de Rosas a Perón* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 1999), pp. 268-91 (p. 278).

³⁶ Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time, The 1994 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xv.

³⁷ *La laguna de los nenúfares* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1926).

raza inextinguible'. In posing the question, 'how would a child play if there were no grown-ups to imitate?' (p. 38), Warner raises the issue of the seriousness of children's games and to what extent this is determined by their observation of adult behaviour. This is a seminal theme for Silvina Ocampo's exploration of childhood, and forms the latter half of Chapter 1.

The nostalgic yearning for childhood innocence is a further aspect of childhood commented upon by Warner; nostalgia forms my point of departure in Chapter 2 for looking at the interaction of youth and age in Silvina Ocampo. Warner refers to Novalis, who 'stressed the importance of becoming childlike to gain wisdom' (p. 37); Ocampo's rejection of the 'wisdom of age' paradigm informs the second section of Chapter 2 on youth and age. I then look at how children in Ocampo's works are frequently threatening to adults. The fairy-tale element returns in the *Peter Pan* ideal of never growing up, through which I draw conclusions about Ocampo's attitude to youth and age in general. Warner subsequently moves on to the subject of children's sexuality: 'As psychoanalytical understanding of children's sexuality has deepened, so have attempts to contain it.' (p. 45) Analysis of childhood moments of sexual initiation – and adult reactions to them – in Ocampo's work is the next important section of Chapter 2. Warner describes onlooking adults as 'we who have lost innocent eyes' (p. 46); Ocampo's style of narration makes a feature of this tainted adult perspective, combined with the not-so-innocent eyes of the child, to force the reader into voyeuristic complicity, as I explore in the sections on child and adult perspective which close Chapter 2. Warner's inevitable conclusion is that child and adult worlds are inextricably intertwined (p. 48); Ocampo's experiments with time, with the aging process and with traits of youth and age make this intertwining a positive feature within the individual.

If Ocampo shows up the taintedness of an adult perspective, Pizarnik – as is discussed in Chapter 3 – initiates her poetic career from the point of *La última inocencia*, implying that everything beyond is no longer innocent.³⁸ I mentioned earlier her possible comparison to Norah Lange in terms of the childlike self-image she created; this child-poet aspect of the Pizarnik 'myth' forms the opening to Chapter 3, encompassing her complex relationship with Surrealism and her attitude towards work. The Surrealist movement, which in Argentina was led by Pizarnik's artistic mentor, Juan Batlle Planas and Aldo Pellegrini, believed in the unfettered inspiration of

³⁸ *La última inocencia* (Buenos Aires: Poesía Buenos Aires, 1956). She did actually publish one earlier collection of poems, *La tierra más ajena* (Buenos Aires: Botella al Mar, 1955) under the name Flora Alejandra Pizarnik, but later disowned it.

children,³⁹ Jeffrey Stern claims that ‘the Surrealist movement almost aimed at the reinstatement of something near to child-vision in adulthood’.⁴⁰ Chapter 3 will thus focus on Pizarnik’s increasingly disenchanted yearning for this child-vision. One subject treated scathingly by Warner, however, is an over-idealistic ‘Romantic thirst to recover childlikeness’ (p. 38); in Pizarnik, this thirst and the Romantic notion of the poet as an isolated figure are entwined with literary representations of childhood such as *Alice*, and with the ‘ojos abiertos’ of Surrealism and the transgressive world of Jean Cocteau’s *Les enfants terribles*. Warner’s opening description of the myth of childhood as Paradise lost or as an unruly and dangerous territory informs the main analytical part of Chapter 3, which contrasts the symbol of a sacred garden with darker Surrealist-associated themes of madness and orphanhood, and with violation of innocence and transgression.

Childhood is the spark which ignites the relationship between Pizarnik and Ocampo, and in some sense Pizarnik chooses her own literary precursors – including Ocampo – within this thematic framework. Chapter 4 will therefore be essentially comparative in nature, looking at the ways in which Pizarnik’s aesthetic is ‘irradiated’ and supported by a reading of Silvina Ocampo as a precursor between the lines, and indeed by Pizarnik’s critical appraisal of Silvina Ocampo with her own preoccupations to the fore.⁴¹ I will move from a contextual look at their mutual literary acquaintances and preferred authors to a closer examination of the nature of their relationship, and consolidate the comparison with close textual reading of thematic affinities, including dolls, mirrors, night and death. I will also examine their appreciation of the relationship between verbal and visual imagery. My conclusions look at how their vital attitudes towards childhood and the aging process diverge sharply, leading to equilibrium in the case of Ocampo and ferocious anxiety in the case of Pizarnik.

³⁹ See Marta Traba, *Art of Latin America: 1900-1980* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press / Inter-American Development Bank, 1994), p. 9: ‘Juan Batlle Planas was the unquestioned leader of the movement, and Aldo Pellegrini its official critic.’

⁴⁰ ‘Lewis Carroll the Surrealist’, in *Lewis Carroll, A Celebration*, ed. by Edward Guiliano (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1982), pp. 132-53 (p. 148).

⁴¹ Pizarnik’s article on Ocampo’s collection *El pecado mortal* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1966) is entitled ‘Dominios ilícitos’, and can be found in Pizarnik’s *Obras completas: Poesía completa y prosa selecta*, ed. by Cristina Piña (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1994), pp. 413-21 (first publ. in *Sur*, 311 (1968), 91-95).

Chapter 1: Silvina Ocampo, 'la hermana pequeña'

'Si la gloire est la somme des malentendus se créant autour d'un nom, elle n'a pas, dans la littérature argentine, de victime plus exemplaire que Silvina Ocampo, du fait même que dire "Ocampo", c'est nommer la grande Victoria, sa soeur, la fondatrice, en 1931, de *Sur*, la revue qui, pendant quarante ans, influença le domaine hispanique tout entier.'¹

Of the writers in the elite literary circle surrounding *Sur*, Silvina Ocampo was the most enigmatic. The publishing-house Emecé refers to Silvina Ocampo's paradoxical popularity yet obscurity, calling her 'esta escritora tan admirada como poco leída, verdadero mito de las letras argentinas'.² Although her work was championed during her lifetime by no less than Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, and is greatly admired by many contemporary writers and critics as being highly original and imaginative, her short stories and more particularly her considerable poetic output have nevertheless remained in relative obscurity.³ Only recently is her work undergoing a reappraisal. Emecé has re-published her complete short stories, the earliest of which had been out of print since their first publication.⁴ Several monographs have been devoted to her, more translations are appearing and her place in the history of Argentinian literature of this century is becoming more clear.⁵ Nevertheless, she is not yet included in Félix Luna's series of biographies *Mujeres argentinas*, a notable omission considering that both Victoria Ocampo and Alejandra Pizarnik are featured. Silvina Ocampo is also notable for her absence from the general histories *Latin American Writers* and *Literaturas de América Latina*.⁶ She does, however, appear in a single-volume work, also entitled *Mujeres argentinas*. Here, significantly, the dominance of her elder sister Victoria

¹ Héctor Bianciotti, 'La "gloire" de Silvina Ocampo', *Le Monde*, 21 June 1991, p. 23.

² On the back cover of the new edition of *Viaje olvidado* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1998).

³ See bibliography for details of Borges and Calvino's prologues and reviews of Ocampo's work. The writers Liliana Heker and Alicia Steimberg and the critics Cristina Piña and Ernesto Schóó all unreservedly praise her individuality. Schóó described her as 'el Borges femenino' in terms of the originality of her style. (Private unpublished interviews conducted March-September 1998).

⁴ Two volumes of *Cuentos* have now been issued (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999) although these do not include the stories for children, and a volume of complete poetry is forthcoming in Emecé. All citations from the *cuentos* will be from these recent editions, for ease of reference. Ocampo apparently left much unpublished material; Noemí Ulla comments that 'buena parte de su obra permanece aún inédita'. See her prologue to *Silvina Ocampo: Una escritora oculta*, p. 8. Ulla is preparing an anthology of Ocampo's unpublished poetry, according to footnote 6 of her article 'La música y la plástica en la literatura de Silvina Ocampo', in *Segundas jornadas internacionales de literatura argentina / comparatística: Actas* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1997), pp. 408-16, (p. 411).

⁵ For details of monographs, see Introduction, footnote 13. There have also been several theses on her *cuentos*, in addition to that of Eva Luz Santos-Phillips already mentioned: María Birgitta Clark, 'The Feminine Fantastic in Short Fiction From the River Plate' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Tennessee, 1992) and Mónica Zapata, 'L'Esthétique de l'horreur dans les récits courts de Silvina Ocampo' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Toulouse 2, 1992). See Santos-Phillips' 'Bibliografía sobre Silvina Ocampo (1903-1993)', *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía*, 47 (1997), 149-57 for a selection of available translations.

⁶ *Latin American Writers*, ed. by C.A. Solé et al (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989) and Harold Tenorio, *Literaturas de América Latina* (Colombia: Universidad del Valle, 1995). Alejandra Pizarnik is also absent from the first of these histories.

Ocampo is taken *a priori*, and indeed is the structuring element of the article.⁷ This relationship between the sisters, as well as the high profile of her two closest companions, Borges and Bioy Casares, arguably contributes to Silvina's overshadowing; it therefore constitutes part of the context to Silvina's self-positioning and aesthetic route.⁸

Silvina Ocampo was married to Adolfo Bioy Casares and the couple, along with Borges, formed a distinct subgroup, slightly apart from the main *Sur* group. In contextualizing her in this way, however, I am also perpetuating this constraining framework in which she is continually presented. For instance, Marcelo Pichon Rivière introduces her as 'mujer de Bioy Casares, amiga de Borges, hermana de Victoria Ocampo' and claims that 'se acostumbró a vivir en los márgenes de esas personas ilustres'.⁹ Gerald Martin presents her as 'sister of Victoria, wife of Adolfo Bioy Casares, and friend of Borges'.¹⁰ The way she is described in the anthology *Diez Cuentistas Argentinas* is also typical: 'esposa de Adolfo Bioy Casares, y colaboradora de Jorge Luis Borges, esta escritora pertenece al mundo de los intelectuales que se desplazan sobre el eje París-Londres-Buenos Aires',¹¹ yet her reception on this glamorous intellectual circuit appears equally contingent and diminutive: 'On a déjà tant parlé de Victoria [...] qu'il nous vient à l'esprit qu'un petit mot sur la soeurette qui vécut dans l'ombre des grands [...] ne serait pas de trop.'¹² Albert Bensoussan then proceeds to contrast Victoria, 'la maîtresse de logis en l'imposante bâtisse de la Villa Ocampo', with 'la maison de poupée de Silvina Ocampo', referring to her collection *Cornelia frente al espejo* which was translated into French as *Mémoires secrètes d'une*

⁷ Liliana Heker, 'Silvina Ocampo y Victoria Ocampo: La hermana pequeña y la hermana mayor', in *Mujeres argentinas: El lado femenino de nuestra historia*, pp. 191-233.

⁸ Mónica Zapata speculates about this overshadowing: 'Tal vez sean las sombras de los 'grandes' que han girado en su entorno – la hermana Victoria, el amigo Borges, el esposo Bioy Casares – las que siguen a pesar de todo ocultando la originalidad de Silvina.' From 'Entre niños y adultos, entre risa y horror: Dos cuentos de Silvina Ocampo', *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 17 (1997), 345-61, (p. 345). Daniel Balderston attributes Ocampo's overshadowing more to the grotesque and shocking nature of some of her fiction. 'It has sometimes been argued that Ocampo was overshadowed in her lifetime by her more famous sister and husband. A more compelling explanation is that her work frightens or shocks many readers, with its focus on cruelty, deceit, metamorphosis, violence and sexual ambiguity. Her work is now being discovered anew, as has also happened with her peers in the grotesque, Felisberto Hernández and Virgilio Piñera.' 'Silvina Ocampo', in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith, pp. 593-94 (p. 594). Danubio Torres Fierro, whilst also commenting on Silvina's position as 'imprecisa and fronteriza' with regard to Victoria and Bioy, suggests that 'no se ha sabido leerla'. In 'Correspondencia con Silvina Ocampo: Una entrevista que no osa decir su nombre', *Plural*, 50 (1975), 57-60 (p. 58).

⁹ 'La vida misteriosa de Silvina Ocampo', *Clarín, Suplemento de cultura*, 6 September 1998, p. 1.

¹⁰ Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 355.

¹¹ *Diez cuentistas argentinas*, ed. by H. Ernest Lewald (Buenos Aires: Ríomar, 1968), p. 100.

poupée.¹³ The oldest and youngest sisters are thus respectively presented as larger and smaller than life, the one imposing, the other scaled down to dolls-house size; Bensoussan subsequently describes Borges not only as a great friend but also as Silvina's 'parrain' or godfather, evidently in a literary sense. (p. 200) In the majority of cases, Silvina Ocampo is thus carefully placed in a dialectic of belonging and not belonging; with 'personas ilustres' yet at the margins of the group. This Chapter will look at some of the ways in which this positioning may have shaped Ocampo's *oeuvre*. It will examine how Silvina moulds the role of younger sister, preserving a child's insight; how she moves away from Victoria's territory of autobiography, literary criticism and appreciation to fiction which resists explanation; how she interacts with, yet distinguishes herself from, the literary games of Borges and Bioy Casares; and finally how she maps out the terrain of childhood *vis-à-vis* adulthood.

Victoria Ocampo – subconsciously or otherwise – mixed literary and family relations; she appeared unable to separate the writer Silvina Ocampo from the little sister, and behaved as if wishing to exercise the same control over Silvina's writing as she did over the young Silvina and her cherished nanny, Fani.¹⁴ This is not to say that Silvina and Victoria were not fond of one another. Silvina's letters to Victoria, her comments to Manuel Mujica Láinez after Victoria's death, and above all her poem of homage, 'El Ramo', testify to this.¹⁵ In such a context, however, Silvina Ocampo's literary world – though basically rooted in her privileged social and intellectual milieu – evolves and flourishes in a spirit of impish perversity and contrariness towards it, and towards the literary and social postures of her dominant sister.

It is noteworthy that the modes of creativity of the two sisters hardly overlap:¹⁶ Victoria expresses herself in essays (*Testimonios*), in autobiography (*Autobiografías*,

¹² Albert Bensoussan, 'Les jolis contes du Sud: Silvina Ocampo, la petite soeur de Victoria', in *Retour des caravelles: Lettres latino-américaines d'aujourd'hui* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 1999), pp. 199-200 (p. 199).

¹³ *Mémoires secrètes d'une poupée: Nouvelles*, trans. by Françoise Rosset, pref. by Jean-Pierre Bernès (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

¹⁴ See Adriana Mancini, who analyses 'la figura que despliegan – y abisman – las relaciones entre las hermanas Ocampo (Silvina y Victoria) y Fani, la criada de ambas' in 'Amo y esclavo: Una relación eficaz', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 575 (1998), 73-86, (p. 73).

¹⁵ A letter to Victoria dated 3 October 1977 says 'Pienso en vos mezclándote a tu paisaje y si pienso en un lugar feliz te planto a vos como un árbol en el paisaje' and she finishes the letter with 'que te quiere tanto, tanto. Silvina'. To Mujica Láinez she comments that Victoria's death left her distracted and she thanks him for his words of affection. Her poem of homage to Victoria, 'El Ramo', can be found in *Sur*, 346 (1980), 108-09.

¹⁶ The biggest area of overlap is obviously that of translation; both also tried writing for the theatre, but it formed a minor and relatively unsuccessful part of their *œuvres*. Victoria Ocampo's early work *La laguna de los nenúfares* is her sole theatrical piece, to be discussed later; Silvina wrote *Los traidores* (Buenos Aires: Losange, 1956) in collaboration with Juan Rodolfo Wilcock and a children's play *No sólo el perro es mágico* which opened at the Teatro Liceo in 1958 [no further details available].

published posthumously) and in critical writing and translations in *Sur*. Silvina, on the other hand, though also a dedicated and enthusiastic translator, expresses herself largely through poetry and short stories.¹⁷ Their construction of identity and sense of self are similarly divergent; Victoria consciously displays images of her beauty in her autobiography and conveys a strong personality through determined and dynamic cultural networking. Silvina, rather than projecting an imposing image, makes every effort to efface all trace of a public persona, resenting interviews, dodging cameras and constantly wearing dark glasses. Not glamorous as Victoria was, Silvina nevertheless had compelling eyes, described as ‘sin edad, abiertos por el asombro, como los de una chica’ (‘La vida misteriosa’, p. 5). This striking visual image will be compared to photographs of the other mythologized childish figure, Pizarnik, in Chapter 3. With the oxymoronic logic so characteristic of her fictional writing, Silvina elucidates somewhat coyly the relationship between the two sisters:

Mi relación con Victoria Ocampo es de las más interesantes por las diferencias que nos unen y los parecidos que nos distancian [...] Es totalmente decidida y emprendedora. Soy totalmente indecisa e inerte. (Torres Fierro interview, p. 60)

Despite her publicity-shyness, however, when among close friends Silvina Ocampo was far from retiring. In intimate conversation a strongly individual character emerged, and all of her friends and acquaintances (along with her husband, Bioy Casares) have a wealth of anecdotes which testify to her endearing and unsettling originality. Schóó commented on her theatricality, her eye for detail, and like many of her friends was amused by her childish covering-up of things that went wrong, as if fearing a telling-off, and her delight in playing pranks.¹⁸ Silvina Ocampo had a remarkable voice, described by Pichon Rivière as ‘muy aññada’ (‘La vida misteriosa’, p. 5) Also like a child, she loved hiding (particularly behind those dark glasses) and the few interviews she gave, she treated like a game of hide and seek. Hugo Beccacece soon realized this:

¹⁷ She may also have an unpublished novel: ‘“La locura de vivir en un cotidiano absurdo” aparece en la novela que estoy escribiendo. El título, si puede despertar alguna curiosidad, será: *Los epícenos*. Es lo mejor que he escrito y según mis cálculos será terminada a principios del año que viene.’ This is from the already-cited 1975 interview with Torres Fierro (p. 60). In a later interview with Noemí Ulla she makes reference to an unpublished novel, this time with the provisional title of *Memorias pre-natales*. ‘Silvina Ocampo: Escribir toda la vida’, *Vigencia*, 49 (1981), 98-102 (p. 100).

¹⁸ He cites, for example, an occasion on which she scraped up stew which had accidentally fallen on the floor and served it to her unsuspecting guests, and another when she deliberately smashed a bottle of water in the kitchen, hoping to convince a thirsty visitor waiting in the drawing room that it was, alas, her last bottle of whisky. Schóó compared her quirky explanations (if she was required to provide them) for apparently odd situations to that of *Alice in Wonderland*; the presence of three televisions in the kitchen, for instance, was explained perfectly reasonably by the fact that each of her grandchildren wanted to watch a different programme at the same time. From ‘Silvina Ocampo: Azúcar en los bordes’ in Ernesto Schóó’s *Pasiones recobradas: La historia de amor de un lector voraz* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1997) pp. 43-45 and also from unpublished private interview, August 1998.

A Silvina le encanta jugar, le encanta desconcertar a sus oyentes con reflexiones insólitas, con ocurrencias graciosas dichas con la entonación de voz de una chica. La infancia siempre está presente en ella a través de los recuerdos y, sobre todo, de su visión del mundo, teñida de la misma ingenua malicia de la que hace gala un niño.¹⁹

She herself reinforces this image of her, stressing the continuing presence of the child within the adult, which – as I explore in the following chapter – becomes a leitmotif of her work: ‘La nena todavía vibra en mí. Sigo siendo una nena.’ (p. 15) As Adriana Astutti observes, ‘la infancia impregna su estilo tanto en relación a la imagen de sí que Ocampo construye como a su escritura’.²⁰

Silvina Ocampo’s fiction is largely peopled by characters who are normally overshadowed, such as children or domestic servants, rather than intellectuals or figures in high society. A solitary child, Ocampo spent a lot of time at the top of their huge family house in the Calle Viamonte amongst the domestic servants and was fascinated by their life, preferring it to the daunting society downstairs. Schóó emphasizes Ocampo’s early timidity in the glittering world of her five elder sisters: ‘La menor de seis hermanas, todas ellas espléndidas, temía no ser más que una etcétera’ (*Pasiones recobradas*, p. 44) She apparently suffered terrible nervousness as a child about speaking in front of her older sisters and grown-up family, preferring only to speak at the same time as everyone else; Marcelo Pichon Rivière quotes her as saying: ‘Cuando estaba con gente, nunca hablaba durante un silencio. Esperaba que alguien dijera algo y otro le respondiera. Entonces sí hablaba’. (‘La vida misteriosa’, p. 4)

Mirroring her own sense of isolation, the children and adults that most interest her are often set apart in some way, whether through behavioural characteristics such as obstinacy, obsessive loyalty, or maliciousness; physical differences like deaf-muteness or dwarfishness; or through social division. These stories thus strike a discordant note within the grand Ocampo family history and single Silvina out not only as the deviant youngest sister but also as a possible source of a distinctive aesthetic route through Argentine literature in the twentieth century.

At the time when Silvina Ocampo began publishing, writers had inevitably to position themselves, or more likely, be positioned, in relation to the increasingly powerful presence of her sister Victoria and *Sur*. The latter began to assume the kind of parental role under which it suffered at its own birth at the hands of José Ortega y

¹⁹ ‘Genial, tierna, tímida, imprevista, imaginativa “Y así sucesivamente”: Entrevista con Silvina Ocampo’, *La Nación*, 28 June 1987, pp. 14-15, 18 and 23 (p. 14).

²⁰ ‘Silvina Ocampo: Fabular la infancia’ [paper read at *VI Jornadas de Historia de las Mujeres y I Congreso Iberoamericano de Estudios de las Mujeres y de Género: Voces en Conflicto, Espacios de Disputa* (Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1-5 August 2000)], p. 4.

Gasset in Europe; its title was forcefully suggested over the phone to Victoria by Ortega:

Fue elegido por teléfono a través del océano. Todo el Atlántico se necesitaba para este bautismo. Se nos ocurrieron varios nombres, pero no llegábamos a ponernos de acuerdo. Entonces llamé a Ortega, en España. Esas gentes tienen costumbre de bautizarnos. Ortega no vaciló: *Sur*, me gritaba desde Madrid.²¹

Altogether a powerful statement, the idea of needing the whole of the Atlantic ocean for the baptism of *Sur* suggests enough water for the baptism of an entire continent. This has strong symbolic overtones, implying a parent-child relationship where the older culture simultaneously names and brings the younger into the 'way of faith'. In this specific situation, the way of faith would include accepted European – or Spanish – modes of describing literary and cultural history and even of running literary magazines and cultural enterprises. But it is worth noting that although Victoria mocks 'esas gentes' for their attitude of superiority, she upholds the imbalance of authority by having sought Ortega's opinion and courted his approval.

Silvina, as Victoria's youngest sister, was inevitably affected by *Sur*. It should not be forgotten that Victoria's publishing house published no fewer than six of Silvina's books of poetry and short stories; in this respect, Victoria helped yet also to some extent controlled her younger sister. It is telling that the metaphor of baptism recurs; having complained about *Sur* being baptized by Ortega, Victoria then promptly asserts her authority over Silvina in a nannyish fashion by describing in detail, in what is nominally a review of Silvina's first book, how she held Silvina at her baptism.

En esta ceremonia yo era, después de ella, el personaje más importante, como que era yo quien la sostenía sobre la pila bautismal. [...] la tinta estuvo presente en ese bautismo, pues manchaba los dedos de una de las hermanas: la que sostenía la otra.²²

This review of Silvina's *Viaje olvidado* gives Silvina a ticking-off for her grammatical lapses, using the words 'negligencia' and 'pereza'. The implications are that this is an early work, that its discontinuities – many of which later prove to be emergent characteristics of Silvina's stylistic idiosyncrasy – should be ironed out in the next book. Victoria has her cultural standards, measured against those of the best European writers, and her younger sister must endeavour to match up to them. It is ironic that Victoria should correct Silvina in this way, since in her *Testimonios* she frequently expresses doubts about her own abilities in Spanish, it being very much her second

²¹ Quoted in Danubio Torres Fierro, 'Entrevista a Victoria Ocampo', *Plural*, 51 (1975), 18-25 (p. 19).

²² In *Sur*, 35 (1937), 118-21 (p. 118).

written language. Herself brought up by a succession of nannies, Victoria seems fated to assume and perpetuate such a role in her relationship with Silvina.²³

Liliana Heker, comparing the two sisters, asserts that each found her role clearly defined: '[La hermandad] definió roles – el de la primogénita, el de la menor – , que a su vez generaron hábitos y mandatos y pesaron sobre la personalidad de cada una.'²⁴ I would argue that to a certain extent, Silvina didn't fight to grow out of the role of younger sister, she simply adapted her mode of existence to occupy this space in a way which gave her maximum freedom, moulding the position of younger sister to allow her to write just what she pleased, as she pleased. To quote Heker once again:

Silvina es, en el despertar de la conciencia y durante varios años, la única criatura en una casa de adolescentes y de mujeres jóvenes. [...] Esto la conducirá al aislamiento, pero también a la libertad. (p. 196)

By looking at Victoria Ocampo's creation of her own role within the literary life of the nation, we can see in greater relief the individuality and deviation of the younger sister's chosen literary path, which contrasts strongly with that of Victoria. We see how these two very different writers and intellectuals 'symbolize themselves in this socio-semantic field' which is the cultural climate of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires.²⁵ I shall focus on one productively revealing area of difference between the two sisters, which is their use of childhood on various levels: adult attitudes to their own lived childhood, appropriation of childhood memories as textual material, and the mediation of childhood in their ways of imagining the Argentine nation. Contrasting their respective uses of childhood as material, theme, and framework, I shall provide a clearer picture of Silvina's idiosyncracies within her social and literary context.

Victoria Ocampo: Mapping of Childhood onto the Continent

Victoria uses images of childhood and the literature of childhood (principally fairy stories) as part of her efforts to synthesize her vision of America and its future potential. The discussions between Victoria Ocampo, Waldo Frank and Drieu La Rochelle on the subject of founding the new literary magazine which was to become *Sur* are fascinating; they reveal how Victoria Ocampo turns to her advantage European constructions of Americans with respect to youth and innocence. The voice which recalls the conversations is inimitably that of Victoria:

²³ Adriana Astutti examines Victoria's role in terms both of the elder sister and the teacher. See 'Fabular la infancia', pp. 8-9.

²⁴ From Liliana Heker, 'Silvina Ocampo y Victoria Ocampo', p. 194.

²⁵ Terminology from Mary Louise Pratt, 'Women, Literature and National Brotherhood', in *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America: Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America*, ed. by Emilie Bergmann et al (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 48-73 (p. 49).

Drieu decía: ‘Frank y Victoria son capaces de pasar a través de todo ... Son dos inocentes’ ... Drieu *quería decir, sin saberlo*, que somos americanos, y que en nosotros la inocencia es todavía auténtica. Que puede, por consiguiente, hacer milagros. Yo pensaba que si América es joven, el mundo (circundante) no lo es y que nuestro continente se parece a *esos niños cuya infancia se marchita por vivir siempre entre adultos*. América no cree ya en los cuentos de hadas. Como necesita creer en ellos acabará por crearlos. (Torres Fierro, p. 18; my italics)

Victoria thus willingly – or wilfully, rather – equates America with ‘authentic’ innocence and youth. Instead of acknowledging that Drieu might be patronizing Waldo and herself as naïve, she immediately extrapolates from his comment that they are representative of the continent as a whole, and that the American population is still in an enviable position of innocence. Obviously Victoria’s pride plays a large part in this, but she is also determinedly occupying and revalorizing the space of innocence in order to maximize America’s potential, and turn Drieu’s remark into something positive. In the reflection which follows her reading of Drieu’s remark, she apparently feels that America’s own creative powers, including its youthful vitality and spontaneity, are withering, since they are constantly subjected to a process of measuring up and finding themselves wanting against the ‘older’ world around. She appears to be speaking out for the need to retain youthfulness at all costs, to fight against being constricted and made to conform to the narrow-mindedness which is a concomitant danger of European ‘adulthood’. In accepting this Eurocentric definition of age, however, Victoria appears to neglect or overlook the ancient native traditions of America; this is in spite of claiming for herself an Indian female ancestor, Agueda. Interestingly, Silvina too posits the idea of an Indian ancestor, though rather than naming her and fitting her into an official history, Silvina simply intuits that she must have had some down-to-earth connection with her native land: ‘No sé nada de mis antepasados pero sé que por ahí anda una india esclava que comería pasto y dormiría sobre la tierra.’²⁶ Victoria is turning the label of a youthful nation into a positive asset, but in doing so implicitly fails to recognize earlier American civilizations.

With this in mind, there is a comment worthy of scrutiny in Victoria’s judgmental review of *Viaje olvidado* which draws a parallel between childhood and wild tribes. ‘La amistad o la enemistad de las cosas inanimadas – que dejan de serlo – pueblan estos relatos *como poblaban nuestra infancia o como pueblan la vida de las tribus salvajes*’ (p. 119, my emphasis). ‘Se tiene la impresión de que los personajes son

²⁶ From a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez dated (approximately) 18 May 1972, courtesy of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. All subsequent references to Ocampo’s letters are from this same source, and will simply bear a date in the main body of the text.

cosas y las cosas personajes, como en la infancia.’ (p. 120) One also has the impression that in Victoria’s mind, childhood is associated with a certain primitiveness, and the process of growing up is therefore equated with becoming more ‘civilized’. In comments such as this, the adult-child analogy overlaps with the long-standing *civilización-barbarie* debate in Argentina; upper-class Argentines like Victoria may feel patronized by ‘genuine’ Europeans, as Victoria herself was by no less than Virginia Woolf, or Ortega, but they in turn often unconsciously dismiss indigenous cultures.²⁷ Although Victoria is not specific in her remarks, regarding native culture as ‘childlike’ in this way was a common attitude amongst colonial powers, as observed by Bassnett (*Comparative Literature*, p. 17). A review by Enrique Pezzoni (respected literary editor and writer of the *Sur* group) of Ocampo’s stories for children, *La naranja maravillosa*, also maps the adult/child paternalistic relationship onto countries. Although this point is only an aside, it has deeper resonances, effectively contrasting Silvina’s attitude to that of Victoria:

El niño no es para [Silvina Ocampo] un borrador del hombre plagado de imperfecciones que es preciso eliminar con dureza. (Imposible no asociar ese criterio de superioridad con la actitud de aquellos antropólogos altivamente protectores ante las civilizaciones que estudiaban, las mal llamadas ‘sociedades primitivas.’) (p. 9)

As well as praising Ocampo’s enlightened attitude towards children’s intelligence and worth, Pezzoni implicitly condemns the kind of treatment given to native Americans. It could also be extended to the attitude of superiority on the part of European cultures with respect to the Americas, considering themselves superior and expecting Argentina to ‘grow up’ into a perfect adult European specimen. This point echoes the feelings of Victoria Ocampo in her conversations with Ortega y Gasset, but also highlights her potential for falling into the same trap.

A different kind of reaction to *Viaje olvidado* is found in the review written by José Bianco. Bianco, as *jefe de redacción* of *Sur* from 1938 onwards, had a close (though not always easy) working relationship with Victoria. He was, however, much

²⁷ Virginia Woolf treated Victoria Ocampo as an exotic means of arousing Vita Sackville-West’s jealousy. Information from John King, ‘Victoria Ocampo 1890-1979: Precursor’, in *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America*, ed. by Susan Bassnett (London: Zed Books, 1990), pp. 9-25 (p. 17). For some choice examples of how *criollos* viewed their Indian neighbours on the pampas, see the prologue to Federico Barbará’s *Manual o vocabulario de la lengua pampa* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1944): ‘a pesar de las preocupaciones y el tiempo que se empleaba para convertirlos en seres útiles para con sus semejantes, había que instruirlos en los conocimientos generales que exige la sociedad humana. [...] Nosotros los considerábamos como a seres que nos pertenecían. Eran tenidos como tales. Ellos lo sentían. Y se les daban hasta nuestros propios apellidos.’ Evidently the *criollos* had ‘la costumbre de bautizar a los indios’, feeling vastly superior to these ‘primitive’ creatures: ‘No alcanzaban a razonar en sus cerebros primitivos [...] por no haber experimentado aún la reacción civilizadora’ (pp. 7-8).

closer on a personal level to Silvina, as her correspondence to him testifies.²⁸ His review, though concurring with Victoria's in observing the blurring between animate and inanimate, notes this as a positive feature and indeed goes on to exalt the feeling of 'infancia intacta' which comes across strongly in the book.²⁹ Rather than acting like the censorial parent or nanny figure trying to civilize, domesticate, educate and above all make adult, Bianco approves of the 'especie de depreciación evangélica de la inteligencia' (p. 149) as regards adult characters. He observes how Silvina uses those adult characters closest to children in their simplicity. Bianco can thus be seen as a kind of ally in Silvina's self-positioning with relation to Victoria.

Enumeración de la patria

Where Victoria in her *Testimonios* makes much of the Argentine oligarchy and her family pedigree within this elite, Silvina shows a distinctly flippant attitude towards genealogy, joking playfully and mischievously about the family name: 'Manuel Puig me llamó O Field; otras personas me dicen ¡Oh Campo! Naturalmente estas variaciones me gustan mucho.'³⁰ Genealogical considerations are similarly scorned in her fiction; see for example 'Cartas confidenciales', in which the narrator – with whose viewpoint we as readers are encouraged to identify – says 'tu abuelo se vanagloria de su árbol genealógico y que un tipo desconocido fuera como un pariente nuestro, le hubiera repugnado.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 24) Silvina finds a niche for herself as youngest sister within an oligarchical family and a 'youthful' nation by choosing to imagine Argentina with frequent recourse to a child's eyes. Rather than capitalizing on the symbolic attributes and potential of youth, as Victoria does, Silvina prefers to opt for the more literal and immediate inclusion of children or a child's perspective in her work.

The first published poetic work by Silvina Ocampo, entitled *Enumeración de la patria*, appears to set itself up as quirky, even prosaic, subverting more conventionally

²⁸ The Princeton collection holds 21 letters spanning the 1940s and 50s. Silvina and Pepe, as he was usually referred to, undertook jointly the translation of Jean Genet's *Les bonnes* (Paris: Marc Barbezat-L'Arbalète, 1947), a play of whose language Victoria disapproved. *Las criadas*, trans. by Silvina Ocampo and José Bianco (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1959).

²⁹ José Bianco, 'Viaje olvidado', in *Ficción y reflexión* (México: Fundación Cultural y Económica, 1988), pp. 148-49, (p. 149) (first publ. in *El Hogar*, 24 September 1937, [n.p.]).

³⁰ Heker, p. 195. She also signs off a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez as 'Silvina Oh!' (dated June 1972). Juan José Hernández suggests a literary affinity between Puig and Ocampo in terms of the conversational tone employed by both: 'Puig no inventa el tono conversacional. Hay muchos cuentos, por ejemplo de Silvina Ocampo, en que ese tono es utilizado muy hábilmente. [...] A Puig le encantaban los cuentos de Silvina Ocampo por esa cosa del mundo de mujeres. En Silvina hay otra intención, claro, la intención más irónica.' 'Juan José Hernández: Sobre recuerdos e invenciones', in *Las huellas de la memoria*, by Graciela Gliemmo, pp. 105-28, p. 127.

laudatory and lyrical works of this type.³¹ Her enumeration is highly idiosyncratic, starting out by describing the national territory as ‘violentísimo y párvulo’ (p. 9), which interestingly seems to echo Victoria’s linking of childishness with savagery. The ‘Evocación de Córdoba’ in this volume seems immediately to focus on that element of unchecked wildness; indeed the example she chooses to illustrate the almost phlegmatic character of Córdoba is shocking in a poetic context, but this is essentially Ocampo’s style:

A ti nada te arredra,
ni el criminal ni el santo, y podrás presidir
la violación de un niño, la caridad de un pobre,
con tu cara benévola con reflejos de cobre
que sabe melancólica y lenta seducir. (p. 50)

We see from her letters to Manuel Mujica Láinez that she adored Córdoba; this is not *porteño* flippancy or disdain. In two key short stories she treats similarly sensitive subject matter, namely ‘El pecado mortal’ and ‘La calle Sarandí’ (to be discussed in Chapters 4 and 2 respectively); rape is an extreme example, but in many less brutal ways Ocampo seeks to undo the myth of childhood as a paradise lost and concomitantly present an unromanticized view of the nation.

Earlier in the poem, she had observed a child’s part in the Cordoban panorama; such details are sketched in as if in a Goya painting, bringing a flash of cruel specificity to the scene.³²

Es oscuro el imperio del niño que trabaja
con dicha de cinco años; sube cerros y baja
arriando a tus vacunos, el látigo en la mano,
látigo con el cual también pegó a su hermano. (*Enumeración*, p. 49)

By bringing such things into a poem evoking Córdoba, she is interweaving strands of how she perceives national and regional identity with her own convictions about the importance of the child’s perspective. Whilst never missing an opportunity to name great ‘próceres’ such as San Martín or Facundo Quiroga, it is significant that even in the

³¹ The use of enumeration or listing as a technique in Ocampo’s work in general is commended by Borges in his review of this work in *Sur*, 101 (1943) 64-67, and is also touched upon by Noemí Ulla in ‘La imagen reflejada (en poemas de *Amarillo celeste* de Silvina Ocampo)’, in *Silvina Ocampo: Una escritora oculta*, pp. 87-100 (pp. 89, 91). Helena Percas sees it as a parallel with the North American poet, Walt Whitman. ‘La original expresión poética de Silvina Ocampo’, *Revista Iberoamericana*, 38 (1954), 283-98 (p. 283).

³² Eugenio Guasta characterizes Ocampo’s protagonists with recourse to visual parallels with Goya: ‘Hay en sus muñecos algo esperpéntico, caricaturesco, agrio y trágico como en los *Caprichos* de Goya.’ See ‘Dos juicios sobre *La furia*’, *Sur*, 264 (1960), 62-64 (p. 63).

very first stanza of the 'Evocación de Córdoba' it is the humbler beings who are mentioned.³³

Tu lentitud es gracia. Rimado es tu desgano:
lo he visto por las tardes en las niñas que pasan,
en los hombres que esperan, en plantas que se enlazan. (p. 45)

She seems to be playing games of hide and seek, declaring from the outset that 'Te [la patria] muestro / en un infiel espejo' as a kind of let-out clause for then enumerating those quirky things which to *her* signify the homeland. Significantly, she recasts the 'Patria' in a maternal role ('tu alma lenta y de madre', p. 13), thus strengthening identification of the poetic persona with a child.

Where the elder sister, Victoria, assumes responsibility and leadership in her approach to American identity, Silvina the younger deliberately shirks such a role. She creates a space of artistic freedom which she can then fill richly from her poetic imagination, including nostalgia, young girls and excessive sunsets in her idiosyncratic evocation:

te muestro con nostalgias asombradas,
con niñas de trece años y maduras,
en las puestas de sol inmoderadas.³⁴ (pp. 9-10)

Moving to the physical geography of the country she literally maps it out with the fresh enthusiasm of a child's pen:

Trémulas nervaduras de una hoja,
los ríos te atraviesan de agua roja
sobre el primer cuaderno con paisajes
pintados por la mano de algún niño. (p. 10)

This action of a child drawing the nation is repeated in the much later poem 'Canto escolar', from the collection of that name, which is accompanied on the facing page by a photograph of a child's schoolbook and the tracing of a map: 'Yo dibujé tu mapa, mi Argentina' (*Canto escolar*, p. 9).

The country landscape of *estancias* and *quintas* leads her to further evocation of childhood memories:

³³ Ana María Chouhy Aguirre, in her somewhat disparaging review, resents the intrusion of so many proper names. 'Enumeración de la patria: Silvina Ocampo', *Verde Memoria*, 5 (1943), 22-23. Even one of the poems for children in *Canto escolar* is entitled 'Sarmiento' (Buenos Aires: Fraterna, 1979).

³⁴ This may not seem so idiosyncratic, however, if we consider some of Borges' early poems from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923); 'Último resplandor' considers just such a sunset, and 'Calle desconocida' hints at the 'esperanza de niña en los balcones'. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, bilingual ed. with intro. and notes by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 6. Nevertheless, these poems are in a more declaredly sentimental vein than those of Ocampo; as the titles suggest, fervour rather than enumeration.

tu canto de piedritas y de coches
 me ha regalado infancias prolongadas,
 dulce de leche y siestas desveladas (p. 12)

which crystallize key elements of her later stories, that is unexpectedly prosaic or domestic details and restless experiences of the childhood world imposed by adult routines and rituals such as siestas. Her absorption of the country's history is similarly filtered through the experience of a child, remembering snatches of learned history through visual stimuli, and imagining creatively through drawing what the great figures of Argentine history were like:

Patria, en una plaza, de memoria
 he sabido pasajes de tu historia [...]
 He transformado próceres dolientes
 con cuidadoso lápiz colorado (p. 12).

This can be contrasted with the poem 'Monólogo', where Silvina Ocampo addresses Argentina as 'tú', and thinks of the country's history which paradoxically she *unlearned* by rote as a child. 'Pensé en tu historia que obliteré en la infancia, de memoria.'³⁵ Perhaps in this way she is inclining more to a experiential, serendipitous and Proustian view of memory, where intense or careless moments are more likely to be retained than a dry catalogue of historical facts. Indeed, as will be discussed later with reference to Miss Harrington in 'El caballo muerto', the importance of knowing historical facts is generally associated by Ocampo with adults trying vainly to exercise superiority over children. To her the Proustian model of memory, with its roots firmly in childhood, is crucial, and will be examined in the following chapter.

Buenos Aires, in the poem which immediately follows 'Enumeración', is exoticised by being imagined by many fanciful historical and literary personages; it is then negated by the intrusion of 'yo, Silvina Ocampo' into the poem who declares that 'en tu presencia / abstracta he visto tu posible ausencia'. (p. 17) According to Ocampo's image of such an absence, the elements of Buenos Aires which would disappear include 'una niña que escupa en las ventanas'. Silvina's view of her country and her capital city is thus a highly personal one, embracing contradictory, negative and vulgar elements and including the view of those citizens who usually have least impact on how a country is described, such as its children. Similarly, the 'Quintas de San Isidro' (which she dedicates to her sister Victoria in what could be either an amicable or slightly provocative gesture) speaks of a child learning to love the place, and undoubtedly evokes memories of their family house in San Isidro:

³⁵ In *Sur*, 298-99 (1966), 39-40 (p. 40).

Quintas de San Isidro, alucinada,
 mirando el cielo como una emigrada,
 os conocí con el triciclo, el llanto,
 la tos ferina y el tejido manto. (p. 23)

Note that the child looks at the sky ‘como una emigrada’; does the child feel this world to be as foreign and strange as if she were from elsewhere? In this use of the adult word ‘emigrada’ to describe a child’s dislocation, Ocampo harnesses the rhetoric of nation for the microcosm of a child’s experiences, as opposed to Victoria’s appropriation of the child as symbol on a macrocosmic scale in imagining relations between continents.

The poem addressed by a lady to the Buenos Aires delta, ‘Plegaria de una señora del Tigre’, also portrays a child’s perspective:

Yo fui quien dibujé con lápices violetas
 tu nombre de animal salvaje en las glorietas;
 yo te adulé en la infancia haciendo reverencias
 al barro, y no a la arena, durante tus ausencias. (p. 27)

As with the ‘Enumeración’, the image of a child drawing is used, and the child’s imagination is fired by the literal meaning of Tigre, tiger. But this is the prayer of a grown woman, and as such it states faith in the nostalgia which nourishes this childish paradise (as distinct from believing in the idea of a paradise itself): ‘Yo creo en la nostalgia que hace crecer tus plantas.’ (p. 28) Nostalgia and its transformations will be looked at in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Silvina, as the publicity-shy youngest sister of a powerful figure in Argentine letters, thus quietly yet subversively inhabits the child space assigned to her and her nation by Victoria and Ortega respectively. She scrutinizes Argentina with the candid gaze of a child, a child whose vision is not cluttered by preconceptions. Even when the persona she adopts is not a child, the child’s view is never far away; in the poem ‘El almacén’, for example, the poetic voice is the *almacén* itself, yet one of the sounds which penetrates the shop is that of an older sister playing the piano: ‘Una hermana mayor / toca el piano, y es bella’ (*Enumeración*, p. 41). By specifying ‘hermana mayor’, the poetic persona is implying the existence and perspective of a younger child, an ‘hermana menor’.³⁶

Fairy Stories

Returning to Victoria’s view of the nation, and indeed of the American continent as a whole, we see from the previously-quoted statement that Victoria believes in America

³⁶ A possible source for this poem is to be found in a letter to another of Silvina’s sisters, Angélica. Silvina recounts how – not having any records at the *estancia* in Pardo – she stopped to listen to the sound

creating its own fairy stories. Is the need to believe in fairy stories a basic craving for an ordered and hermetic world of good rewarded and evil punished? Is she saying that the countries of America will respond to this need by finding their own creative voice, writing their own myths to shape the next generation's imaginative powers? Or is she speculating about the specific ways in which American literatures will evolve fantastic and marvellous worlds to inspire, in the way that earlier fairy stories have inspired many writers? Perhaps Victoria was being prophetic about the writers of her nation, many of whom would reshape, rewrite, and incorporate the fairy stories of Europe, critiquing the other culture or using them to make political criticisms of contemporary Argentine society.³⁷

She brings fairy stories into her world of high culture in the prologue to her third series of *Testimonios*: 'Ya escriba sobre América o Cochinchina, sobre Valéry o Caperucita Roja, lo que verás en mi calidoscopio [...] será siempre un testimonio.'³⁸ This appears to say that even such humble things as fairy stories are grist to the mill of her great American project, her testimony as a vigorously youthful American. Furthermore, one of her earliest attempts to write fiction is the 'Fábula escénica en doce cuadros', entitled *La laguna de los nenúfares*, which includes such characters as 'El Hada de la Esperanza Invencible', a wonderful combination of fairy stories with passionate idealism.³⁹ It can be read not only within its Argentine and European context, but also in the context of Victoria's positive appropriation of youth as her continent and nation's defining quality and source of its potential.

The basic plot of the fable bears a resemblance to Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) in that the central character, Copo de Nieve, is a human child brought up in the jungle, befriending the animals as did Kipling's Mowgli. Mico the monkey, cast as a

of an old piano from the *almacén*. In the same letter she recalls Angélica's piano playing. Such sisterly memories are evidently strong for her.

³⁷ I am thinking, for instance, of Luisa Valenzuela's 'Cuentos de hades' [sic] in *Simetrías* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1993) in which Little Red Riding Hood, The Princess and the Pea, The Bad Fairy and The Frog Prince are just some of the fairy tales rewritten with a twist. See Fiona J. Mackintosh, 'The Heretic and the Bad Fairy', in *The Flesh Made Word: Metaphor and Literality in Selected Novels and Short Fiction of Luisa Valenzuela* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Oxford, 1995), pp. 33-44 (pp. 39-44). Marcela Solá, María Luisa Bombal and Ana María Shua have also reworked traditional fairy tales. Batasto Barea (1961-91), notorious figure of underground theatre in Buenos Aires, used fairytales or children's literature to put across political messages. In 1984, for example, he put on a performance entitled *Caperucita Rota*, and another called *Gasalla en terapia intensiva* (versión paródico-política de *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*).

³⁸ *Testimonios*, III (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1946), 8.

³⁹ In English translation, *The Water-Lily Pond* appears in *Contemporary Women Authors of Latin America: Introductory Essays and New Translations* ed. by Doris Meyer and Margarite Fernández (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1983). It was not, however, universally well received. A terrible review of it appeared in *Claridad*'s 'Encuesta sobre el teatro', *Claridad*, 130, 18 February 1927, [n.p.]: 'La señora Ocampo escribió una pieza que se titula *La laguna de los nenúfares*. ¡Coqueta! ¡Ramonona! ¿Éstas son las novedades que los intelectuales piensan traer al teatro nacional?'

kind of sophisticated city gent, tells Copo de Nieve that the best part of his youth is being wasted in the jungle:

MICO ¡Perdéis lo mejor de vuestra juventud viviendo en la selva!
 COPO Pero si soy muy feliz...
 MICO Lo sois por ignorancia. (p. 36)

The monkey perhaps caricatures the pro-urban, pro-European and anti-native kind of attitude with which Victoria was extremely conversant. The theme of youth is later taken up again by the wise spokesman and counsellor, Optimio the dog, who urges Copo de Nieve not to be depressed about the inevitable process of aging and time passing. He says: 'No te entristezcas, Copo de Nieve. Por lo pronto, la juventud es tuya; tu riqueza es inmensa.' (p. 46) This urging to recognize and realize youthful potential brings us back to Victoria's conversation with Waldo Frank and Drieu La Rochelle on America's assumption of the quality of youthful promise. Victoria Ocampo's appropriation of youth is thus at a highly symbolic level, propagating through the humble fairy tale a vision of American cultural independence. Ironically, however, the fable was published by Ortega in Madrid – another instance of his cultural 'patronage'? – and therefore issued first to a European audience.

Silvina Ocampo's use of fairy stories represents one of the possible approaches hinted at by Victoria, namely that of re-writing. Fairytales had always interested Ocampo; as a child she read Grimm, Andersen and – significantly, given their predilection for terrifying young readers with cruelty – Strowelpeter.⁴⁰ 'En los cuentos de hadas que Silvina escuchó de boca de su hermana Angélica, y que luego leyó por sí misma, encontró el poder de lo maravilloso' (Noemí Ulla, introduction to *Viaje olvidado* (1998), p. 10). In conversation with Noemí Ulla, Ocampo expresses her love for fairy tales, particularly for their possibility of dialogue between humans and animals: 'siempre me parecían amorosos esos diálogos entre el personaje de los cuentos de hadas y los animales, los pájaros'.⁴¹ This has a long tradition, most obviously in Aesop's fables, which is continued in Ocampo's books for children. Examination of Ocampo's use of the fairy tale could help establish an aesthetic context for the re-writing of fairy tales by other authors who, by narrative twists, reveal their adult and disturbing content, blurring the division between childlike and adult. Both she and Valenzuela, for instance, rewrite Bluebeard's Castle; like Victoria's *Laguna*, Silvina's

⁴⁰Two of her favourite heroines in fiction – the Little Mermaid of Hans Christian Andersen and also that of Oscar Wilde – are from a fairy tale and a children's story respectively. See Odile Baron Supervielle's questionnaire 'Silvina Ocampo responde a Proust', *La Nación, Suplemento Literario*, 9 January 1994, p. 3.

⁴¹Noemí Ulla, *Encuentros con Silvina Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Belgrano, 1982), p. 17.

'Jardín de infierno' is a version of an existing tale, but rather than adding a political or moral dimension she gives the story a perverse twist, making it a humorously feminist (with a deliberately lower-case 'f') version of 'Bluebeard's Castle' (*Cuentos II*, pp. 274-76). Ocampo's 'Miren cómo se aman' borrows the classic fairytale device of a prince transformed, in this case into a monkey rather than a frog, as is the more traditional line used by Valenzuela in '4 príncipes 4' (*Simetrías*). Silvina Ocampo's 'Voz en el teléfono' features a puppet show ⁱⁿ which we see a child's unexpected reaction to the well-known story, *Little Red Riding Hood*: 'Caperucita Roja me aterró como el lobo o la abuela, [...] la Bella me pareció horrorosa como la Bestia' (*Cuentos I*, p. 273). Such inversion of the expected childhood reactions, portraying the supposedly charming aspects of fairy tales as deeply disturbing, or conversely the horrifying as seductively appealing, is an aspect of Ocampo's vision of childhood which is communicated to later writers. Marcela Solá had already begun such rewriting in her 1971 version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, 'El lobo feroz'⁴² and it continues in Pizarnik (see for example her poem 'La verdad del bosque', *Obras*, p. 214).

Silvina was apparently inspired early to undertake creative writing by what her governesses taught her about English history; her immediate response was to retell it in her own words, whereas Victoria had used such information to construct for herself an image of the English as a nation of fair play.⁴³

Recuerdo haber llenado tres cuadernos, cuatro cuadernos cuando era muy chica, contando todas las historias que recordaba, sacadas de la historia de Inglaterra, que me gustaba mucho, porque había asesinatos, personajes encerrados en una torre, niños preciosos dentro de una torre. (*Encuentros*, p.15)

In this gleeful description, she makes English history read like a fairy tale; the appeal for her is finding the fairy-tale and narrative aspects of 'real' history. She views history as might a child, making stories or inventing games and bringing history and nation down to narrative size in fairy-tale guise. Where Victoria might use an image from a fairy tale to extrapolate a general truth about adulthood (such as claiming that 'nuestro pasado desvanecido [...] crece silenciosamente en nosotros, como la cabellera de la bella durmiente del bosque', *Testimonios III*, 40), Silvina prefers to delve into fairy tales for their potentially disturbing content or for their humour. The utilization by both Ocampo sisters of what is essentially a genre aimed at children, however, maps out an aesthetic route involving reworking of fairy tales and classic children's texts which

⁴² In *Los condenados visten de blanco* (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1971), pp. 61-70.

⁴³ See her talk 'A los alumnos argentinos de la asociación de cultura inglesa', in *Testimonios*, I (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1935), 75-100.

intersects with the paths of later writers such as Marcela Solá and Luisa Valenzuela whilst also pointing to Pizarnik.

Shared Sisterly Memories

In an aristocratic family such as the Ocampos, to be educated by a French governess was the norm; the predominance and persistence of French as the first medium of self-expression for Victoria shows how this single crucial aspect of her upper-class childhood had a profound effect on her public persona and role. The formative memories of her childhood are indissolubly linked to the French language and therefore seal her fate as a translator.

He sido castigada en francés. He jugado en francés. He rezado en francés [...] comencé a llorar y a reír en francés. Las hadas, los enanos, los ogros hablaron para mí en francés. Los exploradores recorrían un universo que tenía nombres franceses. (*Testimonios*, I, 31)

Between the two sisters, Victoria and Silvina, there is a difference of choice; each marshals this linguistically privileged childhood to suit her own literary ends.⁴⁴ Victoria solves the dilemma of her affinity with French yet her desire to speak ‘en mi tierra, [...] y en una lengua familiar a todos’ (*Testimonios*, I, 32) by promoting translation and cultural exchange; she is put into a filial position vis-à-vis Europe whilst championing America’s youthfulness, and becomes a nannyish figure not only towards Silvina and her husband, Bioy Casares, but also towards the *Sur* committee, and through *Sur* towards other magazines. Silvina, on the sidelines, apparently chooses to blend in more than her out-going eldest sister by adopting Spanish from the start, although like Victoria she experienced linguistic difficulties: ‘me siento despedazada entre los tres idiomas’ [Spanish, French and English] (*Encuentros*, p. 13). ‘Yo no me crié con el español sino con el francés y el inglés [...] Los sentía como idiomas ya hechos; en cambio, el español sentía que había que inventarlo, que había que rehacer el idioma.’⁴⁵ Indeed many of her *cuentos* make a feature – as does Cortázar later and to a greater extent – of imitating clichéd *porteño* patterns of speech in literature.⁴⁶ The images of her privileged childhood (and her fantasies of rebelling against it) then become her subject; the playing, praying and punishment of childhood emerge thematically.

⁴⁴ For a general discussion of the sisters’ affinity with English and French, see Marcos Montes’ ‘Inglés y francés, lenguas literarias de Victoria y Silvina Ocampo’, *Letras de Buenos Aires*, 19.44 (1999), 20-26.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Noemí Ulla, *Inventiones a dos voces: Ficción y poesía en Silvina Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1992), p. 47.

⁴⁶ Ulla discusses Ocampo’s use of colloquial language in ‘El discurso paródico en *Final del Juego* y en *La furia y otros cuentos*’, in *La insurrección literaria: De lo coloquial en la narrativa rioplatense de 1960 y 1970* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1996), pp. 29-49.

It is both interesting and revealing to compare the sisters' childhood memories; many of the same basic elements are remembered and recreated differently, interpreted to differing ends. We can look, for instance, at Victoria's article 'San Isidro' (reprinted in *Testimonios*, III, 183-91) which originally accompanied an album of photographs. In it, she recalls childhood carnival disguises, especially devils; this memory forms part of the invisible beauty of San Isidro along with 'chicas de delantal recién planchado y trenzas recién hechas' (p. 189) and the 'festejante, inseparable de su caballo' (p. 190). Silvina shared many such experiences, but Victoria evidently takes it for granted that Silvina's reactions to them, and even the memories of them that she retains, are similar, since she declares: 'Así lo siento yo. Así lo siente Silvina Ocampo, hermana mía no sólo por haber jugado algunos años más tarde en el mismo jardín [...] sino por una hermandad de emoción ante el mismo paisaje.' (p. 190) She may be suggesting a harmonic vision of emotional sisterhood but she makes it clear that Silvina is the younger, having experienced it 'algunos años más tarde'.

Silvina's story 'El árbol grabado' from *Las invitadas*, on the other hand, suggests that its author has given a more perverse twist to her fictionalized memories of carnival disguises; the narrator opens with 'fui vestida de diablo y muy temprano al banquete' and keeps reminding us of her diabolical disguise throughout the carnival: 'yo, de diablo, no hay que olvidarlo' (p. 148). The diabolical influence becomes grotesquely literal, as the narrator incites young Clorindo to murder. '“Por aquí pasó el diablo, que se apoderó del alma de Clorindo” dijeron las personas, después del crimen [...]. Y yo me sentí culpable.' (p. 149) The poem 'Acto de contrición' enjoys further the reversal of diabolical and angelic through costume, suggesting a common origin in these childhood memories:

La espectadora soy desesperada
de la malignidad con traje de hada,
del disfrazado diablo que es un santo
niño de carnaval que sufre tanto.⁴⁷

Similarly, suitors on horseback feature in 'Anillo de humo' from the same collection, but Gabriel Bruno is not at all the kind of suitor of whom Victoria would approve, since he stones a dog to death, and is a thief whose father murdered a man for five *centavos*. By blowing smoke in the female narrator's face and saying obscene words to her, he holds her mesmerized, to the extent that she tries to engage him in a dramatic suicide pact on the railway lines.

⁴⁷ *Lo amargo por dulce* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1962), p. 10. 'La máscara' from *Cornelia frente al espejo* also centres around childhood carnival disguises.

To further emphasize the divergent destinies that these supposedly shared childhood memories led to, it will suffice to look at Victoria's conclusion to the above-mentioned article on San Isidro. Victoria realizes that at the time she didn't consciously remember these things she now writes about: 'pasaba yo rápida y distraída, con el empuje maravilloso de una juventud que toma posesión del mundo' (p. 191). We hear strong echoes of her triumphal assumption of youthful promise in the face of Drieu's teasing. Silvina, on the other hand, appears not to have had such an attitude of quasi-colonial enterprise. Whilst the adult Silvina talks of the inward childhood self, the 'nena que todavía vibra en mí', (Beccacece, p. 15) the child which persists in Victoria is one which she fancies that other people see in her, 'la chica que siguen viendo en mí, a pesar del correr de los años' (p. 191). Her image is one seen through the world's eyes, the personal as *res publica*, whereas Silvina's is more private and intimate. Victoria's girl, significantly, has 'manos sucias de tierra y tinta' (p. 191). The literary and cultural element of youth is paramount to Victoria, and she uses her own life as a constant point of reference, interwoven with literary works. Silvina turns the raw material of childhood into fictional explorations of the darker side of children, and she responds to the more disturbing side of life that she sees around her, particularly the behaviour of children. One such example is given in her letter to Victoria of 3 October 1977, where she relates a dialogue she heard between two children, playing at killing one another.⁴⁸

Victoria was by no means oblivious to the lasting importance of childhood; her immediate response to a question from Alejandra Pizarnik about her identity as an Argentinian is to say 'Yo soy del país de la infancia'.⁴⁹ Victoria Ocampo's *Testimonios* and *Autobiografía* are highly personal works and in them she frequently refers to events from her childhood as a starting point for reflection and analysis. The most obvious example of this is in her essay 'Lecturas de infancia' from *Testimonios* III but there are numerous others. In the aforementioned essay, Victoria acknowledges the child's lucidity which is lost to the adult:

la triste lucidez de que se jacta nuestra sangre fría de adultos compensa mal la pérdida de una clarividencia acostumbrada a marchar por los atajos que no figuran en los planos de los grandes caminos pavimentados por la lógica.
(*Testimonios*, III, 11-42, p. 11)

⁴⁸ 'Ayer oí este diálogo: Victoria (tres años) y Florencio (cuatro). Victoria (tirada sobre la cama) '¿Me vas a matar?' Florencio – 'No. Tengo que guardar los juguetes.' Florencio (a un camionero de juguete) 'Bájese inmediatamente del camión o lo mato. (Volcando el camión, apunta con el revolver de juguete al camionero) pum pam pum ya está.' Tengo miles de diálogos y de juegos como estos para contar. Me ponen los pelos de punta porque pienso en los chicos de quien nadie se ocupa y que son pobres y que sufren y que harían sufrir toda la vida entera a sus semejantes.'

⁴⁹ Alejandra Pizarnik, 'Entrevista con Victoria Ocampo', *Zona Franca*, 35 (1966), 14-19 (p. 14).

This is a point of view shared with Silvina, although Silvina puts it across persuasively through her fiction, and in the few interviews she gave, rather than in essays. Victoria's way of trying to recapture childhood lucidity, in the early volumes of her posthumously-published *Autobiografía*, has been described as 'mímesis del lenguaje infantil, [...] estilo lenguaje de niña precoz'.⁵⁰ However, the combination of childish language in the present tense with footnotes is unconvincing.

Victoria points to childhood as being a key element in great artists: 'los sabios, los poetas, los pintores no poseen genio sino en la medida en que son hombres mal curados de su infancia y de sus amores' (*Testimonios* III, 13). In this respect she is in agreement with Silvina, but again Silvina prefers to express this implicitly through her fiction, as will be seen in the subsection entitled 'The Child Teaching the Adult' of Chapter 2. What Victoria perceives to be important in her childhood reminiscences is determined by her adult literary passions. She singles out Proust and childhood reactions to different kinds of books, especially those that begin with the magic words 'Once upon a time...'. The familiar trope of childhood as a lost paradise is overlaid by the civilized concerns of the cultured adult, who says that 'el verde paraíso de *las lecturas infantiles* ha desaparecido irremediabilmente' (p. 40, my emphasis), carefully stressing that even as a child one was first and foremost an avid reader. Silvina's child world is less literary; although she was undoubtedly equally well versed in Proust and others, her reading of these texts feeds organically into her fictional exploration of the child and adult emotional worlds.

'La nena todavía vibra en mí'

'Silvina Ocampo a toujours entretenu en elle un certain esprit d'enfance.'⁵¹

'Silvina era un gran talento con alma de chiquita.'⁵²

'Tengo algo muy infantil en mis cuentos.'⁵³

In comparison with Victoria's approach, Silvina Ocampo's transmutation of childhood experiences into literary material is far more oblique, and not only in the sense that we are dealing with fiction rather than the covert and slippery fictions of autobiography. Silvina has commented, revealingly, that the self is unimportant in the composition of a story or poem, although – or perhaps because – it is very difficult to be anything but

⁵⁰ See Cristina Iglesia, *Islas de la memoria* (Buenos Aires: Cuenca del Plata, 1996), pp. 52-53.

⁵¹ Héctor Bianciotti, 'La "gloire" de Silvina Ocampo', p. 23.

⁵² Jorge Torres Zavaleta, 'Infinitamente, Silvina', *La Nación, Cultura*, 19 September 1993, p. 6.

⁵³ From Mempo Giardinelli, 'Entrevista a Silvina Ocampo: El cuento es superior, ¿no?', *Puro Cuento*, 2.8 (1988), 1-6 (p. 2).

faithful to oneself when writing.⁵⁴ Interpreting such a statement is notoriously hazardous when dealing with fiction, perhaps more so when faced with a writer who produced almost no explicitly autobiographical material and who so jealously guarded her private life that we are given few glimpses of the self to whom she might be faithful. Enrique Pezzoni, who was close to Silvina Ocampo, sees her stories and poems as ‘impulsados por el empeño de situar, sitiar, poseer el propio Yo’,⁵⁵ but suggests that this I is possibly created by the texts that seek to possess it, leaving a central absence (p. 188). I would argue that even Pezzoni’s circular model still reveals the futility of trying to write against one’s own grain, since Ocampo’s instinct is that of abstracting and hiding her ‘self’ from scrutiny. Jorge Torres Zavaleta finds a high degree of correspondence between Ocampo’s idiosyncratic character and her work: ‘de una manera poética y casi absurda coincidía con su obra.’ (‘Infinitamente, Silvina’, p. 6)

Ocampo appears inescapably faithful to herself in the way she sees her own position within Argentine literature. When asked ‘¿en relación con qué autores argentinos o extranjeros piensa usted su propia obra?’ the only Argentine author she names is herself: ‘En relación con Silvina Ocampo, o con Shakespeare o con Ronsard [...]’.⁵⁶ While thus being true to her own character in being defiantly individual and delighting in provocative remarks, she is also making the point that whilst every writer admires great models such as Shakespeare, each inescapably writes from the perspective of his or her own experience. ‘Fui y soy la espectadora de mí misma; / cambia lo que entra en mí como en un prisma.’⁵⁷ In this respect, it seems reasonable to take into account aspects of Ocampo’s ‘propio Yo’, whilst bearing in mind its constructedness, and her prioritizing of the work over the author. The question of ‘el propio Yo’, or ‘¿quién es yo?’, as she puts it, is even more vexed in the case of Alejandra Pizarnik, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Bioy Casares, when asked to describe his late wife, said that:

no se parecía a nadie. Todo en ella era original. Era infantil, de un infantilismo genial. Supersticiosa con supersticiones propias, que se inventaba. Temerosa veía el mundo como una cosa incomprensible que depara sorpresas espantosas.

⁵⁴ Letter to José Bianco, dated 12 October 1941. ‘Lo importante cuando se hace literatura no es el yo, sino la obra que se está haciendo [...] Como en mis poemas lo importante no me parece que sea yo. Me parece una preocupación pueril la de querer ser fiel a su yo; es tan difícil *dejar* de serlo.’ (my emphasis). We can compare this statement of inescapable circularity to the observation made by Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée*: ‘Naturellement, il n’y a que moi, moi que hais, moi qui aime’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 212.

⁵⁵ Enrique Pezzoni, ‘Silvina Ocampo: Orden fantástico, orden social’, in *El texto y sus voces* (Buenos Aires: Suramericana, [1986]), pp. 187-216 (p. 187).

⁵⁶ Interview with Noemí Ulla in *Encuesta a la literatura argentina contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), pp. 361-65 (p. 363).

⁵⁷ *Lo amargo por dulce* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1962), p. 10.

Una niña grande. El mundo la hacía sufrir mucho.' 'En todo lo cotidiano podía haber sorpresas espantosas. Ella jugaba, pero también sufría. ('Yo y mi chica', p. 119)

Precisely these aspects which Bioy highlights in his thumbnail sketch of Silvina are some of those which distinguish her fiction from the fantastic aesthetic as embodied in either Bioy himself or in Borges. Her essentially everyday worlds throw up some very cruel surprises, often catalysed by children's actions and reactions, whether of superstition, incomprehension, or a combination of playing and suffering. Thus Bioy's characterization of his late wife makes her seem at one with her many child protagonists, inescapably faithful to herself through her writing about them.

Establishing any degree of autobiographical reference in Ocampo however is, as I have already implied, dangerous. Norman Thomas di Giovanni describes Ocampo's story 'The Drawing Lesson' as 'semi-autobiographical', since it involves the meeting of an artist with her childhood self;⁵⁸ this story will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. A manuscript and a typescript which feature as objects in the documentary *Silvina Ocampo: Las dependencias* are apparently also autobiographical in nature; 'La casa autobiográfica' and the intriguingly titled 'Moi ou quelqu'un d'autre, Silvina Ocampo'.⁵⁹ It is interesting that these have remained unpublished, at least under these titles; perhaps precisely because of their more personal nature. Another indicator of Ocampo's tendency towards self-effacement can be seen in the later alteration to the title of a group of poems which first appears in *Sur* as 'Me hablan las estampas de los santos'. On their re-publication in *Amarillo celeste* they are simply entitled 'Hablan las estampas', as if the poet had absented herself.⁶⁰ In the Bloomsbury guide, *Women's Literature A-Z*, it is suggested in the entry on Silvina Ocampo that the collection of poems *Lo amargo por dulce* is 'written as an autobiography [and] exposes conflicting aspects of her own self, in a kind of 'intellectual extasis' [sic]'.⁶¹ This opinion follows that of Pezzoni, who calls it an 'autobiografía'; presumably his later thoughts on 'el propio Yo' refine this view. Ocampo's volume never openly declares autobiographical intent, but the opening 'Acto de contrición' is strongly confessional in tone.⁶²

The story 'Los retratos apócrifos' contains the closest to an 'auto-retrato', but Ocampo of course resists such a recuperation of the text by simply presenting it as one

⁵⁸ In his introduction to *Celeste Goes Dancing and Other Stories: An Argentine Collection* (London: Constable, 1989) p. 10.

⁵⁹ Video documentary *Silvina Ocampo: Las dependencias*, Dir. Lucrecia Martel (Buenos Aires, 1999). Produced by Lita Stantic, researched by Adriana Mancini and Gabriela Speranza.

⁶⁰ *Sur*, 282 (1963), 21-24 and *Amarillo celeste* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1972), pp. 113-17.

⁶¹ Bloomsbury guide, *Women's Literature A-Z*, ed. by Claire Buck ([n.p.]: Bloomsbury, 1994), [p.].

of two apocryphal portraits. This gesture of presenting a self, yet escaping, is like that of calling her portrait of Argentina 'infiel'. The gesture is also a repetition of that made in her poem 'La cara apócrifa' from *Amarillo celeste*. The poem describes the poet's changing attitude to her own face as seen reflected in anything from spoons to mirrors, and in photographs. Ocampo uses the same poem one year later, with a few revisions, to accompany her portrait taken by Sara Facio in the volume *Retratos y autorretratos*.⁶³ But here the poem is simply entitled 'La cara' and the photograph shows Ocampo's outstretched hand, shielding her face from the prying lens of the camera.⁶⁴ Even when she is unmistakably the subject, Ocampo resists occupying that position.

Returning to 'Los retratos apócrifos', the story is a meditation on youth and age and on the narrator's relationship to one of her sisters. It mentions a miniature copy of [Joshua] Reynolds' painting *The Age of Innocence* with herself as model; it is suggested, however, that this copy was perhaps never painted, a further gesture of negation. In considering herself sitting for this copy, the narrator queries: '¿Y yo la cara de la inocencia? [...] Me conmueve como si yo no hubiera sido yo.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 294) Like the evasive phrase, 'Moi ou quelqu'un d'autre', this observation confirms the image of Ocampo as a writer not only obsessed with exploring childhood

⁶² Pezzoni, 'Silvina Ocampo', in *Enciclopedia de la literatura argentina*, ed. by Pedro Orgambide and Roberto Yahni (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1970), pp. 473-77 (p. 473).

⁶³ Sara Facio and Alicia D'Amico, *Retratos y autorretratos: Escritores de América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Crisis, 1973), pp. 115-19.

⁶⁴ The earlier version of the poem is discussed in depth by Noemí Ulla but despite her analytical focus on the image, Ulla neglects to mention the poem's significant re-appearance in Facio's book alongside the photographic image of Ocampo. See 'La imagen reflejada (en poemas de *Amarillo celeste* de Silvina Ocampo)' from *Silvina Ocampo: Una escritora oculta*, pp. 87-100. The topic is explored by María A. Salgado, 'Mirrors and Mirages: Refractions in the Self-Portrait', in *Selected Proceedings: 32nd Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference*, ed. by Gregorio C. Martin (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, 1984), pp. 285-91.

as a misnamed ‘age of innocence’, but also as a writer with an ambiguous and evasive attitude to the self.

Looking back over her childhood, Ocampo analyses her natural tendency towards solitariness and reflection: ‘mi vida de niña era muy reflexiva, como si yo me hubiera detenido a pensar lo que estaba viviendo’.⁶⁵ We think immediately of pensive child protagonists in her stories, such as ‘Autobiografía de Irene’ whose gift of premonition leads her to scrutinize her thoughts: ‘Traté de analizar el proceso, la forma en que se desarrollaban mis pensamientos.’ (*Cuentos I*, pp. 158-59) It is perhaps such a quality of childish thoughtfulness, analysing situations with a precociously mature detachment, which formed Ocampo’s preference as a writer for adopting the child’s perspective, whilst simultaneously making the reader aware of the coexistence of an adult self, blessed – or cursed? – with hindsight.

Not only in her writing, but also in her letters, childhood frequently supplies Ocampo with images and metaphors for adult life. In a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez dated 15 March 1973, for example, she compares presenting a book for a competition to taking a sensitive child to school for the first time: ‘Es un poco como mandar un niño muy sensible y tierno y atrevido a la escuela por primera vez con todos los útiles y el delantal almidonado.’ In the letter, she changed this sentence, crossing out a single word (unfortunately rendering it illegible) and replaced it with the two words ‘tierno y atrevido’. She evidently thought carefully about the analogy. Likewise, when her book *I giorni della notte* came out in Italy she describes her mixed emotions in childish terms: ‘Me parece que recibí un juguete de esos que pronto se gastan en la infancia y dejan la melancolía de la ilusión.’ (Letter to Mujica Láinez dated August 1973). Images from childhood seem to come most naturally to her, fresh in their hermetic poignancy; this is a point of comparison with Pizarnik, who views her poetic achievements with the wonder of ‘un niño que descubre que tiene una colección de sellos postales que no reunió.’⁶⁶ Indeed, Ocampo appears to prefer to allow such images to speak for themselves rather than analysing or spelling out emotional situations.

Resistance to Explanation

‘Les grandes personnes ne comprennent jamais rien toutes seules, et c’est fatigant, pour les enfants, de toujours et toujours leur donner des explications. [...] Elles ont toujours besoin d’explications.’
 ‘Mon ami ne donnait jamais d’explications. Il me croyait peut-être semblable à lui. Mais moi,

⁶⁵ In conversation with Noemí Ulla. Quoted by Liliana Heker in ‘Silvina Ocampo y Victoria Ocampo’, p. 211.

⁶⁶ Diary for 25 March 1961, from *Poemas* (Caracas: Endymion, 1986), p. 116.

malheureusement, je ne sais pas voir les moutons à travers les caisses. Je suis peut-être un peu comme les grandes personnes. J'ai dû vieillir.⁶⁷

All critics are in agreement about the compelling idiosyncrasy of Silvina Ocampo's style, but they evaluate and analyse this in a variety of ways. It is difficult to avoid the temptation to single out a particular aspect, in order to fit her writing into one framework or another within Argentine literary history, whether by reclaiming her for feminism⁶⁸ (which she certainly never did herself, claiming to be more interested in the sex of a dog or a plant than a writer)⁶⁹ or for the Argentine tradition of 'the fantastic'. Given her tri-lingual upbringing and her greater initial affinity with English than Spanish, she perhaps has as much in common with poets such as John Betjeman (for his quirky sense of place and delight in metrical verse) and writers such as Henry James or Katherine Mansfield (in terms of their child protagonists) as with other Argentinian writers.⁷⁰ Patricia Klingenberg's monograph on Ocampo takes a psychoanalytic and feminist approach, highlighting elements of the fantastic and the grotesque, and envisioning the authorial presence as androgynous. She also notes Ocampo's use of kitsch and makes some useful comments on the figure of the child and the use of paradox, although these are not the main focus of the work. Other critics privilege either the pseudo-fantastic (Perassi), the cruel (Balderston), the domestic fantastic (Agosín) or the exaggerated and deceptively simplistic (Molloy), all of which are unquestionably important facets of Ocampo's fiction, but only parts of the whole.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946; repr. 1991), pp. 10, 21.

⁶⁸ See Eva Luz Santos-Phillips, *La representación femenina: 'Ocampo anticipa el feminismo contemporáneo al rechazar las reglas tradicionales y unirse al grupo vanguardista que busca la ruptura al orden como necesidad de catarsis. Ella le da voz a la mujer y al hacerlo reta el canon dominante.'* (p. 13)

⁶⁹ See her response to Noemí Ulla's questionnaire, 'Las mujeres tienen la palabra: Silvina Ocampo', *Clarín, Suplemento Cultura y Nación*, 12 May 1977, p. 2.

⁷⁰ A few examples will suffice to illustrate the breadth of her acquaintance with English. Silvina contributed to her sister's multiple issue of *Sur*, 153-6 (1947) devoted to English literature with translations of poetry by A.E. Housman, Walter De la Mare, Vita Sackville-West, Stephen Spender, Edith Sitwell, Edwin Muir, David Gascoyne and Kathleen Raine. In other poetry collections she included her translations of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Alexander Pope and W. B. Yeats, and she published a whole book of translations of the American poet, Emily Dickinson (see bibliography). Some of her short stories have English intertexts; see for example Emily Francomano's analysis of 'Mi amada' from *Los días de la noche*, evaluating its debt to Robert Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover': 'Escaping by a Hair: Silvina Ocampo Rereads, Rewrites and Re-members "Porphyria's Lover"', *Letras Femeninas*, 25.1-2 (1999), 65-77.

⁷¹ Patricia Nisbet Klingenberg, *Fantasies of the Feminine*; Emilia Perassi, 'Paradigmi e deviazioni del fantastico ispanoamericano'; Daniel Balderston, 'Los cuentos crueles de Silvina Ocampo y Juan Rodolfo Wilcock', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 49 (1983), 743-52; Marjorie Agosín, 'Mujer, espacio e imaginación en Latinoamérica: Dos cuentos de María Luisa Bombal y Silvina Ocampo', *Revista Internacional de Bibliografía*, 41 (1991), 627-33; Sylvia Molloy, 'Silvina Ocampo: La exageración como lenguaje', *Sur*, 320 (1969), 15-24 and 'Simplicidad inquietante en los relatos de Silvina Ocampo'. Alejandra Pizarnik comments to Ivonne Bordelois that Ocampo had read Molloy's essay to her. Apparently Ocampo resisted this 'explanation' of her style, though Bordelois has tactfully omitted Pizarnik's comments to that effect from the published letter. See Ivonne Bordelois, *Correspondencia Pizarnik* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1998), p. 296.

Bioy Casares names only a handful of people as having really understood Silvina Ocampo's work;⁷² of these, Borges prologued and reviewed several of her works, and Enrique Pezzoni and Edgardo Cozarinsky both contributed lengthy essays as introductions to her work (see main bibliography for details). Francis Korn, who firmly maintains that Silvina Ocampo is unique in Argentine writing of the twentieth century, has tantalizingly not published anything concerning her extensive acquaintance with the writer and her works. It is perhaps least distorting to characterize Ocampo's work precisely by its resistance to, even defiance of, explanation. Héctor Bianciotti sees Ocampo as responding to 'l'étrangeté qui, dans la nature, prend en défaut nos possibilités d'explication'⁷³ and Evelyn Fishburn leaves her reading of 'Soñadora compulsiva' open-ended, reasoning that this story 'will always be in excess of any attempted "explanation"' (*Short Fiction*, p. 108). Lucien Noullez appears to share this opinion of Ocampo's works in his lyrical approach to her poetry collection, *Poemas de amor desesperado*, where he exclaims ironically 'Merveilleuse simplicité de Silvina. Inavouable.'⁷⁴ Danubio Torres Fierro attempts to capture her elusive style thus:

Silvina, como escritora, era de hecho oblicua y, mejor aún, de efectos laterales, de digresiones que se desarrollan [...] Más que los puntos de partida – siempre ambiguos en su ataque – o de llegada – siempre equívocos en sus soluciones – importan, en su cuña retórica, los tránsitos que se efectúan y los recorridos que se describen.⁷⁵

Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, in his review of *Espacios métricos*, also singles out this lack of explanation for the reader: 'Por simple que sea el tema – nunca lo es – trae consigo una razón de existir que nos es inexplicable.'⁷⁶ This parallels the attitude of defiance or quirkiness which was very much a personality trait of Silvina Ocampo throughout her life, and to which Macedonio Fernández tacitly pays homage by dedicating to her his humorous article on the new genre, 'Dudarte'.⁷⁷ All the published interviews she gave stress her abhorrence of putting herself into the spotlight; for example, speaking to Mempo Giardinelli in 1988 she says 'Para que a uno lo conozcan, uno tiene que moverse. Y yo no me moví nada'⁷⁸. It would seem to be the case that not only did Ocampo resist intrusion into her private life by wilful negligence with respect to

⁷² See interview with Bioy Casares, 'Yo y mi chica', 119. 'Es como si pocos elegidos hubieran comprendido y admirado su obra: Borges, Enrique Pezzoni, Edgardo Cozarinsky, Francis Korn.'

⁷³ Bianciotti, 'La mort de Silvina Ocampo: La férocité et l'innocence', *Le Monde, Livres*, 17 December 1993, p. V.

⁷⁴ 'Silvina désespérée', *Le Courrier du Centre International d'Études Poétiques*, 221 (1999), 23-29 (p. 24).

⁷⁵ 'Silvina Ocampo, un retrato parcial', *La Nación*, 20 August 1995, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

⁷⁶ *Sur*, 137 (1946), 82-86 (p. 83).

⁷⁷ Macedonio Fernández, 'La literatura del Dudar del Arte (Dedicado a Silvina Ocampo)', *Destiempo*, 3 (1937), 2.

publicity and positive hostility towards investigation of her biographical details, but her literary style is also characterized by a perverse resistance to facile interpretation or classification.⁷⁹

This resistance dates back to her earliest 'scenes of writing';⁸⁰ when given compositions to do by her governesses, Ocampo's work was invariably marked by a certain rebellion: 'Yo insistía en alejarme del tema dado por la maestra'.⁸¹ This deliberate deviation contributes to her adult narrative style; Ocampo delights in telling stories the way that a child might tell them, allowing the narrator to go off at a tangent, give long lists of details, and appear callous, *cursi* or curious by turns. She also speaks through the child who confidently addresses adults, assuming that they are within the same hermetic world. As echoed in the quotation from *Le Petit Prince* which prefaces this section, a quality associated with children's logic is that of assuming comprehension. Saint-Exupéry's adult narrator is made painfully aware of his inadequate powers of imagination; he cannot see the world with the eye of fantasy, but instead is limited by his adult need for explanations. Noemí Ulla's introduction to *Viaje olvidado* effectively places Ocampo's narratorial stance in a position similar to that of the Little Prince, as her *cuentos* 'conservan cierta mirada de asombro sobre la naturaleza, los seres y las cosas que sólo los niños tienen'.⁸² Her avoidance of explanation can thus be seen as the narrative manifestation of a preference for a childlike apprehension of the world. This assessment is backed up by José Bianco's comment that Ocampo's fantasy 'nos interna en ese segundo plano que los años, la costumbre y los prejuicios parecían haber ocultado definitivamente a nuestros ojos'. (*Ficción y reflexión*, pp. 148-49) Ocampo's fiction defamiliarizes the world for those readers who, like the aviator in *Le Petit Prince*, have grown old. Ocampo herself stresses to Ulla the need to get as close as possible to children's dialogue in terms of leaving things unexplained. 'En el diálogo hay que acercarse más a la inocencia de los niños que hablan de una manera muy rápida, con la confianza de que no hay que explicar todo.' (*Encuentros*, p.45)

This is one way of separating Ocampo from her contemporaries, particularly Borges. Borges continually plays with potential pseudo-logical explanations. He

⁷⁸ Mempo Giardinelli, 'Entrevista a Silvina Ocampo', p. 1.

⁷⁹ In this respect I am in agreement with Graciela Tomassini, whose opening sentence in her longer study of Ocampo's fiction describes it as 'un espacio literario reactivo a las definiciones'. *El espejo de Cornelia: La obra cuentística de Silvina Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1995), p. 9.

⁸⁰ Terminology from Sylvia Molloy, *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991).

⁸¹ Quoted by Marcelo Pichon Rivière in 'La vida misteriosa de Silvina Ocampo', p. 4.

⁸² Introduction by Noemí Ulla to *Viaje olvidado* (1998), p. 11.

perplexes the reader by undermining these, but repeatedly presents them, sowing confusion through erudition and relying heavily, albeit ironically, on the trope of explanation. His explanations are frequently postulated in fantastic or elegantly esoteric terms (such as the Cabbalistic explanation of the crime given in ‘La muerte y la brújula’).⁸³ Silvina Ocampo, on the other hand, prefers to give the reader what are often either facile or callous explanations, or at least follow a different logic; they leave the reader unsatisfied and sensing a deeper and more disturbing emotional situation. As Marcelo Pichon Rivière puts it, ‘Silvina no busca, como Bioy y Borges, un rigor en la construcción de un relato fantástico; por el contrario, encuentra su estilo en lo disparatado, en la imaginación desatada’ (‘La vida misteriosa’, p. 5) and Cristina Fangmann similarly differentiates Ocampo from Bioy and Borges in view of her rebellion against the ‘rules’ for a good short story.⁸⁴

If we look at some of Ocampo’s letters to José Bianco, we see her own confirmation of this resistance to explanation in the way she dissects a phrase of Bianco’s novel, *Las ratas*: ‘“ese personaje un poco mitológico, la tía Jacinta.” Esa clase de explicaciones me molestan [sic] un poco.’ (12 October, 1941) ‘Mi cuento resultó francamente atroz: es ~~una pura exp~~ únicamente una explicación, la explicación de un cuento malo!’ (26 March 1944) Ocampo objects to explanation as if it indicated pandering to the reader. The only time Ocampo does explain is in the form of a *cuento* within a *cuento*, as in ‘La continuación’, for example, which still leaves the outer frame unexplained.⁸⁵ In much of Ocampo’s short fiction, what is manifest is not the real driving force of the story. Like the aphasic patient who confabulates to cover a word he cannot find (and Ocampo is particularly fascinated by patients and their manipulative or manipulated relationships with doctors), or the child who talks desperately to cover a guilty secret, Ocampo’s narratives often mask something lurking behind, a horror behind the trivial details. The reader is obliged to proceed by intuition since Ocampo focuses on the implicit rather than the explicit. Behind trivial domestic events, we sense deep personal tragedies.

The poem ‘Los mensajes’ from *Lo amargo por dulce* (pp. 14-15, p. 14) describes an early stage in which the poet wrote messages on her hand:

⁸³ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La muerte y la brújula’, in *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1971; repr. 1990), pp. 147-63 (first publ. in *Sur*, 92 (1942), 27-39).

⁸⁴ In ‘Escrituras del exceso en el Río de la Plata: Delmira Agustini, Silvina Ocampo y Néstor Perlongher’ [unpublished paper read at *VI Jornadas de Historia de las Mujeres y I Congreso Iberoamericano de Estudios de las Mujeres y de Género: Voces en Conflicto, Espacios de Disputa* (Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1-5 August 2000)].

⁸⁵ ‘Mi conducta te habrá parecido extraña, aun absurda, y tal vez seguirá pareciéndote absurda después de esta explicación.’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 172)

La palma de mi mano es una hoja
de árbol o de papel cuadriculado
donde escribí mensajes en mi infancia
con tinta azul, violeta, verde, roja.[...]

Los textos que borré, no han perdurado
en ningún sitio actual de la memoria
ni cofre, ni cajón los atesora
para curiosidad y ansia nostálgica.

Ahora quedan líneas con sus ramas
que sirvieron de rúbrica a esos nombres,
líneas que son mera lucubración
para investigaciones quirománticas.

It is as if childhood messages and the lines of the hand on which they were written are now transmuted into the lifelines of fortune telling; childhood is the palimpsest beneath adult life. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's interpretation of Ocampo's poetry plays upon all these ideas of palimpsest, lurking horror and defamiliarization: 'cual si descifráramos un texto desvanecido y revelador del sentido del texto superpuesto, sentimos el latente, universal espanto al que nos hemos desacostumbrado.'⁸⁶

Silvina Ocampo's resistance to explanation can be seen as her way of occupying the familial space of the younger sister, turning secretively inward, preserving and illuminating a child's perspective and always reading adult fortunes by searching for the childhood palimpsest. Turning to Martínez Estrada once more, the importance of this childlike use of language is highlighted:

Para que las palabras inocentes descarguen [...] sutiles emanaciones, es preciso que formen parte de un lenguaje que se ha hecho habitual, que se emplea en [...] pláticas de iniciados, que es lo que los niños hacen también con su lenguaje igualmente cargado de multívocos sentidos. (p. 85).

This idea of closed verbal communication between initiates calls to mind the close intertextual communication between the works of the Silvina-Bioy-Borges triangle.⁸⁷ Ocampo's childish perspective distinguishes her from Borges and Bioy Casares in one manifestation of this communication between initiates, namely games.

⁸⁶ In *Sur*, 137 (1946), 82-86 (p. 84).

⁸⁷ As noted by Marily Martínez de Richter: 'Intertextualidad deliberada [...] a través de la cual Ocampo afirma tanto sus coincidencias como sus diferencias con respecto a los otros dos integrantes del triángulo.' 'Triángulo de tigres: Borges, Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo', in *Silvina Ocampo: Una escritora oculta*, ed. by Noemí Ulla, pp. 61-85, p. 63.

Games I: *Homo Ludens*

'The child's games – imitation of adults.'⁸⁸

'Si con las muñecas podía hacerse el juego en serio, con [sus hermanitos] había que hacer de lo serio el juego.'⁸⁹

In 1938 the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga published a widely influential book on human identity, *Homo ludens*. This book apparently attracted a great deal of attention in the 1940s and Argentine intellectual circles were no exception; Silvina Ocampo, Bioy Casares and Borges may well have been numbered in its readership.⁹⁰ There has perhaps been a tendency in examining Argentine literature of this century to mark the publication in 1963 of Julio Cortázar's novel, *Rayuela*, as the key moment which firmly established the game in Argentine literature as a metaphor for exploration of identity.⁹¹ Mario Vargas Llosa seems to support this view:

Probably no other writer has bestowed on the game the literary dignity that Cortázar gave it. [...] For him, to write was to play, to become himself, to organize life – words, ideas – with the arbitrariness, the freedom, the fantasy and the irresponsibility of children or madmen.⁹²

Cortázar was certainly obsessed with the ritual of the game, and Vargas Llosa's references to children and madmen will be pertinent in Chapters 3 and 4 when looking at Cortázar's friendship and affinities with Pizarnik. His 1956 story 'Final del juego' describes a group of girls performing charades for a passing train, striking attitudes such as those pictured in Alicia Carletti's *Plays in the Garden*.⁹³ In stories like this, however,

⁸⁸ Novalis, from the 'General Draft', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Margaret Mahony Stoljar (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 126.

⁸⁹ Herminia Brumana, 'Más difícil terminar de vivir', *Puro Cuento*, 3.13 (1988), 46-47.

⁹⁰ See Graciela Scheines and Adolfo Bioy Casares' *El viaje y la otra realidad: Un ensayo y cinco cuentos* (Buenos Aires: Felro, 1988), p. 51: 'tuvo una cálida acogida entre los intelectuales argentinos de los años 40'.

⁹¹ *Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1963).

⁹² Mario Vargas Llosa, 'The Trumpet of Deyá', in *Making Waves*, ed. and translated by John King (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 245-53 (p. 247).

⁹³ Cortázar, Julio 'Final del juego', in *Ceremonias*, 4th edn (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993), pp. 140-51.

his use of the game comes remarkably close to Ocampo's.⁹⁴ 'Final del juego' examines the peculiar significance and intensity of games for children as an integral part of developing as human beings; it is similar in basic outline to Ocampo's earlier story 'El caballo muerto' in which three girls play in the afternoons at the bottom of the garden, near to the wire fence which marks the boundary with the outside world. There they can feel the 'respiración acalorada del tren' when it passes, and there the three have encounters with a boy older than themselves which upset the already delicate balance of their relationship (*Cuentos I*, pp. 22-23), as do the encounters of Leticia, Holanda and the narrating girl with Ariel in Cortázar's story.

The theme of game is something which Silvina Ocampo, Bioy Casares and Borges share, but which each approaches in a different way. Graciela Scheines discusses with Bioy Casares his concept of all of human life as a game, which we begin as children and continue in our adult roles. 'Como chicos que en un jardín se meten en cajones y son piratas y tienen batallas navales y naufragan ... Creo que nosotros seguimos de grandes haciendo lo mismo.' (p. 49) Insofar as he compares adult behaviour to childhood play, Bioy Casares shares the view of Silvina Ocampo. However, Bioy Casares's fiction, in contrast to his spoken comment, reveals a perception of game-playing which is more focused on the external adult world, in the sense that games have an impact on History: 'Que los juegos terminaran en el derrocamiento del gobierno o en la sangrienta represión, no alteraba esta verdad.' (p. 50, quoting from *El otro laberinto*.) In the case of Silvina Ocampo's fiction, the consequences of games can be equally serious (for example, death by drowning in 'La oración') but the arena in which the game is played out is usually more domestic or '*del barrio*' than that of Bioy Casares.

Ocampo, in an article describing her friendship with Borges, likens getting into an intimate conversation with him to the child's game of trying to jump under a swinging skipping rope.

La personne, ou plutôt la victime, qui veut causer avec lui cherche à entrer dans sa conversation comme l'enfant qui veut sauter à la corde quand ses camarades

⁹⁴ This is not the only thematic link between Cortázar and Ocampo. For a comparison of their exploration of childhood revenge, see Viviana Bermúdez-Arceo, 'Las venganzas de la infancia', in *II Coloquio internacional de literatura comparada 'el cuento': Homenaje a María Teresa Maiorana*. Buenos Aires, 12-15 October 1995, ed. by Martha Vanbiesem de Burbridge (Buenos Aires: Fundación María Teresa Maiorana, 1995), pp. 283-87. Noemí Ulla makes a stylistic comparison between the two writers in 'El discurso paródico en *Final del juego* y en *La furia y otros cuentos*'. Two other publications couple together Cortázar and Ocampo, implicitly inviting comparisons to be drawn: *Aspects du récit fantastique rioplatense: Silvina Ocampo, Julio Cortázar*, ed. by Milagros Ezquerro (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997) and *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 17 (1997), devoted to 'Le Fantastique argentin: Silvina Ocampo, Julio Cortázar'.

la font tourner en l'air. Quelquefois cela devient presque impossible, mais l'enfant, après beaucoup d'hésitations, entre dans le jeu, et parfois aussi n'y entre pas et s'ennuie à mourir ou devient honteux.⁹⁵

This teasing description of Borges reinforces my earlier observation of Ocampo's tendency to use images or analogies from childhood, whilst also illustrating the kind of playful interaction between the three members of this close subgroup of *Sur*; interestingly, Noemí Ulla likens Ocampo herself to Borges in her playful attitude to conversation: 'es capaz de subvertir aquello que se espera sea el diálogo. Este hábito especulativo, esta capacidad para jugar con la sorpresa, tienen en Silvina el mismo énfasis que en Borges.'⁹⁶

Borges' attitude to childhood and to childhood games is more literary and cerebral than that of Ocampo. It is often commented that Borges was fond of so-called children's authors, such as J. M. Barrie, R. L. Stevenson, and Lewis Carroll. Borges contributed to the *Revista Multicolor* of the newspaper *Crítica* in the 1930s, and Irma Zangara notes that from 1934 onwards Borges included translations of children's stories in his contributions, perhaps because he felt an anticipatory nostalgia for these gems of children's literature which would soon be replaced by mere comic strips.⁹⁷ Zangara thus associates Borges' interest in childhood with nostalgia for a particular way of reading and kind of literature, rather than for childhood *per se*. Although Borges was more interested in literature for children, he does make several observations about children's behaviour.

Todo es juego para los niños: juego y descubrimiento gozoso. Prueban y ensayan todas las variedades del mundo [...] Juegan tanto, que juegan a jugar: juegan a emprender juegos que se van en puros preparativos y que nunca se cumplen, porque una nueva felicidad los distrae.

Los niños desconocen la sucesión; habitan el liviano presente, ignoran el deber de la esperanza y la gravedad del recuerdo. Viven en la más pura actualidad, casi en la eternidad. (Zangara, p. 33)

His comments about a child's world verge on the idealistic, and reflect his own delight in metaphysical speculation. The idea of games becoming, in effect, meta-games, taken up entirely with inventing the rules of the game itself, is very reminiscent of Borges' technique of creating stories whose entire plot is the discussion of another (unwritten) story. For Ocampo too, children's games are sometimes highly complex: 'eran tan

⁹⁵ 'Images de Borges', in *L'Herne* (Paris: L'Herne, 1964), pp. 26-30 (p. 28).

⁹⁶ 'Los encuentros propicios', in *Mujeres y Escritura*, ed. by Mempo Giardinelli (Buenos Aires: Puro Cuento, 1989), pp. 158-60 (p. 160).

⁹⁷ 'Su nostalgia anticipada y su identificación de poeta con el niño que fue, y con los que no conocerían el maravilloso mundo de sus lecturas de entonces, lo llevó a seleccionar esos cuentos para despedirse con

complicados que sólo un niño podría entenderlos' (*Cuentos II*, p. 66) but her emphasis is more on the secretive nature of the child and the hermeticism of the child's world as viewed from adulthood than on the complexity of the game *per se*. More interesting in terms of comparison with Silvina Ocampo is Borges' initial statement that 'Todo es juego para los niños'. Silvina Ocampo would perhaps agree with this, but add the proviso that the nature of this game varies enormously, and it can involve high degrees of seriousness, eroticism, fear and revenge, playing with utter commitment, absorption and energy. For Eugenio Guasta, game is the password which allows entry into Ocampo's world, and this is a game as played by children: 'El juego exige la entrega y la seriedad del chico que juega sin perder su frescura, ni la singular lucidez que lo guía'.⁹⁸ Her world is that of the everyday and its games, in contrast to the more metaphysical games of Borges. Héctor Bianciotti, in his review of *Faits divers de la terre et du ciel*, makes this distinction between Silvina Ocampo and her two companions with reference to the figure of Alice in Wonderland:

Entre le génie insouciant de Borges et l'intelligence éprise de fictions ourdies à la manière de théorèmes qui caractérise Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo apparaît comme une sorte d'Alice qui, ayant délaissé les sortilèges du Roi Rouge et du miroir, rappelle à ses amis – voués aux plaisirs de l'érudition et s'amusant à compliquer les labyrinthes du fantastique – l'étrangeté et le mystère du quotidien.' ('La "gloire" de Silvina Ocampo', p. 23)

In Chapter 3 we will see how Pizarnik too is likened (and likens herself) to Alice, but with an emphasis on trying to remain in the Looking-Glass world, rather than recalling us to the everyday world.

Games II: Life and Death

For Ocampo, children's games can indeed be as serious, or more so, than adults' work; as Luis Maidana observes in Ocampo's 'El impostor', where he watches a group of children apparently building a house:

Entonces advertí que aquel trabajo, que tanto me había impresionado, había sido un juego, un juego que merecía una penitencia.

Al oír la estridente voz de la mujer, recordé algunos episodios de mi infancia. Yo había jugado con la misma seriedad. Mis juegos podían confundirse con los más penosos trabajos que los hombres hacen por obligación: nadie me había respetado. Pensé: los niños tienen su infierno. (*Cuentos I*, p. 134)

ellos, de la revista.' *Borges en Revista Multicolor: Obras, reseñas y traducciones de Jorge Luis Borges*, researched and compiled by Irma Zangara (Buenos Aires: Atlántida, 1995), pp. 23-24.

⁹⁸ 'Dos juicios sobre *La furia*', p. 63.

This observation about the emotional seriousness invested by children in their play, and adults' harsh reactions, is pre-echoed in a remark Ocampo makes in her letter to José Bianco of 4 November 1941:

Otro amigo es un chico de cinco años que arrea veinte vacas, que lleva leña como un hombre mientras su padre descansa. [...] Pienso en un posible mundo infernal (más infernal que el actual) donde solo los niños trabajaran. Los barrios de obreros serían más económicos; casas diminutas, sombras diminutas, trajes y útiles diminutos. El trabajo de los niños sería simplemente un juego, no sufrirían como el hombre. El niño juega siempre atareadísimo; que [sic] le puede molestar que su juego sirva para algo?⁹⁹

The musings in this letter are surely the source for 'La raza inextinguible' in *La furia*, and possibly also for the above-quoted passage in 'El impostor'. What Børges' blissful picture of the 'liviano presente' fails to highlight is the miserable side of a child's existence, the moments of 'pura actualidad' in which they suffer and their suffering seems to be an eternity, their hell. Ocampo's work is striking for her skill in portraying such moments. One powerful way in which Ocampo communicates the pathos of a child's misery, for example, is through the impossibility of playing: 'Crees que juego cuando me ves en los columpios, o con niños de mi edad jugando a la rayuela, o con perros. ¡Cómo te equivocas! Si jugar es divertirse, nunca juego...' (*Cuentos I*, p. 449) This child desperately loves his godmother, but she has a lover, Juan, of whom he is wildly jealous. Although at the opening of his farewell letter (the 'Carta de despedida' of the title) he claims not to understand the sadness he feels, intuitively he has grasped the hopelessness of his situation which is summed up in a typical Ocampo image of spatial boundaries: 'Desde que nací, vivimos en esta misma casa: tiempo suficiente para saber que el corredor aísla y no une los cuartos.' (p. 449) Similarly, in the story 'Extraña visita' we see how two girls take in the disquieting experience of apparently seeing the father of one cry, and as a result intuit something about the frailty of the grown-ups they regarded as infallible. Their reaction to this unexplained and ominous scene is desperately to seek order in a familiar place, the play room, but they are unable to play: 'caminaron hasta el cuarto de juguetes como si tuviesen la orden de jugar; pero no jugaron' (p. 54).

We can compare this with the uneasy behaviour of the girl in Ocampo's 'El pecado mortal', who is subconsciously aware of sexual tensions created by the presence of the male servant Chango: 'Jugabas con resignada inquietud. Presentías que algo insólito había sucedido o iba a suceder en la casa.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 439) When Chango

⁹⁹ These thoughts are aired again in conversation with Noemí Ulla: 'Yo veo otros chicos; son felices cuando trabajan, jugar es como trabajar.' (*Encuentros*, p. 74)

instructs her to look through the keyhole, she desperately maintains the pretence of playing, as if to assuage the guilt of her own disturbing emotions: ‘Seguiste jugando como si Dios te mirara, por compromiso, con esa aplicación engañosa que a veces ponen en sus juegos los niños. Luego, sin vacilar, te acercaste a la puerta.’ (p. 440) After having sealed the pact of voyeuristic complicity, she returns to her games, but it is a mere pretense of play, going through the motions: ‘reanudaste tus juegos mecánicamente.’ (p. 440)

Ocampo illustrates how the child often senses powerlessness to influence or resist the adult world except through the only means at his or her disposal, which is to play, or to pretend to do so. It is surely significant, for instance, that the child in ‘La furia’ is described initially as playing unconvincingly: ‘mientras el niño jugaba de un modo inverosímil con los flecos de la colcha’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 230) and subsequently (when the retrospective narrative catches up with the present moment) the child is described as playing dangerously: ‘mientras el niño jugaba peligrosamente con los flecos de la colcha’ (p. 235). The difference between these two descriptions of the same action reveals the narrating adult’s change in mood and perception, influenced by the disappearance of Winifred and the realization that he has been left to cope with the boy. The child’s play moves from being an irritation to being a matter of life and death, his own death.

Matters of life and death are never far from children’s games in Ocampo; respecting the rituals of a game can have fatal effects. In ‘La hija del toro’, for example, the seven-year old girl narrator invents a ‘juego demoníaco’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 316) in which she and her brothers, encouraged by the butcher Pata de Perro, throw mannikins of members of their family onto the bonfire. The children’s addiction to the irresistible lure of the game is demonstrated in the following chilling paragraph: ‘Uno de nuestros tíos murió. Sabíamos que el sortilegio había surtido efecto. No suspendimos por eso el juego.’ (p. 316) When Pata de Perro subsequently incurs the child’s wrath and frustration, an effigy of him and his mare is thrown into the fire. After a solemn ceremony in which the burnt effigy is buried, he is never seen again and we are left to assume that her action has brought about a powerful magical retribution. Most disturbingly, the child’s moral position is left ambiguous – did she repent? ‘Tal vez me arrepentí.’ (p. 317)¹⁰⁰ Santos-Phillips’ interpretation of this *cuento*, and indeed of

¹⁰⁰ There is an interesting echo of this ambiguous attitude in Ocampo’s own answer to a question in interview about her interest in cruelty: ‘A veces me arrepentí’. – ‘¿Sí? ¿Se arrepiente de haber buscado conocer y descubrir actos crueles?’ – ‘No, no. Me parece que el mundo me hace la competencia. Es

Ocampo's girl protagonists generally, sets up an opposition between 'niñas víctimas' and 'niñas agresoras'; Amalia falls into the latter category, since – as Santos-Phillips notes – she prefers wicked tricks to 'juegos con muñecas y tacitas de te' ('La representación femenina', pp. 62-67, p. 65). I feel that Ocampo's aesthetic is misrepresented by such oppositions; surely there is a continuum between harmless 'juegos con muñecas' and the game here with voodooesque mannikins, through which Ocampo's children shift, never entirely victims nor wholly aggressors. Possibly, as Pizarnik points out in her review of *El pecado mortal*, the child's capacity for action, whether good or evil is aided by 'su desconocimiento de la expresión "en la medida de lo posible"', característica de los adultos' (p. 417). The rules of the game are the ultimate determinant, rather than concepts of possible and impossible. Mónica Zapata also underlines the child's 'cumplimiento exacto de las reglas del juego' beyond the point where an adult would be restrained by propriety or social convention.¹⁰¹

That the aesthetic of the game is true to Ocampo's 'propio Yo' seems apparent if we look at ^{the} comment she makes in a letter to her sister Angélica, 7 January 1941:

He sido así desde chica: las cosas decidían por mí. A veces jugaba como quien juega a la ruleta con tal número de flores, o de nubes o de baldosas, o con las rayas del parque para decidir mi suerte.

Such stories as 'La hija del toro' are symptomatic of Ocampo's delight in disturbing revelations of children's capacity for cruelty. It has become a critic's cliché to mention cruelty (particularly of children) in connection with Silvina Ocampo's work, and indeed various critics emphasize this cruel streak as being the single most distinctive trait of Ocampo's writing. Borges suggests that her 'extraño amor por cierta crueldad inocente u oblicua' may simply be a product of 'el interés asombrado que el mal inspira a un alma noble'.¹⁰² Borges is being a little coy. His explanation recuperates and domesticates Silvina's interest, playing down her own childish delight in perversity. Helena Araújo and Blas Matamoro focus specifically on the manifestation of cruelty in two recurrent figures, the 'niña impura' and the 'nena terrible',¹⁰³ limiting discussion to the female child – as does Eva Luz Santos-Phillips with her previously-mentioned categories of 'niña víctima' and 'niña agresora' – slightly mis-represents Ocampo's

mucho más cruel aún.' See 'Silvina Ocampo: Escribir roba el tiempo de vivir', in María Esther Gilio's *Emergentes* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1986), pp. 75-82 (p. 81).

¹⁰¹ Mónica Zapata, 'Entre niños y adultos, entre risa y horror: Dos cuentos de Silvina Ocampo', *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 17 (1997), 345-61 (p. 347).

¹⁰² From his preface to the anthology *Faits divers de la Terre et du Ciel: Nouvelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974). Quoted in introduction to *La furia* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1982), p. 12.

¹⁰³ Helena Araújo, 'Ejemplos de la 'niña impura' en Silvina Ocampo y Alba Lucía Angel', *Hispanérica* 13.38 (1984), 27-35; Blas Matamoro, 'La nena terrible', in *Oligarquía y literatura* (Buenos Aires: Sol, 1975), pp. 193-221.

work, in that several of her cruel child protagonists are boys, as will be discussed with respect to 'El vendedor de estatuas'. Graciela Tomassini sees this cruel aspect of Ocampo's writing as the 'dēmitificación de la infancia' (*El espejo de Cornelia*, p. 38); Viviana Bermúdez-Arceo explains the cruelty in terms of revenge ('Las venganzas de la infancia'); Thomas Meehan attributes it to the gap of incomprehension separating the child world from the adult and Mónica Zapata interprets children's cruelty in Ocampo as agency for adult's desires, or as transgressing adult laws.¹⁰⁴ Most significantly, Pizamnik's short essay on Silvina Ocampo, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 4, applauds Ocampo's resolute 'refutación del espacio adulto' (*Obras*, pp. 415-21, p. 418), a description which accords with my view of her occupying the space of the younger sister.

Childish cruelty is Ocampo's way of pointing out that children mimic what they have, whether consciously or unconsciously, absorbed from their observations of adult behaviour, since at various points the adjective 'cruelmente' is also used by Ocampo to describe adult behaviour, for example in *Cuentos I*, p. 238. This hypothesis is proffered by Blas Matamoro, who – invoking Jean Cocteau – says that 'niños terribles' are a reaction to 'padres terribles' ('La nena terrible', p. 193). So too does Zapata: 'la impostura de los niños es más bien metonimia de la de los mayores' ('Entre niños y adultos', p. 357).

For all the seriousness of their play, Ocampo suggests that neither children nor adults really know what they are doing. The desolate and lonely child of the late cuento 'Átropos' is analysed with hindsight: 'No era fácil vivir en la soledad ausente del jardín ni en los cuadernos de primer grado o del jardín de infantes. Jugaba, pero jugaba con sabiduría, sin saber qué hacía, como nosotros escribimos sin saber qué escribimos' (*Cuentos II*, p. 329). Here, 'we' draws in the adult reader, forcing us to acknowledge that we, in reality, know no more than children. Where Borges might confound us with philosophical absurdities, Ocampo prefers to represent such paradoxes in microcosm, in terms of children's games.

Games III: Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man

An important part of children's games as represented in Ocampo's fiction is playing at being the other, a fantasy of escaping from one's normal social situation. Ocampo's world, largely personal and domestic, is set firmly within specific social classes. She is

¹⁰⁴ Thomas C. Meehan, 'Los niños perversos en los cuentos de Silvina Ocampo', in *Essays on Argentine Narrators* (Valencia: Albatros, 1982), pp. 31-44. Mónica Zapata, 'Entre niños y adultos, entre risa y horror'.

particularly interested in the ability of children to cross boundaries between these classes. Role-playing games which place the self in a different social class or situation recur in many of her stories, obviously influenced by reactions to her own privileged background and by fantasizing about a different kind of upbringing from her own. As a child, not only was Silvina fascinated by the servants' life, but also by the life of beggars who came to the house; this again marks a point of divergence from the childhood memories of Victoria. Porfiria's fantasy, expressed through the medium of her diary in 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal', is to be poor: '*Ser pobre, andar descalza, comer fruta verde, vivir en una choza con la mitad del techo roto, tener miedo, deben de ser las mayores felicidades del mundo.*' (*Cuentos I*, p. 464) That Ocampo's own childish fantasies were similar is clear from the strongly autobiographical poem 'La casa natal':

sólo me gustaba todo lo que era pobre,
 los harapos, los pies desnudos como el cobre.
 Mi dilección volaba en busca de ese niño
 que la indigencia ornaba de pulcro desaliño.
 Ese niño mendigo y hermoso que pedía
 azúcar, un pancito o un bol de leche fría.¹⁰⁵

We might set this romanticization of poverty in a more general aesthetic context by comparing 'Las dos casas de Olivos' to Baudelaire's 'Le jou-jou du pauvre'.¹⁰⁶ The protagonists of Ocampo's story are a rich girl and a poor one, and these two 'se hicieron amigas a través de la reja que rodeaba el jardín' (*Cuentos I*, p. 38). Ocampo translated some Baudelaire poetry and it is extremely likely that she would have known his prose poems. His authorial stance is far more black and ironic towards both the despicable

¹⁰⁵ 'La casa natal', in *Lo amargo por dulce*, pp. 83-84. In interview Ocampo corroborates this: 'ya le he dicho cómo admiraba la pobreza en mi infancia. Tenía para mí una aureola de pureza' (Gilio, p. 80). Silvina Ocampo also declared her fascination with poverty and beggars to Hugo Beccacece, saying that as a child she preferred them to 'gente muy peinada'. Beccacece (p. 15). Works such as 'Los enemigos de los mendigos' from *Cornelia frente al espejo* show clearly these sentimental affinities.

¹⁰⁶ From *Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987; first publ. 1862), pp. 112-13. 'Sur une route, derrière la grille d'un vaste jardin, au bout duquel apparaissait la blancheur d'un joli château frappé par le soleil, se tenait un enfant beau et frais, habillé de ces vêtements de campagne si pleins de coquetterie. Le luxe, l'insouciance et le spectacle habituel de la richesse, rendent ces enfants-là si jolis, qu'on les croirait faits d'une autre pâte que les enfants de la médiocrité ou de la pauvreté. À côté de lui, gisait sur l'herbe un joujou splendide, aussi frais que son maître, verni, doré, vêtu d'une robe pourpre, et couvert de plumets et de verroteries. Mais l'enfant ne s'occupait pas de son joujou préféré, et voici ce qu'il regardait:
 De l'autre côté de la grille, sur la route, entre les chardons et les orties, il y avait un autre enfant, sale, chétif, fuligineux, un de ces marmots-parias dont un oeil impartial découvrirait la beauté, si, comme l'oeil du connaisseur devine une peinture idéale sous un vernis de carrossier, il le nettoyait de la répugnante patine de la misère.

À travers ces barreaux symboliques séparant deux mondes, la grande route et le château, l'enfant pauvre montrait à l'enfant riche son propre joujou, que celui-ci examinait avidement comme un objet rare et inconnu. Or, ce joujou, que le petit souillon agaçait, agitait et secouait dans une boîte grillée, c'était un rat

rich and the humble poor than that of Ocampo, but both writers make much of the symbolism of the fence which divides the two children. The main attraction of poverty as viewed by Ocampo is the sense of freedom it affords, of not being stifled by possessions which can sometimes prove infernal, such as those in 'Los objetos' (*Cuentos I*, p. 224).

Fantasies of poverty predominate, but Ocampo also looks at the situation from the other side of the fence. See for example 'El Remanso' from *Viaje olvidado* (*Cuentos I*, p. 21) where Libia and Cándida, the daughters of the *estancia* steward, slip guiltily into the big house like thieves to try on the rich girls' clothes in front of their mirrors. Imagining themselves in that role, they subconsciously realize that they are crossing social boundaries which their parents cannot, and this expresses itself in the feeling of delight at escaping from their parents: 'Sentían un delicioso placer que las arrancaba de sus padres.' (p. 20)¹⁰⁷

Fantasizing about poverty is not the only attraction for Ocampo's young protagonists. Ocampo also explores erotic games in childhood, and in 'Albino Orma' she elaborates the Freudian notion that these are parallel to those of adulthood. This story is narrated by a woman who, as a child, played 'juegos inocentemente obscenos' (*Cuentos II*, p. 66) with a boy called Juan. These games 'eran tan complicados que sólo un niño podría entenderlos', so we are not given details, but they are exactly paralleled by her adult relationship with Albino Orma. The image of a child's swing is used to link the two experiences: 'Con él también viajé hasta el cielo en los columpios, pues el amor nos vuelve a la infancia'. (p. 66) Leonor Fini's *Escapulette III* beautifully captures this combination of childish game and eroticism seen from an adult viewpoint.

vivant! Les parents, par économie sans doute, avaient tiré le joujou de la vie elle-même. Et les deux enfants se riaient l'un à l'autre fraternellement, avec des dents d'une égale blancheur.'

¹⁰⁷ For a detailed analysis of this *cuento* see Santos-Phillips, pp. 33-36.

In 'Voz en el teléfono' eroticism is hinted at by the boy's fascination for what his mother and her friends are up to. He peeps through the keyhole and sees one woman unbuttoning her blouse to reveal an undergarment that is

transparente como una media de Navidad, pensé que tendría algún juguete y sentí deseos de meter la mano adentro. Hablaron de medidas: resultó que se trataba de un juego. Por turno se pusieron de pie. Elvira, que parecía una nena enorme, misteriosamente sacó de su cartera un centímetro. (*Cuentos I*, p. 273)

What the boy sees arouses sexual feelings in him, but he describes them using a more familiar discourse, that of toys and games. The likening of Elvira to an overgrown girl makes these adult games appear like a perversion of childish games.

It appears that Ocampo's exploration of games has had an impact on various subsequent Argentine women writers, in addition to that great gamer, Julio Cortázar. Various writers take up Ocampo's interest in exploring the feelings of the child at play; Liliana Heker (in her novel *Zona de clivaje*, and in various short stories) takes very seriously the child's view of the world. Mirta Corpa Vargas quotes Heker in interview with Erika Frouman-Smith:

recorriendo mi literatura puedo notar que los chicos aparecen, como figuras centrales, o al menos como un resplandor momentáneo que ilumina o refleja una conducta adulta [...] No creo en la infancia como paraíso ni como edad despreocupada y feliz. Pienso que es una etapa intensa y muchas veces desdichada ya que se viven en ella sentimientos incomunicables.¹⁰⁸

Heker's child protagonists have neither the words nor comparable past experience to act as a guide; adults, on the other hand, have both, yet have lost or forgotten the child's strongly idealistic sense of justice and highly developed capacity for fantasy. Vargas describes Heker's work as a 'tematización de la vida cotidiana a través de personajes infantiles' (p. 14), which is strikingly similar to that of Ocampo. Heker and her contemporaries are often aligned with Cortázar because of the undeniably huge impact of *Rayuela*, but I suggest that the importance of the game in late twentieth-century Argentine fiction owes a debt to Ocampo, following her aesthetic route as well as that of Cortázar.

A Separate World for Children: Paradise or Pandora's Box?

'Where children are, there is a golden age.'¹⁰⁹

'as sinister in its reduction as a doll's house.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Mirta Corpa Vargas, *Los cuentos de Liliana Heker: Testimonios de vida* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Novalis, from 'Miscellaneous Observations' in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 41.

¹¹⁰ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936; repr. 1979), p. 15.

Given that adults are generally seen by Ocampo as not understanding or spoiling children's games, it is worth looking more closely at Ocampo's treatment of the implied existence of a separate world for children. Ocampo certainly supplies an abundance of reasons for rejecting the adult world; the child's-eye view of adults given in 'Átropos' is dismal: 'Preveía los desencuentros, las malas costumbres, la maldad, ¿por qué no?, la falta de respeto por todo lo que no era ellos mismos.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 329) Adults are frequently seen as hypocritical (for example 'Celestino Abril') and their love as a grotesque distortion ('Los amantes') or a combination of hate and jealousy (see 'Amor', in which the female narrator confesses that 'mi marido no podía creer en mi inocencia, ni yo en la de él' (*Cuentos I*, p. 435)).

The idea of children being a separate race, as posited by Ocampo in 'La raza inextinguible' or operating within an independent community, is obviously not novel in literature; many seminal works of literature feature this, such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1955). Ocampo's 'Tales eran sus rostros' features a group of children who bond in a mysterious way, to the exclusion of the adults around. As it becomes apparent to each child that they all share the characteristic of being deaf-mute, the sense of belonging within this group of outwardly isolated individuals emerges. The children gain a collective identity by virtue of this bond, and a sense of communication between initiates: 'Por horrible que sea un secreto, compartido deja a veces de ser horrible, porque su horror da placer: el placer de la comunicación incesante.' (p. 310) The examples given to illustrate this bonding are fantastic: for instance, their clothes cluster together at night, they have the same dreams and in the art lesson they all draw the same thing. The sense of unity is fierce, and it is implied that they could stand up to anything the adult world might present them with: 'tan indisolublemente unidos, hubieran derrotado un ejército [...] el hambre, la sed, o el cansancio aplicado que extermina a las civilizaciones.' (p. 311) But at the dénouement the full poignancy of the children's identical drawings is revealed; the children drew wings in uncanny anticipation of their own death in a plane crash, where witnesses saw them fall from the sky with wings, like angels. A tragic twist, yet the narrator stresses the elusive beauty of the children's close bonding in describing the scene as one of 'intensa belleza' (p. 313). Ocampo chose this for the anthology *Mi mejor cuento* precisely because 'el protagonista es un secreto místico, un milagro colectivo, un multiplicado e infinito niño'.¹¹¹ The incessant communication which redeems their situation is perhaps the most pertinent aspect of a

shared child world for Ocampo. It is by no means a paradise, but the notion of bypassing mundane adult rationality and tapping into the fantastic, the extraordinary and above all the unexplained, is for her the over-riding characteristic of a child world.

In 'La raza inextinguible' Ocampo imagines a children-sized society, in which 'todo era perfecto y pequeño' (*Cuentos I*, p. 305). This story closes the collection *La furia*; its position as the concluding story was undoubtedly deliberate on the part of Ocampo, who took great care with the placing and arrangement of her stories.¹¹² The narrator first assumes that some highly developed race of pygmies inhabit this world,¹¹³ but he is corrected by a haggard child who explains that they 'play' at all the serious work, whilst their parents amuse themselves. 'Mientras ellos están sentados en sus casas [...] amando, odiando (pues son apasionados), nosotros jugamos a edificar, a limpiar, a hacer trabajos de carpintería, a cosechar, a vender.' (p. 305) In this explanation are contrasted the two activities Ocampo associates with the respective worlds; adults love and hate in equal measure and children play, but with great seriousness. The children fear adult impostors, who 'pretenden ser niños y no saben que cualquiera no lo es por una mera deficiencia de centímetros' (p. 306) and they also fear for the future of the race, as they are steadily diminishing in size and number. Ocampo seems to be suggesting that the children are assuming the weight of responsibility for forging a vision of the world which is 'más íntima y más humana', according to the closing line of the collection (p. 306), but

¹¹¹ *Mi mejor cuento* (Buenos Aires: Orión, 1974), p. 188. The difficulty of choosing a particular story is likened by Ocampo to moments of anguished indecision in the children's game 'Martín Pescador' (p. 187).

¹¹² See *Encuentros*, p. 101, where Silvina comments that in the same way that one's eye skips over certain parts of the page when speed-reading, so certain *cuentos* can go unnoticed if hidden away in a less prominent part of a collection.

¹¹³ Like the world imagined by Midgetina in Walter De la Mare's *Memoirs of a Midget* (London: Faber & Faber, 1921; repr. 1932): 'House, shop, church, high road, furniture, vehicles abandoned or shrunken to the pygmy size' (p. 42). This book may have been known to Ocampo; she was acquainted with De la Mare's work, having translated his poem 'All that's past' for the English anthology in *Sur*, 153-6.

perhaps at the cost of eventually disappearing into nothing.¹¹⁴ This child-sized world is not, however, a paradise. The children may be playing at work with tools, furniture and houses made to their size, but the seriousness of the game makes their life as fraught with misery and fear as that of adults. They too, as will be discussed in the following chapter, have the capacity for intense love and hate; the probable reality of a child world is vividly portrayed in Leonor Fini's ironically titled *Un accord parfait*, where the Goya-esque midget figures bear expressions of great seriousness in their singing, shouting or screaming. The image of Pandora's box frequently seems more appropriate, particularly for stories such as 'Carta perdida en un cajón', where the whole story is framed as a letter that was written then hidden and never sent, boiling over with frustrated resentment. Its grim conclusion is that

No hay niño desdichado que después sea feliz: adulto podrá ilusionarse en algún momento, pero es un error creer que el destino pueda cambiarlo. Podrá tener vocación por la dicha o por la desdicha, por la virtud o por la infamia, por el amor o por el odio. El hombre lleva su cruz desde el principio. (p. 238)

Such a statement could apply to Ocampo's aesthetic generally; it would be vain to attempt to keep childhood as a separate world, since within it are contained all the seeds of adult suffering. Children's games anticipate everything including social division, eroticism and death. Indeed, Ocampo does not try to keep it as a separate world, preferring to explore the imaginative possibilities both of apprehension and nostalgia. Even in 'La raza inextinguible', the races are not kept separate; adults are seen trying to infiltrate childhood.

Ocampo thus maps out for herself a rich area of exploration distinct from that of either the dominant elder sister, Victoria, or her 'compañeros de juegos' Borges and Bioy Casares. This exploration covers the overlap and superimposition of the not-so-distinct worlds of childhood and adulthood; the aging process, the imitations, initiations and the nostalgia. Chapter 2 will examine in more detail all these aspects of childhood in Ocampo's works.

¹¹⁴ Such an apocalypse is also envisioned in the futuristic fantastic story 'El banquete' from *Cornelia frente al espejo* where Dr Chiksa's plan is to 'disminuir la estatura de los hombres por un proceso parecido al de los arbolitos japoneses' (*Cuentos II*, p. 292).

Chapter 2: Childhood in Silvina Ocampo

Youth and Age I: Nostalgia or Terror?

‘El niño es dueño de un orden autónomo [...] frente al cual sólo nos queda a los adultos la nostalgia.’¹
 ‘Childhood quickly fleets away. Those happy, unhappy, faraway days.’ (*Memoirs of a Midget*, p. 29)

Enrique Pezzoni’s observation in the first of these quotations presents us with that most poignant of all emotions which an adult experiences when re-imagining childhood: nostalgia. Ocampo’s lifelong fascination with the world of children might lead one to suppose that this emotion would colour her works, but this is predominantly not the case.² Pezzoni’s remark, it should be remembered, was made in an introduction to one of Ocampo’s works written for children; Pezzoni’s nostalgia is an adult’s reaction to the hermetic world conjured up by these stories, rather than an intrinsic element of them. Nostalgia is present in Ocampo’s works, but she observes that childhood is too often seen through rose-tinted spectacles: ‘hay como una especie de romanticismo que se relaciona con la infancia’ and she is careful to set out her own position thus: ‘parece un gran privilegio ser chico, un privilegio y una desdicha’ (*Encuentros*, p. 27), stressing – as does De la Mare in the second quotation above – that childhood is at once a privilege and a source of unhappiness with its own peculiar miseries. Rather than indulging in nostalgia *per se*, she prefers to scrutinize how the functioning of memory generates nostalgia, and speculate on how an awareness of this process alters the nature of experience. Such scrutiny can be seen in the Proustian questioning of poems such as ‘Los días perdidos’.³

¡Qué haré, días perdidos, con vosotros! [...]
 qué haré con vuestra disimilitud
 que distinguí sin duda en un momento. [...]
 Días que me parecen hoy tan bellos,
 tan vacíos y lisos y perfectos.[...]
 ¿Qué haré para recuperar la dicha
 que no supe encontrar en vuestras horas?[...]

¹ Enrique Pezzoni, in his introduction to Ocampo’s *La naranja maravillosa* (Buenos Aires: Orión, 1977), p. 9.

² Francis Korn insists that Ocampo herself was not in the least nostalgic. Private interview 28 July 2000.

³ Ocampo had read Proust, as had most educated Argentines of her generation, although Borges was scathing about Proust, saying that there are chapters by him to which ‘nos resignamos como a lo insípido y ocioso de cada día.’ In prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares, *La invención de Morel* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1940). Ocampo’s reaction, along with that of José Bianco, was much more favourable; indeed she names Proust as her favourite prose author. See ‘Silvina Ocampo responde a Proust’, p. 3 and Herbert E. Craig, ‘Proust en España y en hispanoamérica: La recepción 1920-1929’, *Bulletin Hispanique*, 101.1 (1999), 175-85: ‘durante la segunda mitad de los años veinte los jóvenes argentinos experimentaron la lectura de la *Recherche* como una gran acción colectiva. Recibieron su último tomo, *Le temps retrouvé*, con los brazos abiertos.’ (p. 180) Ocampo alludes to Proust in her ode ‘A Francia en 1942’, where she mentions ‘de Marcel Proust las páginas del tiempo que se obstina’ (*Enumeración*, p. 142), deliberately changing the emphasis from time fleeting to time persisting.

¿Qué haré con vuestra interminable infancia [...]?

Si no concuerdan con las cerraduras

¿qué haré, qué haré con todas vuestras llaves? (*Lo amargo por dulce*, pp. 37-38)

Proust's is perhaps not the only shadow over this poem. Ana María Chouhy Aguirre, a promising Argentinian poet who died tragically young of tuberculosis, left behind various unpublished poems written from 1938 onwards, which were published posthumously as *Los días perdidos*.⁴ The two poets knew one another, and exchanged copies of their books. Ocampo puts a footnote to her own poem 'Los días perdidos' saying that she thinks it may originally have begun life as a translation from English; I suggest, rather, that the title of Chouhy Aguirre's volume, and indeed the poignancy of the entire collection, is lurking in her memory. The poignancy of this particular poem lies in the fact that the poet cannot, in one sense, 'do' anything with lost days; they are gone, irrecoverable. In this truism lies all the pathos of nostalgia. Remembering them, they are 'réels sans être actuels'.⁵ The poet's rhetorical questions implicitly lament the way in which later remembrance homogenizes childhood days.⁶ The passing of time smooths out differences, blurring the individuality of days; to retain the 'dissimilarities' would bring them closer. It is interesting that Ocampo uses 'días' as opposed to Proust's more general 'tiempos'; this is symptomatic of Ocampo's tendency always towards the particular instance, which sometimes verges on the whimsical or anecdotal. But why should the poet describe childhood as interminable? In the slightly negative connotations of this single adjective Ocampo succeeds in fusing momentarily adult and child perspective: the child's eagerness for the perceived freedom and independence which comes with being older (making childhood seem interminable) and the adult's sensation that childhood feelings persist despite the gradual merging and loss of individual days. The paradox of wishing to recapture a happiness that she was not aware of at the time is Ocampo's way of representing the workings of nostalgia, and results in the heart-felt cry of the final two lines. It seems that unlike Proust's moments of childhood recall, which are 'quelque chose d'analogue à une jolie phrase', and can therefore be transmuted into art, Ocampo's wealth of keys (stressed by the word 'todas') still cannot unlock childhood; what they can open is the way to understanding nostalgia. This backward glance towards childhood is poignantly captured by Monet's painting,

⁴ *Los días perdidos* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1947).

⁵ Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927; repr. 1990), p. 179.

⁶ Contrast the poem 'La tarde desdeñada', from *Espacios métricos*, where precisely the sense of having no individual memories of it recaptures one such day from oblivion: 'No quedan en memoria de aquel día / una palabra, una fotografía ... / nada que pueda ahora repetir, / y esa nada persiste en subvertir / aquella forma de mi indiferencia / en el ámbito férvido de ausencia.' (p. 144)

Un coin d'appartement, which Silvina analyses in a letter to José Bianco, June 5 1949.⁷ 'El alma de ese niño no está sólo en su figura, está en las plantas, en la enredadera trémula, en el piso lustroso que se aleja, finalmente en aquel cuarto oscuro donde el niño acaba de salir para mostrarnos el camino.'

We can compare 'Los días perdidos' to 'A mi infancia' from *Amarillo celeste*. As in the first poem, where the poet addressed these lost childhood days as 'vosotros', here 'Infancia' is addressed as 'tú'. The elaborate play of tenses involved in nostalgia, the necessity of the retrospective glance to activate nostalgic feelings, is here viewed from the reverse perspective, from beforehand:

Si pudiera llevarte de la mano
a ese lugar que más te ha ensombrecido
verías la alegría que ha existido
y lo maravilloso de antemano. (p. 88)

If the poet were able to lead her childhood by the hand into the future, that is, into the here and now of writing and precisely that time which has most overshadowed her childhood, this perspective would allow a glimpse of the happiness which childhood acquires, seen in retrospect; an almost Borgesian mindgame, except that the poignancy of 'lo maravilloso de antemano' reaches beyond mindgames into the soul. In a move analogous to the Monet painting, Ocampo changes temporal relations for spatial ones, making the future a 'lugar' rather than a 'tiempo'. Compare the musings of Walter De la Mare's 'midgetina' who realizes 'how much less afflicting at times would my present have been if I had had the foresight to remind myself how beguiling it would appear as the past.' (*Memoirs of a Midget*, p. 170) The impossibility of giving the childhood self hindsight is dramatized in the late *cuento* 'La lección de dibujo', where the narrator's younger self speaks to the older: 'Yo nunca pude amarte. No sabía cómo eras.' (p. 168) From the perspective of the present, one can only love earlier versions of the self, never later ones. It is this enforced chronology linked to nostalgia which Ocampo's works not only dissect but also challenge, as will be discussed later.

⁷ In a nice thematic parallel, the picture also features as the front cover of the Flammarion edition of Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).

The disease of nostalgia seems to be afflicting the convalescent patient of 'El corredor ancho de sol', who remembers 'un hotel de Francia [...] en donde había pasado protestando los días que ahora le parecían más felices de su vida.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 48) Such nostalgic reinterpretation of events takes the form of a malaise, a sense of dis-ease, precisely when the patient is returning to health: 'Se sintió enferma el día de su convalecencia.' (p. 48) Ocampo delights in these paradoxes which communicate through physical manifestations deep psychological anguish about aging and mortality. As the patient muses on this distant hotel in France, it is objects around which serve as the sensory bridge to the past; the linoleum in both rooms is the same, and the food which is being brought to the patient has 'gusto a infancia' (p. 49).

Feelings of nostalgia activated by food are deeply Proustian. So too are the associations of smells, beautifully captured in Ocampo's 'Epitafio de un aroma' which hinges on the word 'falaz': 'infinitos serán en la memoria / los complejos caminos del perfume; también será infinita la falaz / reaparición de todos los momentos' (*Enumeración*, p. 116). In Ocampo, it is as frequently clothes which act as a trigger to memory. Juan Pack's fiancée in 'Nocturno' keeps one dress which has become a repository of memories of her childhood home and life: 'En los pliegues era seguro que llevaba las amapolas del jardín, las sillitas verdes de fierro, las cuatro palmeras y las siestas estiradas en los cuartos húmedos de la casa vieja.' (p. 51)

Belonging to a generation in which clothes still clearly delineated age, and in which the move from childhood to adolescence and adulthood was reflected in dress, Ocampo is highly aware of the powerful associations of clothes.⁸ Alicia Carletti's painting *Percal* illustrates this, the word 'percal' signifying a particular kind of fabric, but emphasizes

⁸ Andrea Ostrov explores in several articles how cloth and clothes can be constitutive of identity in Ocampo. See 'Silvina Ocampo: La identidad en cuestión', in *Nuevos territorios de la literatura latinoamericana*, ed. by Sylvia Iparraguirre and Jorge Monteleone (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1997), pp. 273-79; 'Vestidura / escritura / sepultura en la narrativa de Silvina Ocampo', *Hispanamérica*, 25.74 (1996), 21-28; 'Género, tela y texto en la escritura de Silvina Ocampo', *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 17 (1997), 301-08.

the girl's move forward into adolescence by the presence of heeled shoes and the backdrop of giant eroticized flowers, rather than nostalgia through childhood clothes.

Just as pleasant memories of childhood may be stored in this way, however, so too may childhood phobias and anxieties be preserved in all their original horror, to be violently released through the medium of dreams. Ocampo half-ironically comments to Ulla that 'los recuerdos son como los sueños, uno los arma cuando se despierta, dicen los psicoanalistas' (*Encuentros*, p. 65). This is perhaps the 'interminable' side of childhood which persists despite outward maturity. The wardrobe in Lucía's room takes on a significant role in 'Nocturno' as the repository of Juan Pack's dreams, nightmares and paranoias and the focal point of all the strange noises of the night. Pack's dreams are regressive, 'un sueño blando de infancia' (p. 50), and he spends 'noches de dormir como un niño' (p. 50);⁹ however he also has nightmares which centre on being trapped in the mesh of a cobweb-like tennis net inside Lucía's wardrobe. Lucía recalls the painful stage of early adolescence when seeing others people's weddings was torture; one such memory of her sister's wedding is 'relegada bien al fondo de su infancia'

(p. 50) but deeply felt, and embedded in the dress she saves. Her nightmare is also to do with a net, this time a butterfly-catching net, which is put over her head by the servant's daughter, paradoxically preventing her future fiancé from seeing her. 'No se conocen, se miran siempre de lejos.' (p. 51) In their enmeshed yet separate dreams they are like the lovers in the painting *Les Amants* by the Belgian surrealist painter, René Magritte. The

wardrobe houses a mystery for Juan, which is intimately bound up with his childhood. It apparently reminds him of the broom cupboard where 'se escondían de chicos jugando "a la operación de apendicitis", "al cuarto oscuro"'. (p. 52, original punctuation) That details of these games, particularly of the latter, are not given, creates an aura of still-repressed terror. The quotation marks are suggestive of ritual phrases which are keys to unlock tortured memories. Indeed, the final image in the story is of fear personified, which grabs Pack from the depths of this dark space and 'le sonríe grande y adulto como un monstruo' (p. 52). This incredibly powerful vision, with all the vividness of a

⁹ There is an interesting parallel to this in Ocampo's letter to Angélica of 30 January 1970, where she says 'suelo tener esos sueños con una angustia de niña.'

nightmare, looms out of the depths of the unconscious; the association between adult and monstrous is deeply disturbing to the child in Juan. Thus Ocampo explores how contact with the childhood self can reawaken old terrors as much as generating nostalgia. The reference to a Surrealist painting is not casual; Ocampo was familiar with Surrealist painting, having studied with De Chirico in Paris. Noemí Ulla comments on the abundance of visual references in the collection from which this story comes.¹⁰ De Chirico stated that 'if a work of art is to be truly immortal, it must pass quite beyond the limits of the human world, without any sign of common sense and logic. In this way the work will draw nearer to dream and to the mind of a child.'¹¹ This prioritizing of dream and the mind of a child has undoubtedly left its mark on Ocampo.¹² De Chirico's painting of the head and torso of a man, entitled *The Brain of the Child*, suggests from a productive disjunction between word and image that the child governs the adult, which is an idea also raised by Ocampo.

Youth and Age II: The Child Teaching the Adult

'A child is far cleverer and wiser than an adult.'¹³

'los niños – maduros – son más sabios – la mayoría'.¹⁴

In the poem 'A mi infancia' considered above, the poet vainly wishes to give her childhood self the benefit of hindsight in order to bestow on childhood days, at the actual moment in which they are being lived, the preciousness they will later acquire. Accepting the futility and impossibility of such an enterprise, in the final six lines of this poignant sonnet the adult poet indicates her willingness instead to be led where her childhood wishes to take her, and to be shown in sleepless moments the child's games and emotions. The importance Ocampo ascribes to children's games has already been

¹⁰ 'Lo que rápidamente puede advertirse en los cuentos de *Viaje olvidado* (1937) [...] es el inevitable referente del contexto artístico de los años veinte [...] El desarrollo de los cuentos revela la enigmática fantasía que el cubismo y el surrealismo pictórico despertaron en la agradecida alumna de Giorgio de Chirico.' Ulla, 'La música y la plástica' (p. 408).

¹¹ Quoted in Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970; repr. 1991), p. 58.

¹² Even as early as 1958, Alfredo Roggiano, in his *Diccionario de literatura lationamericana*, describes Ocampo's work as being 'basado en la búsqueda de la verdad psíquica del subconsciente' (Washington: Unión Panamericana, 1958), p. 348, and she herself claims that any cruelty in her stories comes from her 'mundo onírico, que es paradójal'. Mempo Giardinelli, 'Entrevista con Silvina Ocampo', pp. 1-6.

¹³ Novalis, from the 'General Draft', in *Philosophical Writings*, p. 126.

¹⁴ Emily Dickinson, Poem 503, in *Poemas*, trans. by Silvina Ocampo (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1985), p. 133.

discussed in the previous chapter, and the child's emotions she lists include persistent crime, pursuit of chimeras, precocious jealousy and incestuous love. Ocampo thus goes beyond the drive of nostalgia (which romanticizes childhood) by highlighting the complex and painful emotions of childhood, and beyond that of regret (which wishes to have childhood again with the benefit of hindsight) and comes to a state of receptiveness in which she recognizes that the child self can in some sense lead the adult.

Ocampo's work allows the child to lead the adult by frequently challenging the paradigm of the wisdom of experience; the aforementioned story 'La lección de dibujo' is a case in point.¹⁵ In the fantastic narrative situation presented here of the protagonist coming face to face with her childhood self, it is the child who predominates over the adult. We are implicitly encouraged to read both selves as having a link with Ocampo in that the child's pseudonym is Ani Vlis, which is Silvina backwards. This verbal retrogression of Silvina, playing games with herself in name as well as in time is perhaps in the spirit of Borges, but has more emotional as well as philosophical overtones. The child challenges the adult: 'Yo te enseñé a dibujar de otro modo' (p. 164), and claims that 'todo lo que aprendiste te lo enseñé' (p. 168). The child has gone through the disillusionment of having her drawings misunderstood and misinterpreted by adults, as does Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince when trying to make adults see his sheep inside a box. The process of trying to make adults see again with a child's eyes mirrors that used by adults to teach children, thus acting out an exact reversal of roles: 'Como se les enseña a los niños, con el índice indicando cada cosa con su nombre, mostraba a las personas mayores mis cuadros. Lo que me daba más trabajo era hacerles entender que las sombras no eran pelos y la luz hinchazón.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 166)

Ocampo also delights in playing with the child-innocent, adult-knowing paradigm in 'Esperanza en Flores', where childhood innocence is seen, on one level, to be purely an adult's self-delusion; here it is the adult who is apparently innocent. The boy Florián pretends to be cross-eyed to get more money begging, but the guileless woman, Esperanza (we might think vain hope) 'no sabía ese teje maneje, creía en la virtud azul de los ojos de Florián, en sus diez años, en su timidez, en su voz quejosa ejercitada en pedir limosnas.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 13) Florián is fully aware of Esperanza's

¹⁵ For another in-depth study of the wisdom of children, see Annick Mangin's reading of the story 'Magush' from *La furia*: 'Dans ce conte, comme dans 'La sibila' [...] c'est l'enfant qui sait, qui a le don de voyance, qui a la sagesse et la connaissance et c'est l'adulte qui apprend, qui s'initie et qui raconte. La

delusion, and therefore cannily keeps certain information from her which would otherwise tarnish her virtuous image of him. However, Ocampo introduces another level of irony with respect to youthful innocence; Florián is still naïve as regards his sisters' jobs as prostitutes in that he wonders '¿Qué virtud tan extraordinaria tenían sus hermanas?' (p. 15) that they should have so many male visitors. Here the reader can enjoy a plural narrative voice in which Florián's innocent questioning is overlaid by the adult's appreciation of the irony on 'virtud'. Such superimposition of child and adult viewpoints is a recurrent feature of Ocampo's texts, and will be analysed in more detail with reference to 'La casa de los relojes'. As I pointed out in the Introduction, part of Ocampo's seductive charm is her ability to shift perceptively (and sometimes imperceptibly) between child and adult viewpoints.

Youth and Age III : The Child Threatening the Adult

'Hay niños que fingen pactar con el orden adulto. Pero en los cuentos de Silvina Ocampo, esos niños extreman la argucia.'¹⁶

As well as portraying adults who are more innocent than children, Ocampo frequently presents us with adults who are in awe of children, feeling uncomfortable or threatened in their presence; she also creates children who are aware of their obscure hold and control over adults. The governess Miss Harrington, sensing the powerful bond which binds the three girls in 'El caballo muerto' 'se sintió más chica que sus discípulos: no sabía nada de geografía, no podía acordarse de ningún dato histórico' (*Cuentos I*, p. 22). The insecure adult seeks refuge in historical data, as if this ostensible order to the world will give her power and authority, and keep the chaotic emotional world of the adolescents at bay. At the conclusion of the story, when the three girls are no longer emotionally united, Miss Harrington recovers the security of her position with historical facts: 'Miss Harrington, que estaba recogiendo datos históricos, se sonrió por encima de su libro al verlas llegar.' (p. 23) Miss Harrington's feelings of inadequacy result from a situation that is entirely unspoken but powerfully sensed, a secret bond between the three girls like the 'incessant communication' discussed at the end of Chapter 1.

In 'El vendedor de estatuas' the establishment of an equilibrium between child and adult is more violently achieved; a secret enmity exists between the child, Tirso, and the statue seller, Octaviano, and the only possible *dénouement* of the child's repeated persecution is Octaviano's death. There is something demonic about the child, since Ocampo does not present any logical reason for his persecution of Octaviano; she

relation traditionnelle enfant/adulte est inversée. C'est l'enfant qui initie l'adulte, qui le conseille et qui le protège contre les mauvaises expériences que lui réserve le destin.' (*Temps et écriture*, p. 195)

merely portrays the child's instant dislike for him and ruthless persistence in making his life unbearable. 'No era un chico travieso, y sin embargo una secreta enemistad los unía. Para el vendedor de estatuas aún el beso de un chico era una travesura peligrosa; les tenía el mismo miedo que se les tiene a los payasos y a las mascaritas.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 58)

It is particularly revealing that they should be described as being united precisely by a feeling of mutual enmity. Such yoking together of apparently opposing forces appears time and time again in Ocampo's works; one need only look at the titles of many of her published books (for example *Lo amargo por dulce*, *Los que aman odian*, *Informe del cielo y del infierno*) to see her peculiar delight in exploring the paradoxical coexistence of extreme love and hate. In this story as in many others there exists an apparent boundary between the child's world and the adult, but unlike 'Extraña visita', it is the adult who feels uncomfortable and threatened. The master-slave relationship that is so often portrayed in Ocampo's stories here casts the child in the more dominant role.¹⁷ Indeed, the behaviour of the statue seller seems more like that of a child in that he treats his statues as companions, showing a childlike level of fantasy: 'antes de dormirse les decía disimuladamente buenas noches a sus estatuas.'

(*Cuentos I*, p. 58) The fact that he does this covertly suggests that he is ashamed of being seen behaving in a manner so eccentric for an adult. His desire to conceal this behaviour is perhaps the cause of the child's instinctive enmity; were he to enter whole-heartedly into the world of fantasy as would a child – or a madman – he might earn the boy's admiration. His submissiveness to social decorum earns him instead the boy's scorn. The boy persecutes him by kicking his chair repeatedly at mealtimes 'con perversidad malabarista' (p. 58). The

choice of adjective, whilst obviously suggesting the child's adroitness at swinging on his own chair, echoes the fears of the statue seller who fears the boy as he would clowns

¹⁶ Enrique Pezzoni, in prologue to *La furia y otros cuentos* (1982 edition), p. 21.

or masks. The boy is thus semantically associated with the carnivalesque, like Leonor Fini's children of the painting *Les Enfants justiciers*, inhabiting a world outside normal social rules and which defies their authority. The reversal of adult-child roles is further reinforced by Octaviano's attitude at mealtimes: 'Cuando terminaron de comer, Octaviano se levantó como un chico en penitencia, sin postre – él, que hubiera deseado que Tirso se quedara sin postre.' (p. 59).

The threat posed by Tirso is ultimately magnified into a 'fuerza de gigante' when Octaviano is shutting his bedroom door; such paranoia is like that which a child would exhibit, imagining ogres in the dark. It echoes Juan Pack's monstrous fear, discussed earlier. The imbalance of this bizarre master-slave relationship is exacerbated by the fact that Octaviano does not give Tirso the resistance that he requires. Instead of confronting Tirso about the graffiti on the statues, he merely erases them, thus denying Tirso's presence. The child knows no limits except those posed by adult rules, so in a situation where the adult recoils in fear and loathing, there is no boundary to the child's malice. As discussed in the section on games in Chapter 1, the child will not impose his own limits if the adult does not do so.

The most notorious and frequently-analysed story by Ocampo which deals with the subject of a child threatening and exerting power over an adult is 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal' from the collection *Las invitadas*.¹⁸ Miss Fielding's testimonial narrative, which is announced in smaller letters as the sub-title of the story 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal: Relato de Miss Antonia Fielding', underlines a familiar Ocampo theme when she declares in the preamble to her tale: 'No suponía que los niños fueran capaces de infligir desilusiones más amargas que las personas mayores' (*Cuentos I*, p. 454). Once again, Ocampo is setting out to challenge preconceived ideas about the 'niceness' of children. Porfiria's relationship to Miss Fielding is indisputably a threatening one; the governess admits as much: 'Durante muchos meses, Porfiria me amenazó con la lectura de su diario' (p. 459) and like the relationship between Tirso and Octaviano, this pairing

¹⁷ The master-slave relationship in Ocampo is discussed in detail by Adriana Mancini in 'Amo y esclavo: Una relación eficaz', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 575 (1998), 73-86.

¹⁸ There are several excellent studies of different aspects of this story. See for example Annick Mangin's analysis of its temporal complexity in Chapter 1 of *Temps et écriture* or Guillermina Walas' focus on female identity, 'La mirada en la escritura: Identidades femeninas en *Personas en la sala* de Norah Lange y 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal' de Silvina Ocampo', *Cuadernos para Investigación de la Literatura Hispánica*, 21 (1996), 159-70. Walas views the relationship between child and governess as a kind of mutual vigilance and complicity mediated through Porfiria's diary: 'El diario es [...] el "objeto clandestino" que hermana a la niña con la institutriz pues traza entre ambas un lazo de complicidad.' (p. 163) The child is associated with transgression: 'En el diario la niña dejará de ser discípula para ejercer el gobierno de su mundo, mundo de la transgresión, de una mentirosa fantasía que caprichosamente se irá haciendo realidad para Miss Fielding.' (p. 164) Her diary, usually a 'minor' form of text in literary terms, 'vencerá sobre el discurso más racional y "público" de Miss Fielding' (p. 165).

is united in a secret and dangerous way: ‘me parecía que un secreto ya nos unía: un secreto peligroso, indisoluble, inevitable.’ (p. 459) The teacher-pupil role is reversed; Porfiria is in control, and she suspects that Miss Fielding resents her as a bad pupil resents her teachers: ‘*Me guarda el rencor [...] de los malos discípulos por sus maestros.*’ (p. 471, original italics)

In the opening passage, the Society for Psychical Research is mentioned.¹⁹ Miss Fielding indicates that her fascination with the work of this society dates back to a childhood memory of her grandfather, but she then forcibly draws her narrative into line, as if acting like the castigating governess on herself. ‘No quiero detenerme en ínfimas anécdotas de la infancia, sin duda superfluas.’ (p. 453) The coy and subtly-inserted words ‘sin duda’ are often a signal in Ocampo’s texts for something which is not at all certain. The word ‘seguramente’ is also used in this way; see my discussion of ‘La boda’ at the end of this chapter. Rather than being superfluous, this childhood anecdote is symptomatic of Miss Fielding’s receptiveness to psychic phenomena, and to what will be the compelling seduction of Porfiria’s diary. Porfiria’s own malicious caprice is lured on by the pleasure of narrative, of foretelling, prescribing an ending then watching it unfold.²⁰ ‘Es como si una voz me dictara las palabras de este diario: la oigo en la noche, en la oscuridad desesperada de mi cuarto. Puedo ser cruel, pero esta voz lo puede infinitamente más que yo. Temo el desenlace, como lo temerá Miss Fielding.’ (p. 171). The power of being able to predict the future, to dictate it, is heady. In this instance of a cruel child dictating the future to a helpless adult, we see an example of Ocampo’s forcible reversal of the adult-nostalgia trope, exchanging it for that of child-determination, the child leading the adult in no uncertain terms.

Perhaps Miss Fielding’s gravest mistake lies in her attitude to children. She confesses to having initially a romantic view of her job as a governess, since she regards herself as friends with children, ‘como si tuviéramos yo y los niños la misma edad y los mismos gustos’ (p. 454). Assuming a relationship of equals arouses enmity and suspicion on the part of Porfiria and leaves the governess neither in the children’s territory, nor fully in the adults’; indeed, Porfiria’s mother regards her as ‘una niña

¹⁹ This society, still in existence since the publication of its first committee report in 1885, strove to investigate the evidence for ‘marvellous phenomena’ offered by certain members of the Theosophical Society. These ‘marvellous phenomena’ include thought-transference, telepathy, projections of a double and Mesmerism. Such theories may well have been circulating in Buenos Aires at that time, along with popularization of Freudian ideas.

²⁰ Compare the desires of Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre’s *La Nausée*, who wishes that his life could have this kind of narrative drive in which ‘[la fin] est là, invisible et présente [...] qui transforme tout’ (p. 65). He, of course, has to make the existential decision to ‘vivre ou raconter’ (p. 64), whereas Miss Fielding is drawn into Porfiria’s narrative and has no choice but to live what is dictated by the narrative.

tímida, sin experiencia y sin carácter' (p. 456) despite the fact that she is thirty years old and has been like a mother to her orphaned siblings. At the root of her estrangement from Bernal mother and daughter alike is her untenable position, knowing as she does the secrets of the house (the mother is having an affair, see pp. 462, 468-9) and being in love herself with Porfiria's elder brother, Miguel. Porfiria's vendetta thus has a psychological 'explanation' if we care to read between the lines, but Ocampo presents the narrative in such a way that this explanation seems weak in comparison with the driving fictional force of the self-fulfilling diary entries and the child's belief in the power of her writing.

Through this story and those discussed above, Ocampo relishes re-defining the roles between children and adults, portraying the ways in which their power relationships can shift. Ocampo's treatment of the relationship between youth and age, between childhood and adult, extends to seeing youth and age as superimposed and co-existent in a person.

Childhood and Second Childhood

'Recuerdo mi niñez / cuando yo era una anciana' (Pizarnik, *Obras*, p. 54)

'Nacemos viejísimos, viejísimos. Me impresionan mucho los recién nacidos, lo viejos que son.' (*Encuentros*, p. 117)

'Si los viejos parecen disfrazados, los niños también.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 295)

'No hay diferencia entre el viejo y el niño. El viejo y el niño son iguales.' (*Cuentos II*, p. 365).

The latter bold declaration of the equality of the child and the old person is the penultimate phrase published by Ocampo in her lifetime. It is one of her most categorical statements on the subject of youth and age, and comes from an extraordinary and highly personal prose piece entitled 'Anotaciones', almost too fragmentary to be termed a *cuento* , in which the narrative persona is intimate and confessional. The tone of the piece communicates the urgency and anxiety of a person in the last stages of life, who imagines the day of her death as a return to Venice and a renunciation of ages, objects and experiences held most dear:

Iré corriendo por la plaza San Marco, por todas las edades, y no me reconoceré en ningún espejo, por mucho que me busque [...] No seré una niña de siete años, ni una joven de quince, ni una columna de la iglesia, ni un caballo de mármol, ni una rosa de estuco, ni una muñeca de 1880 [...] No veré los cisnes de mi infancia nadando en un lago de San Isidro [...] ni el precioso bosque de madre selvas asesinas, que se comen los árboles. (*Cuentos II*, p. 363)

This enumeration of images is a palimpsest of Ocampo's earlier work.²¹ Not recognizing herself in any mirror recalls 'La cara apócrifa', discussed in Chapter 1. The

²¹ As Patricia Nisbet Klingenberg observes, Ocampo also 'sets up an elaborate game of mirrors in which the author's previous works echo' in the title story of this collection, 'Cornelia frente al espejo' (*Fantasías*

objects she lists hark back to 'La muñeca', 'El caballo alado', 'El vendedor de estatuas' and 'Epitafio de una rosa'. The swans recall 'El Impostor' and San Isidro has numerous autobiographical resonances; the idea of honeysuckle assassinating a tree echoes 'Hombres, animales, enredaderas' and 'Los árboles'. The early poem 'Plegaria de una señora del Tigre' from *Enumeración* had evoked Venice; in it, the canals of the Tigre delta – mixed with those of Venice – would inhabit the poet's dreams after her death. (*Enumeración*, p. 29) Venice was also represented as a place full of nostalgic reminiscence in one of Ocampo's earliest short stories, 'El vestido verde aceituna' in which the narrow streets of Venice were characterized as 'de cementerio' (*Cuentos I*, p. 17). These thematic reflections back to early works in which Venice already had shades of death has the effect of bridging the gap between Ocampo's late works and those of her youth. The confessional voice reiterates love for 'A.B.C.' (an obvious reference to Ocampo's husband, Adolfo Bioy Casares, with whom she visited Venice in 1949) whilst associating both the loved one and her own childhood with boats which advance and retreat randomly.²² 'Los barcos de mi infancia aquí están. ¿Saldrán? ¿Cuándo? Cuando no piense en ellos...' (p. 364) Ocampo thus creates a fabric which weaves together many aspects of her life serendipitously into the present moment and which draws into one early and late works; this interweaving perhaps also contributes to the sensation of 'curiosa atemporalidad' Jorge Torres Zavaleta comments upon with regard to Silvina. ('Infinitamente, Silvina', p. 6)

Such close correspondence between early and later life occurs within individual texts on a thematic level, thus further supporting the prefatory quotation that there is no difference between the old and the young. Many of Silvina Ocampo's characters are seen to be at once old and essentially young. The apparently ageless Miss Hilton of 'El vestido verde aceituna' is emblematic of Silvina Ocampo's view that an element of the child always survives in everyone:

No tenía ninguna edad y uno creía sorprender en ella un gesto de infancia, justo en el momento en que se acentuaban las arrugas más profundas de la cara y la blancura de las trenzas. Otras veces uno creía sorprender en ella una lisura de muchacha joven y un pelo muy rubio, justo en el momento en que se acentuaban los gestos intermitentes de la vejez. (*Cuentos I*, p. 16)

of the *Feminine*, p. 228). The seven deadly sins are listed, for instance (*Cuentos II*, p. 228) echoing 'Las invitadas'. This fact is also noted by Graciela Tomassini: 'se parecen los cuentos de esta última etapa a los textos primerizos de *Viaje olvidado*. [...] Los personajes infantiles, tan frecuentes en las ficciones de Ocampo [...] regresan aquí como fantasmas, o como "dobles".' In 'La paradoja de la escritura: Los dos últimos libros de Silvina Ocampo', *Anales de la Literatura Hispanoamericana*, 21 (1992), 377-86 (pp. 379-80); see also Tomassini, *El espejo de Cornelia*, p. 14.

²² 'Estoy en el hotel Danieli, donde paramos en el 49'. Letter dated Venice, 3 November 1967, from Bioy to Silvina and his daughter Marta. In Adolfo Bioy Casares, *En viaje (1967)*, ed. by Daniel Martino (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1997), p. 180.

Although gestures and features combine to create this illusion of youth in age, Ocampo counters this by subtly suggesting the disparity between appearance to oneself and appearance to others. Miss Hilton's head, Janus-like, seems to have a Classical aspect with associations of unchanging youth and beauty when seen by herself in the mirror, but reveals its age and mortality viewed from behind by other people:

se había dejado peinar por las manos de catorce años de su discípula, y desde ese día había adoptado ese peinado de trenzas que le hacía, *vista de adelante y con sus propios ojos*, una cabeza griega; pero, *vista de espalda y con los ojos de los demás*, un barullo de pelos sueltos que llovían sobre la nuca arrugada. (p. 17, my emphasis)

Miss Hilton thus wills herself to be youthful through the agency of her young hairdresser, and through adopting childish plaits, but in such deliberate alteration of appearances there is an inevitable process of self-delusion. Ocampo again implicitly contrasts nostalgia with 'interminable' childhood; actively wishing to be young again is doomed, but receptiveness to the persistence of childhood emotions allows for serendipitous moments of youthfulness.

Ana María Bernal, mother of the infamous Porfiria, is similarly characterized as both young and old; her age, however, appears to depend on her mood and whim.

Nunca pude saber [...] la edad de Ana María Bernal: sólo supe que su edad dependía de la dicha o de la desventura que le traía cada momento. En un mismo día podía ser joven y envejecer con elegancia, como si la vejez o la juventud fueran para ella frivolidades, meras vestiduras intercambiables, de acuerdo a las necesidades del momento. (*Cuentos I*, p. 455)

As the second prefatory quotation to this section indicates, Ocampo's works suggest that age is not only dependent on receptiveness to younger emotions but also partly a matter of masks and disguise. The mirror in 'Cornelia frente al espejo' supports this view, claiming to have seen 'viejos sin arrugas [...] viejos decrepitos que parecían disfrazados, y niños viejísimos, niños lívidos que se hacían los niños.' (*Cuentos II*, pp. 228-29)

Ocampo not only glimpses the child in adults; 'Ulises' portrays a child who is given the physical attributes of old age, and also invested with qualities of wisdom. The six-year old Ulises has the appearance and attitudes of an old man, whilst the seventy-year old aunts who look after him behave like children, buying sweets, singing loudly and breaking everything in the house with their wild, careless behaviour. Their pleadings and threats are always barbed with references to age: '¿Acaso sos un viejo? [...] Si no te dormís vas a tener cara de viejo.' (p. 30) The irony of such jibes is that he

already has the face of an old man, as we hear from the narrator, who was a boyhood companion of Ulises:

Ulises fue compañero mío, en la escuela [...] Tenía seis años, uno menos que yo, pero parecía mucho mayor; la cara cubierta de arrugas (tal vez porque hacía muecas), dos o tres canas, los ojos hinchados, dos muelas postizas y anteojos para leer, lo convertían en viejo. Yo lo quería porque era inteligente y conocía muchos juegos, canciones y secretos que sólo saben las personas mayores.
(*Cuentos II*, p. 29)

The narrator of this story is evidently fascinated by Ulises; the latter's knowledge of grown-ups' games, songs and secrets invests him with a certain authority and power. The time framework of the narrative is interesting in that the narrator is obviously relating his awe in hindsight, overlaying reasons and possible explanations for the original fascination. He also reflects critically on the reader's – or his own? – possible scepticism about modifications produced by hindsight:

Este diálogo no parece que pudiera existir entre un niño de siete años y otro de seis, pero en mi memoria así ha quedado grabado y si los términos en que nos expresábamos no eran exactamente los mismos, el sentido que queríamos dar a nuestras palabras era exactamente el mismo (p. 30).

The conversation is etched on his memory, implying absolute fidelity of recall, yet fidelity to what may be an altered adult reconstruction of the sense. The narrator thus tacitly admits that no absolute fidelity is possible, and Ocampo subtly demonstrates the mechanism of memory and its process of transmutation. She also poses the question of whether or not an adult *can* really remember the intentions and meaning of the child that he was, if the words themselves – the language of the initiates – have been lost.

This idea of the language and meanings of childhood being different from those of adults is developed in the next stage of the story, in which Ulises decides he is fed up with being the way he is and seeks the solution through a book on oracles. Ulises has the knowledge and capability to negotiate the arcane system of finding answers in the book, yet the questions it poses are not those that a child wishes to ask.

El único inconveniente que había era que las preguntas no eran las que suelen hacer los niños, de modo que en su mundo, por más viejo que Ulises se sintiera, no existía la zozobra ni el interés por consultar algunas cosas. (p. 31)

What are these 'algunas cosas' so coyly suggested by Ocampo, which Ulises subsequently consults for mere entertainment? Ocampo is reminding us that a child's questioning of, and interest in, the world around is different to that of an adult, but no less valid.

On Ulises' visit to a fortune-teller, he asks for a potion to stop him looking old, which she gives him. His immediate transformation to a child distresses the narrator

(‘no era ese el Ulises que yo quería’, p. 32) and is paralleled by the transformation of Ulises’ aunts into worrying old women, who fuss over him and address him with the diminutives ‘Ulisito’ and ‘Niñito’ (p. 33). There follows, as if in a fairy story, a struggle between the two generations; the next day the aunts take the potion and appear young again, whilst Ulises appears old once more, and so on. The outcome is that Ulises takes the narrator’s advice and remains ‘arrugadito y preocupado’ (p. 33). Not only does Ocampo thus take delight in subverting the fairytale paradigm of eternal youth being the most desirable quality; she also suggests that neither youth nor age has a monopoly of sense. Furthermore, she senses a balance of cruelty in both youth and age; as the narrator of ‘Los retratos apócrifos’ declares, ‘Siempre pensé que las edades son todas crueles, y que se compensan o tendrían que compensarse las unas con las otras.’ (*Cuentos II*, pp. 294-95) Going one stage further than the superimposition of age in youth, and youth in age, Ocampo also experiments with the narrative potential of reversing the aging process. This represents her most direct challenge to the workings of nostalgia.

Rejuvenation

‘Gide decía que nacemos viejos, pero nos vamos rejuveneciendo.’ (*Encuentros*, p. 39)

‘How more tidy had it been to have been born old and have aged into a child.’ (*Nightwood*, p. 142)

Ocampo’s subversion of accepted attributes of youth and age is extended to experimentation with the reversal of time, finding its most fantastic conclusion in the figure of Don Toni in ‘Cartas confidenciales’ from *Los días de la noche*.²³ I use the word ‘fantastic’ advisedly, since experimentation with time has consistently been a key feature of fantastic literature in general; Bioy Casares’ tremendously successful *La invención de Morel* is a case in point.²⁴

The narrative form of ‘Cartas confidenciales’ is that of a woman writing to an old school friend; thus even the epistolary framework represents a return to the time of childhood. The writer is about to explain a situation; in order to do so, she says ‘tengo que hablar del pasado’ (*Cuentos II*, p. 23). This key unlocks the story and provides an insight into Ocampo’s aesthetic; the narrator can only attempt to make sense of the present by talking about the past, yet exploring this past throws up perplexities and leads to a reassessment of the aging process.

There are hints at generational mirroring, for example when the narrator comments in a moment of self-awareness ‘hablo como hablaría mi abuela’ (p. 23). In

²³ For an excellent and detailed analysis of time in Ocampo’s works, see Annick Mangin’s *Temps et écriture*.

such apparently clichéd remarks, Ocampo naturalizes the similarities between the first and third generation, between youth and old age, which she then proceeds to develop in a fantastic manner. The situation which the letter-writer is attempting to explain is that which surrounds the mysterious figure of Don Toni; the family he lives with never really questions where he appeared from, and neither, inexplicably, do they seem to register his gradual rejuvenation, which is the focus of everyone else's speculation. It takes a visiting friend to pose the apparently absurd question '¿Toni es Toni o se transformó en otro?' (p. 24). Through this story, Ocampo takes a whimsical look at how we are conditioned to accept the the process of aging, and the huge physical and mental changes that this process involves, as something totally natural, simply as a result of our perception of time. The fantastic situation of this process operating identically but in reverse, however, arouses suspicion and incredulity that Toni can really be one and the same person. Ocampo thus plays on the idea of an infinity of successive selves, but selves who become increasingly young with time, and progress from death to birth. This scenario echoes one described in a footnote from Borges' 'Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain':

los Hijos de la Tierra o Autóctonos que, sometidos al influjo de una rotación inversa del cosmos, pasaron de la vejez a la madurez, de la madurez a la niñez, de la niñez a la desaparición y la nada. (*Ficciones*, p. 84)

Don Toni, in studying architecture, draws lots of plans for crypts 'como si tuviera nostalgia de la muerte' (*Cuentos II*, p. 25). The idea of feeling nostalgia for death reverses the usual chronology required for nostalgia. It is a feeling which recurs in Pizarnik but with a very different emotional charge. Not only does Ocampo reverse time; she also seems to cause it to accelerate through narrative devices. She describes the changes in Don Toni's age with a repetitive structure but precisely-chosen details which encapsulate each stage. That a princess should go mad with desire for the adolescent Don Toni is a very fairy-tale touch, something which Ocampo took delight in using.

Y así transcurrieron los años, que lo rejuvenecían entre el amor y el estudio, entre los negocios y el ocio. Y así llegó a la pubertad, cuando mamá se casó y se enamoró platónicamente de él, y a la adolescencia, cuando la belleza de su rostro impresionó tanto a una princesa, que enloqueció por no poder besarlo; y a la niñez, cuando los juguetes electrónicos llenaron su cuarto [...]; y a la edad insaciable y delirante de las mamaderas, cuando el hombre es como un enfermo pequeño, que no se maneja solo, porque es un niño arrugado, de pocos meses. (p. 26)

²⁴ *La invención de Morel* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1940).

The final description of Toni as a child calls to mind Ocampo's description of the lined face of the seven year-old Ulises, and like Ulises, Tomi (as he has miraculously become) speaks like a 'viejo reviejo' (p. 27). All of this incredible tale seems alternately natural or supernatural to Paula, who is writing the letter; in the final line, she expects her friend to suggest that she go to see a psychoanalyst. Psychoanalysis was extremely well established in Buenos Aires by 1970, the date this story was published, and Ocampo would doubtless have been aware both of Freudian and Kleinian theories of child behaviour and development. In the same way that 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal' perhaps takes a playful look at psychic theories, so this story could be read as a comic engagement with Kleinian psychoanalysis, bringing everything back to the child in a literal way.²⁵

'El castigo' from *La furia* also relates a life backwards, although in this case it was not lived that way; Sergio's lover, suspected by him of being unfaithful, takes her revenge by giving a resumé of her life in reverse, and thus in effect gradually separating the entwined threads of their life. Like a film being rapidly rewound (again we are reminded of Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel*) they move from three recent years of bliss to the flutter of their first meeting, the telescoped narrative of their relationship culminating in the dismissive anticlimax 'rápidamente Sergio entró en mi olvido' (p. 278) before they had ever met.²⁶ Sergio, and their difficult relationship in the present, is relegated to the narrative 'past historic' whilst the ongoing story rushes towards infancy.²⁷ It takes in moments of childhood betrayal and disappointment along the way; 'Alicia me decepcionó con sus traiciones' (p. 279) precedes 'Alicia y yo nos hacíamos confidencias. Era mi mejor amiga.' That these disappointing betrayals pre-empt, in narrative sequence, their initial friendship gives the story a curious bitterness and poignancy; so too does the remark of her mother, 'estas mocosas se creen grandes' (p. 279) which in the context seems highly ironic since she is already grown-up at the time of narrating. Most striking is the elasticity of time as perceived in childhood, something which once more reveals Ocampo's affinity with Proust; the days seem to get longer,

²⁵ See Melanie Klein, 'Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy', in *Our Adult World and Other Essays* (London: Heinemann, 1963), pp. 1-21.

²⁶ This perspective is reversed by Irene, in the poetry version of 'Autobiografía de Irene', who says of her lover Gabriel 'ya presentía cómo iba a olvidarte' (*Espacios métricos*, p. 91).

²⁷ A parallel to this story is found in Thomas Hardy's poem, 'The Clock of the Years', in which a spirit promises a man that he can 'make the clock of the years go backward.' The man agrees, since he will thus regain his dead beloved. But the spirit will not stop time, so the girl gets younger and younger: 'Then younger, younger she freshed, to the year / I first had known / Her woman-grown [...] No stop was there; / And she waned child-fair, / And to babyhood [...] / And smalled till she was nought at all.' The man laments; now not even the memory of her lives on; 'it was as if / She had never been.' In *The Complete*

and days, mornings and nights ‘se repetían al infinito’ (p. 281). We are again reminded of the ‘interminable infancia’ discussed at the opening of this chapter. It is the child’s feeling that life is infinite which is lost to the adult, whose sense of time inexorably passing is all too highly developed. Indeed Sergio represents how adults are fatally bound to live measured time. The twenty years narrated in reverse by his lover have aged him by twenty, turning his hair white.

Ocampo not only experiments with the possibilities of living the aging process in reverse; she also explores the effect that knowing the future has on the present moment. Borges’ footnote to ‘Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain’ is again apt: ‘Más interesante es imaginar una inversión del Tiempo: un estado en el que recordáramos el porvenir e ignoráramos, o apenas presintiéramos, el pasado.’ (*Ficciones*, p. 84) ‘Autobiografía de Irene’ is the narrative of a child gifted with prescience.²⁸ She has imagined the scene of her death many times, and at the opening of the narrative is on her deathbed.

Hoy estoy muriéndome con el mismo rostro que veía en los espejos de mi infancia. (Apenas he cambiado. Acumulaciones de cansancios, de llantos y de risas han madurado, formado y deformado mi rostro.) Toda morada nueva me parecerá antigua y recordada. (*Cuentos, I*, p. 153).

The aging process is here equated with both formation and deformation. Though at first sight this refers to the formation of a definitive adult face, which then becomes deformed by the signs of age, it also hints at Ocampo’s belief that the child face is the fundamental one, a kind of palimpsest as suggested in Chapter 1 in connection with the image of palmistry. In this reading, the adult face would be a deformation of the original child face.²⁹ The statement that ‘Toda morada nueva me parecerá antigua y recordada’ has a Proustian ring that all stages of life contain echoes of childhood, though of course here every ‘morada nueva’ is literally remembered in advance.

Irene, like Ocampo, sees the adult in children’s faces, though in a more literal manner, in that with her gift of prescience, she paradoxically remembers how they will become. ‘Asomada a los balcones, veía pasar con caras de hombres a los niños que iban al colegio. De ahí mi timidez ante los niños. Veía [...] las ambiciones, las crueldades ineludibles de los hombres con los hombres y con los animales.’ (p. 112)³⁰ Knowing

Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, ed. by Samuel Hynes, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982-1995), II (1984), 278.

²⁸ Both Eduardo González Lanuza and Annick Mangin analyse it in detail. See: ‘Silvina Ocampo: *Autobiografía de Irene*’, *Sur*, 175 (1949), 56-58, and Chapter 2 of Annick Mangin’s *Temps et écriture*.

²⁹ This is paralleled in the poetry version of ‘Autobiografía de Irene’, found in *Espacios métricos*: ‘Se deposita ahora ya el cansancio, / repetidos cansancios, en mi cara, / cansancios que han nacido en la niñez, / y en un sendero con guiraldas de horas / me hubieran conducido a la vejez.’ (p. 84)

³⁰ Again, compare the poetry version: ‘los niños todos ya con rostros de hombres’ (p. 88).

what children will become, seeing in advance their ambitions and cruelties, does not fill Irene with desire for the future. Other Ocampo characters, whether prescient or not, demonstrate a marked resistance to growing up, both in the sense of attaining adulthood and in a literal sense.

Never-Never Land? Resistance to Growing Up(wards)

'Why should I have to grow to man's estate,
And this afar-noised World perambulate?'³¹
'Odio las fechas (¿será porque la vejez llega gracias a ellas?)'³²

The fantasy of never growing up has always been a strong one, particularly in children's literature, the classic example being J. M. Barrie's 1904 drama, *Peter Pan*.³³ There are precedents closer to home for Silvina Ocampo, however, for instance Rubén Darío's 'El caso de la señorita Amelia' published in Buenos Aires in 1894.³⁴ Darío's tale is narrated by the elderly and pompous 'Doctor Z', who was enchanted in his youth by twelve year-old Amelia, the youngest of three sisters. On returning after twenty-three years in the Orient, he finds the two elder sisters unmarried and apparently sad, and dare not ask after Amelia since people refer to 'el caso de Amelia Revall' in veiled words. The truth is not that she has died, but that Amelia 'se ha quedado en la infancia, ha contenido su carrera vital' (p. 195). Darío's 'case', the title of which makes it sound like either a Poe mystery (such as 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar') or a Freudian case history, is presented in a dramatic and mysterious way. Ocampo's story 'Icera' from *Las invitadas* is far more quirky, in that it is Icera's fierce envy of dolls and her stubborn determination not to grow which bring about the fantastic result. Rather than examining the peculiar infant phenomenon from an adult's point of view, as does Darío, she follows the child's thoughts and logic, including fierce resentment at the remark '¡Cómo has crecido!' (*Cuentos I*, p. 424). Icera literally wishes not to get any taller, since even an extra ten centimetres is felt as a loss, in terms of the privileges she used to have, such as being given a drop of wine in her mother's thimble (p. 424). But despite succeeding in remaining small, she does grow up in terms of her features; indeed her face becomes like a caricature of age: 'la niña tenía bigotes, barba y dentadura postizas'

³¹ Thomas Hardy, 'Childhood Among the Ferns', in *Poems of Thomas Hardy: A New Selection*, rev. edn by T. R. M. Creighton (London: Macmillan, 1977; repr. 1982), p. 93.

³² Silvina Ocampo in interview with Danubio Torres Fierro, p. 59.

³³ James Matthew Barrie, *Peter Pan* (London: Armada, 1988; first publ. 1904). J. M. Barrie appears almost as frequently as Lewis Carroll in the Index Translationem, translated into Spanish and published in Argentina.

³⁴ Reprinted in Rubén Darío, *Páginas escogidas*, ed. by Ricardo Gullón (Madrid: Cátedra, 1979), pp. 189-95. Also compare Norah Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia* where Lange recalls seeing a child who never grew, and was placed outside her parents' house every day in a little box to watch the passers by. Quoted

(p. 425). Darío Cuerda, the shop assistant, (whose name gestures the reader towards Rubén Darío) has, like Darío's Doctor Z, become old and wrinkled. Ocampo describes him as 'un viejito que parecía Darío Cuerda disfrazado de viejito' (p. 425), again presenting the idea that the marks of age are like a disguise. Like Darío's Doctor Z, he initially imagines that the little girl he now sees before him must be the daughter of the original child. He is, however, confused by her apparently aged face; overcome by feelings of tiredness and strangeness he exclaims to himself '¡Tantos niños que se hacen los viejos y viejos que se hacen los niños!' He even becomes convinced that he is going mad, obsessed by age: 'me obsesiona la vejez: hasta los niños parecen viejos' (p. 425). He eventually realizes that thirty-five years have passed, and that this is indeed the original Icera. Ocampo thus enjoys the hybrid figure who is apparently both child and adult, who retains the height of a child whilst acquiring the inevitable marks of aging of an adult. In less fantastic stories, Ocampo's characters reveal a resistance to growing up in terms of a resistance to the absurd habits, compromises and hypocrisies of adulthood. The thoughtful child of 'Átropos', for example, is cross-examined by her later self: '¿Pensabas que algún día serías grande? Nunca lo pensaste, pues para ti todo era absurdo, la vida de la gente mayor' (*Cuentos II*, p. 329).

The closing sentences of 'La lección de dibujo', discussed earlier, give the clearest indication of Ocampo's complex attitude to the aging process. On the surface, the ending of this *cuento* appears quite simple. The child, Ani Vlis, states baldly: 'Nunca quise ser grande. La edad me parece la peor invención del mundo. Sentí que para siempre me extrañaría no tener la edad que tengo'. (*Cuentos II*, p. 168) The translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Susan Ashe in *Celeste Goes Dancing*, renders this passage as 'I never wanted to *grow up*. To me, *growing older* is the worst invention in the world. I felt I would always regret not being the age I am *now*.' (p. 23, my emphasis) Surely this is the Peter Pan instinct; the child never wants to stop being a child, never wants to grow up into an adult. In the three places highlighted, however, the translator has made a decision to shift the focus of the original Spanish from a state of being to the process of becoming.³⁵ Where Ocampo's text has 'ser grande' and 'la edad', this translation substitutes 'grow up' and 'growing older'. The insertion of the word 'now' also slightly reduces the possibilities for ambiguity inherent in the source text. We can compare this to another possible version: 'I never wanted to *be grown-up*.

in *Páginas escogidas de Norah Lange*, ed. by María Hortensia Lacau, sel. and notes by Beatriz de Nóbile (Buenos Aires: Kapelusz, 1972), p. 46.

To me, *age* seems like the worst invention in the world. I felt I would always regret not being the age I *am*.' This second version permits greater ambiguity of interpretation, which is crucial to the original. Rather than simply resisting the inevitable process of growing up, the child is resisting arriving at the state of being 'grown-up', which she perceives would imply a definitive removal from the child world. Again, it is not so much growing older that is the worst invention in the world, but rather age, in the sense of being a certain, fixed age, and behaving (or being expected to behave) accordingly. Ocampo's repeated references to children appearing old, or old people having childlike qualities reveal her desire for age to be something fluid and shifting rather than rigidly defined. The final phrase 'la edad que tengo' could, in the light of this, be read not merely as the age that the child speaking is *now*, but whatever age the speaking voice happens to be at the present moment. Rather than marking a simple resistance to old age and the onset of inevitable nostalgia for childhood, this statement by Ani Vlis could mark resistance to the classification of age (and of behaviour related to each age or stage of life) and resistance at every stage to fatalistically accepting the passing of time.³⁶ These sentiments echo those of a letter to Ocampo's sister, Angélica, on 29 September 1954, in which she exclaims: '¡Tendré que acostumbrarme a tener una edad que nunca sabré tener! Que nunca me resignaré a tener.' The older narrating self in this story has the feeling that the young Ani Vlis had always been around, like something apparently lost, which is in fact there all along, unnoticed. In this image, Silvina Ocampo encapsulates her attitude to childhood; it is with the adult all along, often inadvertently ignored and thus thought to be lost irretrievably. By refusing to resign herself to age, the 'Ani Vlis' part of Ocampo is kept alive.

Ocampo's Writing for Children

'It is a story that I shall now tell you, and you will think it is not very suitable for children. And no perhaps it is not very suitable for children, if you have that point of view about children.'

'Children are overbearing, supercilious, passionate, envious, inquisitive, idle, fickle, timid, intemperate, liars and dissemblers; they laugh and weep easily, are excessive in their joys and sorrows, and that about the most trifling objects, they bear no pain but like to inflict it on others; already they are men.'³⁷

To gain further insight into the way Ocampo viewed childhood and children, it is instructive to look at those stories she wrote specifically for children. Ocampo got an immense amount of pleasure out of writing children's stories and produced at least five

³⁵ Whether or not this decision was taken in consultation with Ocampo herself, I do not know. In the introduction, di Giovanni says that they had contact with each author and some of those that knew English (as Ocampo did) were 'encouraged to comment on drafts of their work'. (p. 12)

³⁶ The later story 'El miedo' presents a more ambiguous view of fearing any age, or fearing none: 'el miedo a la infancia, a la madurez, a la vejez, a ninguna edad' (*Cuentos II*, p. 327).

books: the fantasy story *El cofre volante*, its continuation *El tobogán*, and *El caballo alado*, all aimed at quite young children; the collection of stories *La naranja maravillosa* and the twelve long poems comprising *Canto escolar* aimed at older children.³⁸ Even in those stories aimed at young children, parallels can be seen with Ocampo's 'adult' books. *El caballo alado*, for instance, echoes 'El vendedor de estatuas', discussed earlier, but here the bond is between a girl, Irene, and one particular statue – that of the winged horse. The poems of *Canto escolar* return to favourite subjects such as trees ('Los árboles', pp. 23-25) and circus performers ('La amazona del circo', pp. 45-49); 'Santa Rosa de Lima' (pp. 33-35) recalls the poems of *Breve santoral*, and 'A mi maestra' (pp. 61-64) echoes the framework of 'La casa de los relojes'.

A continuation of Ocampo's intermingling of the traits of youth and age can be seen in the subtitle of her most popular children's book, *La naranja maravillosa*; this subtitle expects a receptive readership, labelling them 'Cuentos para chicos grandes y grandes chicos'. Aside from mere delight in play with words, this is indicative of Ocampo's refusal to belittle children, and her concomitant determination to find the child in adult readers. It is noteworthy that many of these stories published for children are in fact largely based on her adult stories.³⁹ If they are re-written at all it is not by being bowdlerized or dumbed down; as the highly perceptive and far-reaching prologue by Pezzoni makes clear, 'si algo está del todo ausente en estos cuentos es el tono protector, paternalista, que se registra en buena parte de la literatura infantil'. (*La naranja maravillosa*, pp. 7-9) Rather, the children's versions are characterized by the addition of quirky narratorial remarks addressed to the reader and *Alice in Wonderland*-style logic, making the stories more engaging. Ocampo recognizes that a child's logic is different to an adult's, rather than simply being a less developed version. The practice of using symbolic names for people and places is common to both Ocampo's adult and

³⁷ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper; or, Work it Out for Yourself* (London: Virago, 1980, repr. 1988; first publ. 1936), pp. 130, 52.

³⁸ All published in Buenos Aires. *El cofre volante* (Estrada, 1974), *El tobogán* (Estrada, 1975), *El caballo alado* (La Flor, 1972), and *Canto escolar* (Fraterna, 1979). A minority of bibliographical sources lists another volume, *La torre sin fin* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1985). According to <http://amazon.com>, various of Ocampo's children's books have been reprinted and republished either in Spanish or in translation, which suggests their continuing popularity. The site lists *The Marvellous Orange* (1998), *Tower of No End* (1998), and *El caballo alado* (1996). The Buenos Aires Feria del Libro website confirms this popularity, giving publication details for a third edition of *El caballo alado* (Buenos Aires: De la Flor, 1996), a fifth edition of *La naranja maravillosa* (Buenos Aires: Orión, 1994) and a new issue of the story *La liebre dorada*, originally from *La furia*, in the category Literatura Infantil y Juvenil (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1998).

³⁹ For example, *La naranja maravillosa* includes 'Icera' (first published in *Las invitadas*), 'Fuera de las jaulas' (*Las invitadas*), 'La sogá' (from *Los días de la noche*) and 'La liebre dorada' (in *La furia*).

child fiction, but she uses more overtly comical names for the latter, such as Villa Deliciosa or Calle Carasucia (*La naranja maravillosa*, p. 28).

Ocampo evidently revels in expressing the childlike side of her personality, enjoying the freedom to transform the world through re-writing the rules. ‘Ulises’ is an example of a story in *La naranja maravillosa* which first appeared seven years earlier in the collection *Los días de la noche*. The text of the version aimed at children and that of the original are almost identical, the only differences being three alterations of vocabulary (‘tisana’ for ‘somniafero’, ‘vertical’ for ‘perpendicular’ and ‘tarot’ for ‘taraud’ in the children’s version) and the omission of a short phrase explaining the way Ulises and his friend dupe their parents into thinking that they are being looked after. Ocampo evidently preferred to cut an explanation which she considered supremely unnecessary for children; they would not need to know how to dupe parents. Indeed, in the children’s stories, adults are mocked for their long-winded explanations: ‘el guarda a quien mostraron la dirección del telegrama, les dio una larga explicación tonta, que sólo Claudia comprendió.’ (p. 29)

Key themes of her ‘adult’ texts recur in this collection of children’s stories, such as the wisdom of children and the child teaching the adult. The child of ‘El niño prodigio’, for example, is superior to his mother both in intellect and dexterity; there is a resultant reversal of parent-child roles:

Daniel tenía cinco años. Era un niño precoz. Hacía los deberes de su madre, Rosa Prodigio, que estudiaba alemán en una escuela nocturna; hacía las cuentas de la casa; cuando el teléfono se descomponía, con uno o dos tirones lo arreglaba. (p. 105)

Characteristically, however, Ocampo subverts the fairytale-like cliché of a child prodigy by making the word ‘Prodigy’ the family name; Daniel is literally the child Prodigy simply by virtue of his surname. Also in this story we are presented with a bitter adult (la señora de Alado) who is ‘carcomida por la envidia’ (p. 106) for the child Daniel’s talent; such strong emotions expressed by the powerful verb ‘carcomer’ continually appear in Ocampo’s adult stories. For example, Icera’s Peter Pan-like desire never to grow is expressed using this same verb: ‘Una angustia diminuta carcomió por unos días el corazón de Icera’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 424). Ocampo herself uses this highly-charged verb in conversation with Noemí Ulla, saying that as a child ‘la imaginación me carcomía’ (*Encuentros*, p. 18).⁴⁰ The word is threaded through both the child’s and the adult’s vision of the world and in a sense it sums up what several critics have pointed out as

being an important characteristic of Ocampo's style; as Rosario Castellanos observes, 'lo que Silvina Ocampo nos advierte [...] es que [...] el abismo es el hábito cotidiano'.⁴¹ Hell is found and experienced in the everyday by children and adults alike, at whose lives it gnaws away.

Pezzoni's prologue to this 'children's' book, *La naranja maravillosa*, raises an important issue; he suggests an approach to 'lo maravilloso' and 'lo imposible' that, if taken as the aesthetic for Ocampo's work as a whole, would revitalize in the reader a childlike acceptance of the fantastic genre. Pezzoni claims that Ocampo's challenge to us is 'que aceptemos, literalmente, las reglas del juego. Única posibilidad de lo imposible: persuadirnos de que, como los niños, alguna vez hemos sido capaces de imaginarlo.' (p. 8) Like the Little Prince, we should need no complicated explanation for how things are.

Not only did Ocampo write children's stories; she also wrote a play for children entitled *No sólo el perro es mágico*, which was likened to *Alice in Wonderland* in its approach to a child's kind of logic. Virgilio Piñera, in his review of this play, comes to the conclusion that in Ocampo's representation at least, 'el alma infantil no es tanto fantástica como lógica. El niño no es soñador, es analítico.'⁴² As far as the narrator is concerned, in writing for children 'imaginación no servirá de nada si no está controlada por la lógica.' So the characterization of Ocampo's fiction as resistant to explanation should perhaps be modified; rather, they demonstrate resistance to adult explanations, which may miss the peculiar complexity or disarming simplicity of a child's logic.

The Child's Perspective: Birth

'The fresh gaze of the child is more brimming with emotion than the intuition of the most determined seer.' (Novalis, p. 67)

'[...] the dim, sweet, scared, wondering, clinging perception of the child.'⁴³

'[...] a continuous dream broken into bits of vivid awakening.' (*Memoirs of a Midget*, p. 29)

Whilst Ocampo's writing for children does not belittle them, conversely neither does her fiction for adults idealize the world children inhabit. In the first half of this chapter I looked at Ocampo's reevaluation of the relationship between youth and age, and at the aging process. In this and the following two sections I shall look in more depth at Ocampo's adoption of a child's perspective and emotions, in particular at moments of

⁴⁰ She also uses it with respect to envy in a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez; she is envious of his being in Córdoba, but her envy is tempered with fond memories of the place; 'por eso los refinamientos de la envidia no me carcomen'. (15 March 1973)

⁴¹ Rosario Castellanos, 'Silvina Ocampo y el "más acá"', in *Mujer que sabe latín* (México: Sepsetentas, 1973), pp. 149-54 (p. 154).

⁴² Virgilio Piñera, 'Silvina Ocampo y su perro mágico', *Sur*, 253 (1958), 108-09.

initiation; these initiatory moments are akin to the ‘bits of vivid awakening’ observed by Midgetina in the prefatory quotation above. As I discussed in the Introduction with reference to Marina Warner, adults’ attempts to keep children shielded from difficult or distressing adult emotions are doomed to failure,⁴³ and the first experiences of these emotions are powerful and lasting.

Discovering the mystery of birth, usually framed in terms of the question ‘where did I come from?’, forms an early and vivid part of every child’s emotional development. In ‘Viaje olvidado’ Ocampo recreates a child’s feelings of horror and repulsion at discovering the facts about childbirth.⁴⁵ Though narrated in the third person, the situation is seen entirely through the shocked eyes of the young girl who is

the central protagonist. The reader thus shares, with the heightened poignancy of superior age and experience, her feelings of anguish. Initially she is securely and happily cocooned in the fairy-tale explanation that ‘los chicos antes de nacer estaban almacenados en una gran tienda en París’ (p. 73) whence they are ordered by mothers and despatched in a parcel, hence the forgotten journey of the title. Leonor Fini’s painting *L’Orphelin de Velletri* conjures up imaginatively the child’s possible vision of where babies might appear from, in the absence of parents, the vase subtly suggesting the child’s

unwillingness to think too carnally. The child in Ocampo’s story tries desperately to remember herself making that journey, but frown as she might (and ‘fruncía tanto las cejas que a cada instante las personas grandes la interrumpían para que desarrugara la frente’, p. 73) the earliest memory she can locate is that of making nests for birds in the

⁴³ Henry James, quoted by Cicely Havely in *What Maisie Knew* (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1973), p. 17.

⁴⁴ See ‘Little Angels, Little Devils: Keeping Childhood Innocent’, the third of Warner’s 1994 Reith Lectures, *Managing Monsters*, pp. 33–48.

park. An idyllic beginning, one might suppose, yet already in that reminiscence the inevitable shock of truth which is coming at the climax of the story is prefigured: when the nests she made are gone the following day, her delight at the nanny's suggestion that they are being used by the birds is brutally squashed by her sister, 'que tenía *cruelmente* tres años más que ella' (p. 73, my emphasis) and who points out that the gardener has just swept them all away.

The phrase 'que tenía *cruelmente* tres años más que ella' is a very interesting one in terms of perspective. It suggests at once several feelings: the younger child's powerlessness to protect herself against the harsh and hurtful realities of her sister's more advanced knowledge; and the narrator's view (occupying a quasi-parental position) which laments the elder child's inevitable aggressive assertion of her authority through this superior knowledge, thus spoiling innocent pleasure. The process of growing up is in this way associated negatively with harsh disillusionment, and with a gradual enslavement to a 'knowledge = power' paradigm. Each stage of the process is seen by the child as 'alejándola desesperadamente de su nacimiento' (p. 73),⁴⁶ and the bewilderment of growing up is vividly captured in the image of the child's many successive selves forming a ring around her: 'Cada año que cumplía estiraba la ronda de chicas que no se alcanzaban las manos alrededor de ella' (pp. 73-74). The picture is one of a playground game of ring-a-ring-a-roses, a circle of girls holding hands enclosing one in the middle, but poignantly the circle is broken; their hands cannot meet.⁴⁷

Ironically, having believed that babies come from Paris, it is the daughter of the French chauffeur who first shakes this belief. The crudity of her explanation, and the feelings of horror and repugnance it conjures up in the child forced to listen, are only too clear: 'la hija del chauffeur francés le dijo *con palabras atroces, llenas de sangre*' (p. 74), 'y no sé que otras palabras *obscuras como pecados*' (p. 74), my emphasis. The child instinctively links the mysterious acts surrounding birth with blood and sin, and as a consequence experiences shame on account of this horrible secret. Her nanny's reassurance and her mother's goodnight kisses offer little comfort; the alienation of this secret hanging over her seems metonymically to represent the atmosphere of the entire

⁴⁵ All page references will be taken from the republication in *Cuentos I*. Santos-Phillips analyses this story as two forgotten journeys; not only the child's supposed journey as a baby from Paris, but also the forgotten journey of the adult narrator from her own childhood. (*La representación femenina*, pp. 27-33)

⁴⁶ This calls to mind a poem in Pizarnik's *Arbol de Diana*: 'Extraño desacostumbrarme / de la hora en que nací. / Extraño de no ejercer más / oficio de recién llegada.' (*Obras*, p. 76)

⁴⁷ Olga Orozco, as noted in the Introduction, is also obsessed by childhood; she too uses the image of successive selves, a series of 'niñas' who are 'los seres que fui' in 'Quienes rondan la niebla'. In *Poesía: Antología*, sel. and prol. by Telma Luzzani Bystrowicz (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), pp. 7-8.

house in which she passes ‘muchos días y muchas horas largas y negras en el reloj enorme de la cocina, en los corredores desiertos de la casa, detrás de las puertas llenas de personas grandes secreteándose’ (p. 74). Ocampo’s use of doors as the symbolic

delineators of emotional boundaries is marked, a detail which her texts share with many Surrealist paintings, such as Dorothea Tanning’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (1946) or ‘Palaestra’, reproduced in

the following chapter. Here the child feels the adult world (full of horrible secrets about childbirth) to be something very alien and sinister. The climax of the story, at which the child is brought definitively out of her cosy womb of childhood innocence into the world of biological reality, is when her mother too tells her that babies do not come from Paris. The mother’s words, though not as gruesome of those of the chauffeur’s daughter, nevertheless are entwined with them, forming part of the same discourse in the child’s mind. The effect is devastating; the girl’s whole world is made strange and her own mother seems alien: ‘el rostro de su madre había cambiado totalmente debajo del sombrero con plumas: era una señora que estaba de visita en su casa.’ (p. 74) The symbolic action of opening the window, by which the mother intends to clear the air and dispel the tension has the reverse effect on the little girl: ‘La ventana quedaba más cerrada que antes, y cuando dijo su madre que el sol estaba lindísimo, vió el cielo negro de la noche donde no cantaba un solo pájaro.’ (p. 74)

It is perhaps significant that apart from the mention of the chauffeur, no men feature in the story. Their absence make the whole sexual act (the description of which we are left to imagine, in either atrocious bloody words or euphemistic birds and bees language) seem incongruous, sinister or even grotesque. It lurks behind the outward signs of pregnancy and childbirth, as something that the child does not want to – and cannot – come to terms with.

Sexuality: Initiation and Violation

‘vergüenza de los niños, temor a los mayores, curiosidad por los suplicios sexuales, todo me torturaba’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 279)

‘Fornicar era una de las palabras más atrayentes en el libro de catecismo. Queríamos en la práctica descubrir su significado. Lo descubrimos.’ (*Cuentos II*, p. 66)

Ocampo's exploration of the world of childhood includes the awakening of sexuality in the child or adolescent, as already touched upon briefly in Chapter 1 in relation to games. This is one of the most important initiatory stages in the passage from childhood to adulthood and forms a crucial part of many of Ocampo's texts. In 'El caballo muerto' the two sisters and their friend begin to discover themselves as sexual beings through their ritual encounters with a boy on horseback. Their growing awareness of their own bodies is apparent in their physical self-consciousness which Ocampo captures beautifully as if in a snapshot:

Estaban tan quietas que parecía que posaban para un fotógrafo invisible, y era que se sentían crecer, y a una de ellas le entristecía, a las otras dos les gustaba. Por eso estaban a veces atentas y mudas, como si las estuvieran peinando para ir a una fiesta. (*Cuentos I*, p. 23)

In later writing, Ocampo does not always spell out quite so deliberately the poignancy of growing up, but the image of being still as if having their hair done for a party pre-echoes many other Ocampo short stories, in which parties are symbolic of initiation, for example 'Las invitadas', 'Día de santo', and 'La boda'. Being photographed is also a frequent symbol of initiation in Ocampo's work, in such *cuentos* as 'Las fotografías' and 'La revelación'. Alicia Carletti's pictures, *Secret Corner* and *The Morning* encapsulate the mixture of self-possession and self-consciousness so characteristic of the adolescent girls Ocampo describes.

Childhood and adolescence are both marked by strong desires to explore sexuality, in a shifting combination of curiosity and repulsion. Ocampo's own sense of humour retains something of this repulsed fascination, revelling in the dirty

jokes side of sexual encounters; an example can be found in a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez, where she tells a story about an incident she witnessed whilst out walking her dog, Diana. She hears what sounds like female cries and the voice of a young man coming from the bushes, and wonders what is happening: ‘Me acerqué pensando que el joven estaba violando a una niña y con mi perro me acerqué. La pareja era el joven solo con el pene al aire ejercitando su virilidad contra un árbol.’ (Dated 14 June 1972)

Initiation into sexual identity in Ocampo’s work, however, frequently introduces the theme of abuse of children or adolescents by figures of authority, such as Chango in ‘El pecado mortal’ which will be looked at in detail in Chapter 4. I mentioned in the first chapter Ocampo’s determination to include such violent subjects as rape in her *Enumeración*; Ocampo is able to treat these episodes with great sensitivity, whilst exploring fully the ambiguous complexity of the child’s desires for knowledge and consequent degree of complicity. In this way she reinforces her vision of childhood as far from being an innocent paradise. The short story ‘La Calle Sarandí’ utilizes a telescoped development, where the narrator moves from her memories as a young girl to her present experience as a mature woman in the course of a short story.⁴⁸ The story pivots around one traumatic experience in childhood; this traumatic episode is then seen in retrospect to have shaped and circumscribed the whole subsequent emotional development of the character. We see how the narrator of ‘La calle Sarandí’ carries with her for life a painful image from her childhood which has carved itself into her memory. The pain of trying to understand it, to make sense of the meaningless adult life which followed that tragic moment, leads the adult narrator to say in desperation ‘No quiero ver más nada’, echoing her own ‘No quise ver más nada’ at the height of the trauma. As in ‘Extraña visita’, the first sentence sums up the situation which the story then expounds, which in this case is that certain obsessive autumnal memories have obliterated or obscured all others.

The actions of the character’s hands are symbolic in this sinister and powerful story, since both the adult and the child persona resort to hiding behind their hands, trying to deny reality. From the beginning there are sinister hints in the child’s paranoia about losing something and clutching her hands tightly over the leaves she has picked. ‘El miedo de perder algo me cerraba las manos herméticamente sobre las hojas que arrancaba de los cercos’ (*Cuentos I*, p. 55). This anxiety and mystery (‘creía llevar un mensaje misterioso, una fortuna en esa hoja arrugada’) is linked by narrative sequence to the repeated appearance of a man who ‘se asomaba siempre en mangas de camisa y

⁴⁸ For another detailed analysis of this *cuento* see Santos-Phillips, pp. 37-43.

decía palabras pegajosas, persiguiendo mis piernas desnudas con una ramita de sauce, de espantar mosquitos.’ (p. 55) These vile sticky words, like those of the chauffeur’s daughter in ‘Viaje olvidado’, are made all the more repellent by being described rather than cited; we are left to imagine what the man actually says through the child’s instinctively graphic description of their repugnance. Apparent ellipses in narrative progression skilfully create the illusion of a distracted child narrator at the same time as provoking the reader to search for connections. For example, we move straight from the child’s attempts to avoid the man to an apparently unconnected passage about her six sisters. ‘Mis hermanas eran seis, algunas se fueron casando, otras se fueron muriendo de extrañas enfermedades. [...] Mi salud me llenaba de obligaciones hacia ellas y hacia la casa.’ (p. 55) The casual, matter-of-fact way in which she generalizes about her sisters smacks of rebellious resentment hiding a sense of vulnerability and loneliness. The obligations that her sisters’ several desertions placed upon her young shoulders have obviously left her emotionally scarred. This impression is only reinforced by the narrative slip back to the man in the Calle Sarandí and his sinister behaviour, which her ‘obligations towards her sisters and to the house’ force her to endure. Ironically these obligations are echoed semantically in the next paragraph where the child describes her fear during these walks along the Calle Sarandí:

‘El hombre asomado a la puerta de su casa escondía en el rostro torcido un invisible cuchillo que me hacía sonreírle de miedo y que *me obligaba* a pasar por la misma vereda de su casa con lentitud de pesadilla.’ (p. 87, my emphasis) The child is like a small animal, mesmerized by fear in the face of its predator. The scene which follows takes place on a darker, more wintry day, and is left almost entirely to the reader to imagine. Having been snatched into the house (and it is not clear whether he physically drags her inside, or whether her own mesmerized fear and fascination compel her to enter with paradoxical ‘pasos inmóviles’, p. 56), the only details the girl mentions are those of smoke and cobwebs, an iron bedstead, an alarm clock showing five-thirty and the huge shadow of a man growing behind her; thereafter she hides her face in her hands: ‘No quise ver más nada y me encerré en el cuartito oscuro de mis dos manos, hasta que llamó el despertador.’ (p. 56)

The symbolism of hiding in the dark room of her hands is powerful. She desperately seeks protection, a room to which no-one, not even this man, who we presume rapes her, can gain access. What she glimpses through the gaps between her fingers when it is over is suggestive enough: ‘en torno de la lámpara de kerosene caían lentas gotas de mariposas muertas cuando por las ventanas de mis dedos vi la quietud del cuarto y los anchos zapatos desabrochados sobre el borde de la cama.’ (p. 56) Still with the horror of the street to face she rushes out, ‘desanudando mis manos’. The action of parting her hands calls to mind the opening, where fearful of losing something she had clutched them tightly together. Now something is definitively lost. What is most powerful is the allusive nature of the narrative and this deeply disturbing tone of unspoken menace is echoed in the Czech Surrealist painter Marie Cerminová Toyen’s painting, *Relâche* (1943).⁴⁹

As if to say that this traumatic experience signalled the end of childhood, the narrative moves swiftly on thereafter. Once again we see how the girl had no-one to turn to: ‘Mis hermanas se fueron yendo o desapareciendo junto con mi madre.’ (p. 56) Nothing remains of the family as it was but a few mended clothes (a typically suggestive Ocampo detail) and a photo of her father ‘rodeado de una familia enana y desconocida’. (p. 56) This photograph is surely of the sisters as children; after the trauma she has

⁴⁹ Whitney Chadwick’s commentary on this painting is illuminating: ‘a young girl hangs upside down in an attitude often assumed by children playing on a gymnastic bar. The folds of her skirt hide the head and upper body, the feet merge imperceptibly with the fissured and stained wall, and the flesh and exposed lace-trimmed panties lend a virginal air [...] But the figure has become terrifyingly impersonal and the objects that surround her – a riding crop and an empty paper bag – introduce an air of perverse danger

experienced, the girl no longer recognizes her childhood self, seeing it as stunted and alien through the distortion of bitterness. But something of the child does remain, though seen in a broken mirror, as Ocampo's *patria* was seen in an unfaithful mirror: 'Ahora en este espejo roto reconozco todavía la forma de las trenzas que aprendí a hacerme de chica' (p. 56). Like Irene's mirror, this broken mirror reflects a detail which binds youth and age together. Time has rapidly telescoped, the narrator is now a grown woman. Most significantly, the narrator once more takes refuge behind her hands: 'Estoy encerrada en el cuartito oscuro de mis manos y por la ventana de mis dedos veo los zapatos de un hombre en el borde de la cama.' (p. 57) Once again she is seeing a detail that she saw that fateful day. Her final action is to close her eyes tightly behind her hands, so tightly that she sees all manner of colours. 'Así será la muerte cuando me arranque del cuartito de mis manos'. (p. 57)

This woman's entire life can be symbolized by this 'little room' made from her hands. It is her last pitiful refuge from the violence that has been inflicted on her, and which led her to regard her childhood as tainted by age: 'La cabeza de mi infancia fue siempre una cabeza blanca de viejita.' As a child, to cover her face with her hands was a defensive reflex; as an adult it has become a way of existing. This image provides a curious kind of parallel to the photograph in which Ocampo is seen putting her hand out towards the camera in order to hide her face (see Chapter 1). Something of a child's vulnerability persists in that action of self-defence which adds to the poignancy of this *cuento*.

Death

'La muerte es para todos, para grandes y chicos, señora.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 379)

The third moment of 'vivid awakening' in a child's emotional life which Ocampo scrutinizes is that of contact with death. We need look no further than Ocampo's very first published short story, 'Cielo de claraboyas', in which the death of a child occurs at the hands of a diabolical aunt, and is observed through the skylight of the flat below by another child. The death of a close relative is something that indelibly marks a child's life. Irene, at the age of fifteen, asserts that: 'La repentina muerte de mi padre determinó un cambio en mi vida. Mi infancia terminaba. Trataba de pintarme los labios y de usar tacos altos.' ('Autobiografía de Irene', in *Cuentos I*, p. 157) Like the subjects of many of Alicia Carletti's paintings, wearing adult shoes is a step on the way to becoming an

adult.⁵⁰ That Ocampo had previously been drawn to a child's mourning as a subject is apparent from her choice of a particular passage from Thomas de Quincey's *Autobiographic Sketches* for translation; the passage is entitled 'Aflicción de la niñez. Muerte de la hermana'.⁵¹ The perspective of the passage is that of a young boy, but narrated with adult hindsight. It explores his grief at the death of his sister, and his gradual comprehension of the concept of mortality. Several moments and observations must have spoken particularly to Ocampo, in that they approach the boy's sensibilities as she would approach childhood emotion in her own fiction. For example, the boy describes how he tries to have a last look at the body of his sister, but he has been barred from the room: 'me deslicé de nuevo hasta el cuarto; pero la puerta estaba cerrada con llave, la llave no estaba – y quedé para siempre afuera.' (p. 71) The powerful symbolism of closed and locked doors to children is exploited many times by Ocampo, as has already been noted; we can compare De Quincey's passage, as translated by Ocampo, with 'Siesta en el cedro' where Elena is barred from seeing Cecilia lest she should catch consumption.

Elena corrió al cuarto de su madre y dijo: 'Cecilia está tísica': esa noticia hizo un cerco asombroso alrededor de ella y una vez llegada a los oídos de su madre acabó de encerrarla. [...] Así, poco a poco, le prohibieron hablar con Cecilia, indirectamente, por detrás de las puertas. (*Cuentos I*, p. 44)

After Cecilia's death, Elena initially goes through a phase of denial, where she now deliberately tries to ignore what is being discussed behind closed doors. 'Elena esta vez huía de los secretos detrás de las puertas' (p. 44). Since the adults do not seem to acknowledge Cecilia's death in their behaviour either, Elena clutches at the faint hope that perhaps she may one day return: 'quién sabe si esperándola mucho en la persiana no llegaría un día' (p. 45).⁵² There is an echo of this too in the de Quincey translation:

lo único que sabía de la muerte era que Juana había desaparecido. Se había ido, pero tal vez volviera. ¡Oh intervalo feliz de celestial ignorancia! ¡Venturosa inmunidad infantil para el dolor que excede su fuerza! (p. 62)

Inevitably, both children eventually have to come to terms with death.

⁵⁰ See particularly those paintings exhibited in the Bonino Gallery, New York, in 1983, and reproduced in this thesis: *Plays in the Garden* (Chapter 1), *Secret Corner* and *The Morning* (in this chapter) and *In Alice's Garden* (Chapter 3).

⁵¹ Thomas de Quincey, 'Aflicción de la niñez: La muerte de la hermana', trans. by Silvina Ocampo and Patricio Canto, *Sur*, 112 (1944), 59-74.

⁵² The step from this childish hope of an idyllic hereafter to adult delusion is small, and one which is taken in the later story, 'El impostor' from *Autobiografía de Irene*. Armando refuses to accept the death of his lover, María Gismondi, saying to Luis that: 'nuestra vida depende de un número determinado de personas que nos ven como seres vivos. Si esas personas nos imaginan muertos, morimos. Por eso no le perdono que usted haya dicho que María Gismondi está muerta.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 136)

Ocampo never underestimates the emotional and intellectual resources of the child in the face of death; indeed, the maturity of her child protagonists sometimes deliberately subverts the patronizing assumptions of adults. Nowhere is this more the case than in the short detective novel which Ocampo co-wrote with her husband, Bioy Casares, *Los que aman, odian*.⁵³ I would agree with Klingenberg, who opines that ‘the importance of its child character most obviously signals Ocampo’s contribution’ (*Fantasies of the Feminine*, p. 18). Throughout the novel, which continually pokes fun at the conventions of detective fiction, our attention is – true to the genre – diverted from the person who turns out to be the killer. In this case, however, the killer is an eleven or twelve-year old child, Miguel, whose grasp of the jealous ‘adult’ emotions which drive him to kill is total. Like so many of Ocampo’s characters, he has elements both of adult and child in him, a combination which disconcerts the narrator: ‘había en él una mezcla de madurez y de inocencia que me disgustó.’ (p. 25) Miguel’s terrible cry is the only deeply-felt and intense reaction to Mary’s death, whilst the adults are as ever, concerned with explanations. ‘Sentí que esa destemplada intervención era como un reproche a todos nosotros por haber condescendido a pequeñeces y mezquindades ante el definitivo milagro de la muerte.’ (p. 44) Miguel, despite having caused Mary’s death, is nevertheless also the person most genuinely distraught by it; in him are combined the love and hate of the title, *Los que aman, odian*. He also represents the potent combination of adult knowledge and resolve together with a child’s emotional dependency. As we see from his confessional letter, he would willingly have confessed his crime: ‘Para evitarle disgustos a Emilia, le hubiera explicado todo al comisario, pero no puedo hablar porque soy un niño.’ (p. 133) The Comisario and Huberman, typifying the patronizing adult attitude to children, decide against interrogating Miguel because, as they assume, ‘los niños son ^um_y sensibles. [...] Podríamos impresionarlo, dejarlo marcado para el resto de la vida.’ (p. 82) Ironically, they wished to protect his supposed innocence, but he has already been marked for life by the ‘adult’ emotion of jealousy.

Ocampo thus repeatedly contrasts the mixture of precocious maturity, intuitive understanding and emotional insecurity experienced by children in the face of death, and conversely, the insincere socially-determined behaviour of adults.

The vulnerability of a child in the face of death is nowhere more telling than in the first-person narrative ‘La casa de los relojes’. Here Ocampo effects a disjunction between the manifest text of a child narrator and the latent content, unperceived by the

⁵³ *Los que aman, odian* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1946; 6th reprint 1999).

child or sometimes deliberately concealed, but revealed to the adult reader. The child's candid, curious, now fearful and now resentful gaze reveals by what is left implicit the hypocritical nature of the adult world. The narrative framework is that of a nine-year old boy writing to his female schoolteacher; apparently the germ for this story came from a true story that Ocampo was told, but it was her idea to describe it from the point of view of a child witness: 'Claro, yo inventé el chico que escribía la carta' (*Encuentros*, p. 72). This viewpoint allows Ocampo to create an explicit adult addressee within the text, but also has the effect of drawing the reader into the position of implicit addressee. The adult reader, like the *señorita* to whom the letter is addressed, is obliged to reflect on the child's narrative, to read between the lines, make connections, interpret obliqueness or elision in the flow of the narrative, and extrapolate the child's state of mind from the symptoms of the discourse. The reader has to gauge how much the child perceives the implications of what he is narrating, and its sinister undertones. As Daniel Balderston puts it, 'la ironía acecha o se insinúa en los intervalos entre esa inocencia del que cuenta y lo atroz de lo que se cuenta'.⁵⁴ We are also aware that behind the persona of the male child we have the superior experience of a female adult author-figure, who is re-creating a child's limited horizons.⁵⁵

One obvious example of the way in which this story operates simultaneously on adult and child levels is to be found in the symbolism of shop names such as La Mancha and La Parca (both capitalized in the original edition). The child names them innocently, merely using them as signs; an adult reader takes on board the symbolic overtones of both and the humorous literal meaning of the first, which applies to a dry-cleaning shop.

The boy is frank and unashamed about his way of describing Estanislao Romagán as 'aquel relojero jorobado que le compuso a usted el reloj' (*Cuentos I*, p. 193); adults would certainly also remember Estanislao for being hunch-backed, but would refrain from saying so, or would use a euphemismistic alternative.⁵⁶ The teacher

⁵⁴ Daniel Balderston, 'Los cuentos crueles', p. 748.

⁵⁵ For an analysis of this story in terms of the limitations of the child's perspective 'que dibuja una imagen incompleta de lo real al mostrarse incapaz de interpretar los signos que el mundo le procura' see María A. Semilla Durán, 'Silvina Ocampo: La perversión de la lectura', *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 17 (1997), 319-31 (pp. 320-22).

⁵⁶ Incidentally, there are various literary precedents involving cruelty to hunchbacks, notably Roberto Arlt's 'El jorobadito' (1933), the title story of his first collected volume of stories. In this, the narrator has strangled the hunchback and is looking back over his motives. The simultaneous feelings of fascination and repulsion the hunchback causes in the narrator betray a hatred of the Other for fear of becoming that Other: 'en presencia de un deforme no puedo escapar al nauseoso pensamiento de imaginarme corcovado, grotesco, espantoso, abandonado de todos [...], perseguido por traillas de chicos feroces que me clavarían agujas en la giba' (p. 8). The narrator feels he has done society a service 'pues he librado a todos los corazones sensibles como el mío de un espectáculo pavoroso y repugnante' (p. 8). Arlt, as does Ocampo,

(and the adult reader) is therefore made strongly aware at once of the child's ingenuousness and also of her own adherence to social conventions which avoid mentioning that which is abnormal. Adult intolerance and persecution of the Other lurks between the lines of the child's narration, when he contrasts admiration for Estanislao's clocks with his father's opinion: 'Mi padre no pensaba lo mismo.' (p. 194). In this case unlike Tirso from 'El vendedor de estatuas', the child – though curious and blunt – is tacitly presented as more willing to accept eccentricity.

Estanislao Romagán and the child can thus be viewed as equivalents in some way, both deficient in the eyes of the adult world. The former is hunchbacked and therefore 'imperfect'; the latter is imperfect in that he has not yet achieved the status of manhood. The boy situates himself in a position superior to his younger sister, Joaquina, who is not even sufficiently socially aware to realize that she is being impolite asking to touch Estanislao's hump.⁵⁷ However, he needs the teacher's reassurance that Joaquina's attitude is unacceptable, and later regresses to take refuge himself in childhood, commenting to his teacher, 'Esas cosas no se hacen con un chico, ¿no le parece, señorita?' (p. 194) when Iriberto tries to make him into a man by giving him alcohol. He thus oscillates between younger and older, between vulnerable and responsible subject positions.

The degree of culpability amongst the adults is divided. All the women are symbolically atemporal in that they come to Estanislao with broken watches for mending, and this places them outside the action and the violence; they merely weep in reaction to it. The role of the boy's mother is interesting; she appears twice, each time trying to deflect the child and to rescue him from the infernal adult world. On both occasions she uses the excuse of a broken ornament or dirty carpet as if wanting to make a pact with the child not to get involved in anything other than the trivial. But, as Semilla Durán points out, 'el intento de preservación de la inocencia efectuado por la madre es necesariamente vano: el niño ha aprendido a relativizar la ley.' (p. 322) The female teacher acts like a second mother, in that the boy seeks the teacher's approval for his opinions.⁵⁸ It is as if his own mother's feeble attempts to isolate him from the atrocious incident had left his guilt unexorcised.

exposes society's persecution of those regarded as misfits. 'El jorobadito', in *El cuento argentino 1930-1959*, selected by Eduardo Romano (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993), pp. 7-25.

⁵⁷ See Marina Warner *No Go the Bogeyman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 298: 'Crook-backs are considered lucky in some parts of the world: in Italy, until recently, rubbing the hump was commonplace.' This custom may have been brought over to Argentina by Italian immigrants.

⁵⁸ We can compare this to 'El diario de Porfiria Bernal', in which the governess Miss Fielding is in effect set up in opposition to Porfiria's mother, and put in a compromising situation. Porfiria will show the diary to her, not to her mother, because 'las madres fácilmente dejan de ser inteligentes' (*Cuentos I*, p. 459).

The party which precedes the main event is celebrating an initiation ritual, the baptism of 'el Rusito',⁵⁹ and it is like a Bacchanal. All lose their inhibitions and the narrator is also subjected to a ritual initiation, that of alcohol. He lays the blame for it on adults for leading him astray, but underneath he obviously feels guilty for being present and somehow implicated in what happens subsequently, tainted by association. Indeed, it is important to note that he defied his mother's plea to remain behind, so he has some responsibility for his witnessing the crime. The child undergoes the ultimate initiation rite of seeing the sacrifice of a victim, as the eccentric and deformed Estanislao is eliminated by the sadistic community of 'normal' people.

Once the ritual atmosphere takes over inside La Mancha, which becomes like a torture chamber or operating theatre, the vocabulary is evidently more advanced than a child's would be, with words such as 'peregrinación'. Pilgrimage is a religious word, giving the whole passage ceremonial overtones and casting Nakoto, the dry-cleaning assistant, as a kind of acolyte. Nakoto puts the lights on in the enormous room (previously unknown to the child), removes his glasses and prepares the irons which begin to appear more sinister, like instruments of torture. The child tries to lighten the increasingly nightmarish atmosphere by putting in a positive narrative aside to his addressee: 'ya ve que progreso en mi vocabulario' (p. 196), but the unacknowledged fact is that he is also progressing inexorably in terms of experience. Learning words such as 'giba' brings complicity with violence. We can compare this linking of language with complicity to the *cuento* 'La siesta en el cedro', where Elena learns the word 'tísica': initially she is attracted by the sound of the word, 'No sé qué voluptuosidad dormía en esa palabra de color de marfil' (*Cuentos I*, p. 43) but then after receiving the adults' warnings about Cecilia's cough 'la palabra cambió de color, se puso negra, del color de un secreto horrible, que mata.' (p. 43) This idea of a single, previously-unknown word, containing a horrible secret that kills, is very powerful, and is common to both stories.⁶⁰

Returning to 'La casa de los relojes', the description of what happens to Estanislao Romagán as an 'operación quirúrgica' again uses an adult word, in an

Porfiria, in this flattery, forces Miss Fielding either to deny the remark and support Porfiria's mother (her employer), or accept it and therefore become complicit with Porfiria's scheme. Miss Fielding exclaims '¡Ya empezaba a abrumarme la responsabilidad de ser institutriz!' (p. 459)

⁵⁹ Such a nickname is a further reminder of how those in the minority, whether through physical differences such as the hunchback, or racial origins, are labelled – albeit affectionately – by the majority.

⁶⁰ Compare also the previously-discussed examples of horrible-sounding words in 'Viaje olvidado' and 'La calle Sarandí', or Midgetina's observation about the word 'melancholia' in *Memoirs of a Midget*: 'I think the word frightened me even more than its meaning. 'Melancholia,' I repeated the melodious syllables.' (p. 235) Calling the syllables melodious, yet their effect frightening, reveals the simultaneous attraction and repulsion caused by the word.

attempt to make the torture chamber hellish atmosphere more clinical. The child senses what will happen as he notes that Estanislao is the only one to laugh; in a desperate attempt to master his rising panic, the child chatters about his ostrich stomach. This confabulation, seizing at normal things, masks the violence with words; what subsequently happens to Estanislao is elided in the gap between ‘Alguien me sacó de allí a los tirones y me llevó a casa’ (p. 196) and the following paragraph which begins with the simple phrase ‘No volví a ver a Estanislao Romagán’, a phrase sufficient to confirm the adult reader’s suppositions about what took place. This elision is supremely subtle; having discreetly suppressed mention of the word ‘muerto’ or ‘muerte’ the effect, of course, is to send it underground, making the sense of death all-pervasive precisely because of being unspoken. As shocking as the presumed manner of Estanislao’s death are the pressures of adult social behaviour which catalysed it. By using the manifestly ‘flawed’ account of a child in this way, Ocampo is able to intensify the adult reader’s sense of horror and of distancing from the adult position.

The death of Estanislao Romagán is also the death of the narrator’s childhood. His favourite of Estanislao’s clocks, which had a case like a ‘casa de madera’ is like a child-sized coffin and the initials with which he signs off the letter – and the narrative – are N.N., the abbreviation used to refer to the body of an unknown person. His desire for news of Estanislao translates into a desperate desire to re-establish the order of innocent curiosity, to be ignorant of the infinite potential for cruelty of the adult world. His continued questioning and appeal to his teacher to confirm and support his moral sense belies a growing sense of panic that order may collapse utterly. In greeting the teacher as her ‘discípulo preferido’, he makes a final attempt to situate himself back within the safe pupil-teacher relationship where the teacher acts as guarantor of an extant moral order and takes the weight of responsibility away from the child. The motivation behind the letter framework of ‘La casa de los relojes’ may also be a moral sense striving to emerge. The child is wrestling with deeply disturbing questions, and is given little guidance, since this moral sense appears to be hopelessly corrupted or compromised in the adults around him. As Sylvia Molloy concludes, this letter ‘deja abierta una puerta hacia lo atroz en lugar de cerrarla’ (‘La exageración’, p. 23); children can be no better than the adults they imitate.

Acting in Bad Faith: The Adult’s Perspective

In ‘La casa de los relojes’, Ocampo uses the child’s perspective as witness of an atrocious event where a group of adults is responsible for killing another adult. The

story 'La oración' from the same collection presents us with what is apparently the reverse situation; an adult witnesses a group of children killing another child. Does Ocampo pretend by this to redress the balance, showing that children are equally cruel? This is certainly the aspect on which, as I have said, critics frequently focus. I would suggest, however, that on closer examination, this story further confirms Ocampo's fundamental mistrust of adult behaviour, of which childish cruelty is simply an imitation.

The narrative framework suggests certain parallels between the two stories; where the boy of 'La casa de los relojes' addressed his narrative-missive to his teacher as a figure of authority, the text of Laura (the adult narrator of 'La oración') takes the form of a confessional *récit* to God, another figure of authority. Between the lines of Laura's text, we sense omissions and elisions; more knowing than N.N., she nevertheless appears desperate for absolution from her guilt. She in fact puts herself into a childish role in order to try and escape responsibility for her own deviousness.

Laura has a child's sense of disillusionment about married life, which she was reluctantly led into 'como se lleva a una niña al colegio o al médico.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 282) She does not love her husband and cannot bear his caresses: 'Cuando él me abraza, quiero huir, esconderme en un bosque (siempre imagino, desde la infancia, un bosque enorme, con nieve, donde me escondo, en mi desdicha)' (p. 282). These repeated references to childhood make her self-image an ambiguous mixture of child and adult;⁶¹ her narration of various scenes with Anselmo, the brick-layer, are curiously difficult to place, mixing coyness, genuine fear and false piety. She appears to be hiding behind a less womanly sense of self, one that is sexualised, but nevertheless still naïve and therefore not responsible for her actions: 'No tengo la culpa si me miran los hombres: me miran como a una chiquilina.' (p. 284) Like N.N., she seeks refuge in an infantile position.

Describing the event to which she was sole witness, she says that she saw some boys fighting, and one trying to push another's head underwater.

Los compañeros de juego aplaudían. Los minutos parecen a veces muy largos o muy cortos. Yo miraba la escena, como en el cinematógrafo, sin pensar que hubiera podido intervenir. Cuando el niño soltó la cabeza de su adversario, éste se hundió en el barro silencioso. Hubo entonces una desbandada. Los niños huyeron. Comprendí que había asistido a un crimen, a un crimen en medio de esos juegos que parecían inocentes. (p. 285)

⁶¹ Santos-Phillips sees Laura's self-characterization as 'seguidora de Dios y [...] ser humilde' (p. 220) but I think this neglects the specifically childish aspect of her character and self-image.

Her narrative is thus more adult than that of N.N. in that she is able to verbalize the details of what she has seen, and is fully aware that a crime has been committed; typically for Ocampo, it is a crime which results from a children's game, as discussed with reference to 'La hija del toro' in Chapter 1. Yet her subsequent attitude with regard to sheltering the criminal child and perhaps tacitly encouraging his delinquency to further her own ends is wilfully in bad faith. With regard to her medicine cabinet, for example, her doctor advises her to keep it locked.

La criminalidad infantil es peligrosa. Los niños usan de cualquier medio para llegar a sus fines. Estudian los diccionarios. Nada se les escapa. Saben todo. Podría envenenar a tu marido, a quien *según me dijiste*, lo tiene entre ojos.
(p. 286, my emphasis)

The doctor is implying that given the opportunity, the boy – Claudio – would poison Laura's husband; but crucially, this idea has been planted in his mind by Laura. Laura's response is that one must build up children's trust, so she deliberately explains the contents of the cabinet to Claudio, including the bottle marked VENENO, poison. Is this impossible naivety, or is Laura presenting herself in a certain light to God, hoping that he will believe her to be acting in good faith, rather than trying to get her husband poisoned by a wayward child? Her meaningless relationship with her husband is evidently the latent content of this prayer, and thus the manifest act of charity through which she is trying to earn the trust of Claudio veils the more sinister recompense she seeks, which is her husband's death and thereby her own freedom. 'Yo sé que un día tendré mi recompensa y ese día volveré a sentirme feliz, *como cuando era soltera* [...]' (p. 287, italics added).

She admits that she is hiding in the church from whatever may have happened at home, and in this evasive action aligns herself with a child. '¿Alguien se habrá escondido alguna vez en uno de tus confesionarios? Es el lugar ideal para que se esconda un niño. ¿Y acaso no me parezco yo a un niño, en estos momentos?' (p. 287)

In many respects, her narrative is indeed that of a child, hoping to beguile the authoritative figure, God, whose forgiveness she seeks. Laura is an adult playing childish games of hide and seek; the manifest criminal is the child Claudio, but the latent criminal is the woman who (with the coyness of a child narrator not owning up to her motives) seeks to abuse the wayward tendencies of Claudio to her own ends, whilst claiming to be doing something for his good. In this respect, Laura is more manipulative than N.N., whose confabulation was partly an unconscious self-defence mechanism, though mixed with elements of guilt. By juxtaposing these two stories, we can see how Ocampo presents children's behaviour as fated to be no better than the adults they

imitate, and conversely, adult's behaviour as retaining certain traits associated with childhood, not necessarily good ones.

Many of Ocampo's stories are based around a similar situation in which adults manipulate or coerce children, persuading them by insidious suggestion to commit atrocious acts. Roberta in 'La boda' from *Las invitadas* dominates the vulnerable young narrator, Gabriela, by apparently treating her like an equal: 'me hablaba a veces como si yo fuera grande y a veces como si ella y yo fuéramos chicas de siete años.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 262)⁶² They are not equal, however; the child recognizes this, but has no control: 'Es misterioso el dominio que Roberta ejercía sobre mí' (p. 262). True to Ocampo's refusal to explain, however, it is difficult to determine the amount of blame on either part at the crucial moment in the story. In her fierce loyalty to Roberta, Gabriela suggests placing a poisonous spider in the wedding headdress of Roberta's cousin, Arminda, of whose engagement Roberta is jealous. This scene takes place in the hairdresser's, where Roberta is under one of the electric driers (which have already symbolically prepared her for combat, since the helmet-like shape makes her look like a warrior). Gabriela's suggestion falls into the ambiguous communicative void created by the noise of the drier: 'El ruido del secador eléctrico *seguramente* no dejaba oír mi voz' (p. 264, emphasis added). The word 'seguramente' (as did the phrase 'sin duda' earlier) allows precisely the right amount of doubt to creep in; surely Roberta *has* heard, and is making as if she had not, in order to avoid taking responsibility for the action. All of this is narrated by the child, who is going back over the events in her mind, attempting to disentangle her own actions from the tacit incitements of Roberta. 'Se me antojó que Roberta me miraba' (p. 264); she doubts her own perceptions. 'Inclinó la cabeza como si asintiera' (p. 264); she doubts her own interpretations. Roberta's complicity is not in question, however, since when the deed is done, she swears Gabriela to secrecy, twisting her arm until she cries. A pact is thus sealed, and Gabriela's assent, 'Seré una tumba' is symbolically prophetic both of the death of Arminda, and more so of her own silence, which is the death of innocence.

The death of innocence, or rather the tortured vision that innocence was always already corrupted steers us towards the poet Alejandra Pizarnik. Having explored in these first two chapters the importance of childhood and the child's perspective to the work of Silvina Ocampo, and examined her attitudes to youth, age and the aging process, the following chapter will examine some of these issues in relation to the work

⁶² Discussed by Santos-Phillips, pp. 67-71.

of Pizarnik. She shared Ocampo's fascination for childhood, but in her case, the effect this had on her self-image and self-positioning was even more profound.

Chapter 3: Childhood in Alejandra Pizarnik

The Pizarnik Myth

'The troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds – meet of child and desperado.' (Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 56)

'Like all the new young his sole provision for old age is hope of an early death.' (*Nightwood*, p. 180)

The poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik is widely known in Argentina and has influenced many subsequent poets; this is despite her relatively small output and the difficulty, until recently, of obtaining copies of her texts.¹ Indeed she has acquired something close to cult status. The Buenos Aires poetry magazine *La Guacha* refers to Pizarnik as 'este mito porteño',² César Aira alludes to 'el mito personal de la poeta'³ whilst in *Clarín* she is 'la figura mítica de la poeta suicida';⁴ Luis Chitarroni claims of her that 'basta nombrarla para que en el aire vibren la poesía y la leyenda'⁵ and Gabriela De Cicco claims that this process of mythologization occurred very rapidly.⁶ Melissa A. Lockhart's summing-up of Pizarnik's reception also alludes to this mythologized status: 'Pizarnik continues to be one of the most discussed Argentine poets of the last thirty years and her death, if in fact it did not initiate her rise

¹ See Susan Bassnett's 'Speaking with many voices: The poems of Alejandra Pizarnik', in *Knives and Angels*, pp. 36-51 (p. 37). 'Some texts are out of print, some virtually unobtainable, and some anthologized and varying considerably from edition to edition. In short, there is no authoritative body of Pizarnik texts.' Fortunately this situation is changing, thanks to Cristina Piña's landmark editions of the *Obras completas: Poesía completa y prosa selecta* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1990; rev. 1994) and her recent selection, *Alejandra Pizarnik: Textos selectos* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1999). Another new edition of Pizarnik's complete works together with a fuller selection from her diaries and notebooks is currently in preparation in Barcelona. Her work is also gradually spreading to an English-speaking audience; recent translations include the BCLA/BCLT 1999 prize-winning version by Cecilia Rossi of *Árbol de Diana, Diana's Tree*. Announced in *In Other Words*, 13-14 (1999-2000), 130.

² Front cover of *La Guacha*, 1.3 (1998).

³ César Aira, *Alejandra Pizarnik* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 1998), pp. 78, 81 and 86.

⁴ Marcelo Pichon Rivière, 'Desventuras y peligros de los escritos íntimos', *Clarín, Suplemento Cultura y Nación*, 7 May 1998, pp. 2-3 (p. 3).

⁵ In the introduction to Juan Jacobo Bajarlía's personal testimony, *Alejandra Pizarnik: Anatomía de un recuerdo* (Buenos Aires: Almagesto, 1998), p. 5.

⁶ Gabriela De Cicco, 'Alejandra Revisited', *Feminaria*, 8.16 (May 1996), 17-18. 'Creado el mito poco tiempo después de su muerte ocurrida en 1972; canonizada por una crítica que podríamos llamar hermenéutica [...] y sobredimensionada en los ochenta por un abuso de citas, poemas dedicados a ella y copias burdas de sus poemas' (p. 17).

in popularity, at least contributed to making her an almost mythical figure in the realm of Argentine letters.⁷ In the first essay of Cristina Piña's recent collection (charting the key moments of her lasting fascination with Pizarnik), Piña looks at how the Pizarnik 'myth' continues, and has not been absorbed and naturalized by subsequent literary horizons.⁸ Interviewed in *La Guacha* (p. 8), Piña describes how when Pizarnik's work first came to be known it was largely amongst young people, and almost thirty years after her death they are still her most avid readers (*Poesía y experiencia del límite*, p. 19). Why and how has Pizarnik become such a myth, and why should her work appeal particularly to young people? The fact that she died so tragically young, and possibly by suicide,⁹ creates an aura of intense vulnerability coupled with an unwillingness to compromise, feelings to which young people in particular can relate. Furthermore, despite her own lack of political commitment, the anguished fervour of Pizarnik's 'poetry' often touches a chord with the politically disenchanted; some of her poetry and her late experimental prose work in particular has been appropriated by various alternative theatre groups which normally align themselves with a radical political agenda.¹⁰ There are many facets to Pizarnik's persona, but Jason Wilson's assessment of Pizarnik's appeal alludes to the aspect of the Pizarnik myth upon which I shall focus: 'Her work has attracted cult readers to its risky plight, and pity for the poet's sense of being [...] exiled into a dull adult's world, like an Alice expelled from Wonderland, facing death.'¹¹ Wilson's linking of the poet to Alice has its textual source in her own poem 'Infancia' (*Obras*, p. 100), but what has further fuelled this aspect of the Pizarnik myth is the childlike self-image which she created and projected, an image which enhances the 'risky plight' of her poems and gives them a hauntingly authentic resonance. Her friend Juan José Hernández declares that 'quienes la conocimos sabemos

⁷ In *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, ed. by Verity Smith (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 657-59 (p. 658).

⁸ 'La palabra obscena', in *Poesía y experiencia del límite: Leer a Alejandra Pizarnik* (Buenos Aires: Botella al Mar, 1999), pp. 17-63 (pp. 18-19).

⁹ It is impossible to ascertain whether the second overdose which caused her death was intentional or accidental, but either way, her poetic persona was obsessed with – and craved – death.

¹⁰ Fernando Noy and Batato Barea created various performance pieces in the 1980s using Pizarnik's poetry, for example *El puré de Alejandra* and *Los perros comen huesos* (a line from *Los poseídos entre lilas*). 'Estábamos en contra de todas las instituciones, de todo lo que no te permitía 'ser'. Alejandra Pizarnik tenía que ver con esto y Batato tomó esta parte.' From Jorge Dubatti, *Batato Barea y el nuevo teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1995), p. 154. In April 1998 several performances of Pizarnik's Beckettian theatre piece, *Los poseídos entre lilas*, were staged in the Salón Pueyrredón 946, Buenos Aires, by an alternative theatre group, and the performances were attended almost entirely by students.

¹¹ Jason Wilson, 'Latin American Poetry Since 1950', in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. by Leslie Bethell, 11 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984 –), X, *Latin America Since 1930: Ideas, Culture and Society* (1995), 257-86 (p. 263). The Alice reference is made by Pizarnik herself in various poems and interviews, and is discussed in more detail in my article 'La pequeña Alice: Alejandra Pizarnik and Alice in Wonderland', *Fragmentos*, 16 (1999), 41-55.

cuánto dramatismo y artificio había en su aspecto anñado y *négligée*'.¹² Many of the published photographs of her foster and perpetuate this aura of childishness, since they picture her with dolls, in a children's playground, or looking up at the camera as if

from a child's perspective. Those that do not present the childish side of Pizarnik present instead the tortured poet with eyes wide staring blankly as if looking into death ('alguien entra en la muerte / con los ojos abiertos', *Obras*, p. 100). Pizarnik shares the childish wide eyes of the preceding myth of Argentine letters, Silvina Ocampo, as described by Pichon Rivière; what she does not share, however, is Silvina's total abhorrence of cameras; in Pizarnik's case, the photographs of her which stress this wide-eyed look seem to affiliate her with Surrealist images, such as the cover of the 1930 Surrealist publication *La femme visible* by Salvador Dalí, which features just the eyes of his muse, Gala.

Requeni's tribute to Pizarnik links these wide eyes to Alice: 'ojos claros, ensanchados por el asombro como los de Alicia en el País de las Maravillas.'¹³ After her death, Pizarnik was frequently presented as a child-like figure in various homages: Orozco's 'Pavana para una infanta difunta', Cortázar's 'Aquí Alejandra' where he refers to her affectionately as *bicho*, and the

¹² Juan José Hernández, 'Alejandra Pizarnik en el recuerdo (1935 [sic] – 1972)', copy of text publ. in *La Gaceta de Tucumán*, 1997.

¹³ Antonio Requeni, 'Recuerdo de Alejandra Pizarnik', *Alba de América* 4.6-7 (1986), 205-14 (p. 205).

'Memoria de Alejandra' by Raúl Gustavo Aguirre, which describes her as 'una niña triste que creía en la magia'.¹⁴ The fact that both she and her poetry exuded such an air of childish vulnerability, and that after her death she has been 'canonized' as a child poet has made 'el mito Pizarnik' that much more compelling; César Aira sees the Pizarnik myth as a fusion of life and poetry, 'la fusión de vida y poesía en términos de mito personal' (Aira, p. 86).

Pizarnik often presented a deliberate self-image which emanated from, and reinforced, her childlike poetic persona. The more pressing that resigning herself to 'la adultez definitiva' became, the more strongly she resisted it.¹⁵ Indeed, on a postcard to the Catalan painter and publisher Antonio Beneyto, she claims a later birthdate than was really the case, as if desperate to seem younger. The card is dated 12 September 1972 and on it Pizarnik states: 'Nací en 1939 y no en 1936.'¹⁶ Such desperation issues from her radical views of the poet which require poetry to be a living act, poet and poem as one. 'Ojalá pudiera vivir solamente en extasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo' (*Obras*, p. 156). This ardent desire, akin to that of Octavio Paz whom she much admired, appeared to demand an absolute correspondence between herself and the 'niña extraviada' who wanders through her poetry. Pizarnik's poetry is marked by a preference for such diminutive, insubstantial figures, as has been noted by Aira and others. Alejandro Fontenla comments on 'visiones de sí misma que parecen deslizarse hacia una imagen preferida: la de una pajarita de papel, una muñequita que acentúa su insignificancia'.¹⁷ These defenceless, even pathetic figures include the 'muchacha' (*Obras*, p. 19), 'niña ciega de alma' (p. 28), 'hija del viento' (p. 39), 'muchacha desnuda' (p. 62), 'la pequeña olvidada' (p. 70), 'una niña de seda sonámbula' (p. 74), 'la pequeña muerta' (p. 79), 'la niña calcinada' (p. 223), 'la pequeña viajera' (p. 85), 'dama pequeñísima' (p. 102), 'los niños perdidos en el bosque' (p. 135) and vague 'pequeños seres' (p. 237). They are often indicative of the disturbing nature of the poetry: the 'niña sonámbula' inhabits worlds close to violently surreal paintings. Rather than drawing on and transmuting through fiction a repository of childhood memories and observations as Ocampo does, Pizarnik's creative act is to bring her adult self ever

¹⁴ 'Pavana para una infanta difunta', in *Mutaciones de la realidad* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1979), pp. 73-77. 'Aquí Alejandra', in *Salvo el crepúsculo* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Imagen, 1984) pp. 279-85. 'Memoria de Alejandra' is reproduced in Susana H. Haydu, *Alejandra Pizarnik: Evolución de un lenguaje poético* (Washington: Organization of American States, 1996), p. 171.

¹⁵ Frank Graziano, *Alejandra Pizarnik: Semblanza* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), p. 277.

¹⁶ Courtesy of Carlota Caulfield. The postcard was presumably intended for Beneyto's preparation of the anthology *El deseo de la palabra*. Several other sources, including Pizarnik's elder sister Myriam Pizarnik de Nassis, and her close friend Juan-Jacobo Bajarlía, give her birth date as 1936, whilst Juan José Hernández gives it as 1935 in his testimony, 'Alejandra Pizarnik en el recuerdo'.

¹⁷ In his prologue to *Alejandra Pizarnik, Poemas: Antología*, p. IV.

closer to these personae of her poetry. Modelling her lifestyle with adolescent fervour on *poètes maudits*, as typified by Lautréamont,¹⁸ Pizarnik's rejection of 'Flora' and the bourgeois childhood with which that name was associated, seems a natural progression. Instead she cultivates the image of the 'niña viajera', orphan-like, vulnerable but marked by a wide-eyed and precocious fascination for death. Her obsession with childhood became enshrined in a definitive rejection of the 'dull adult's world'.

Pizarnik's Critical Reception

Many critics have raised the theme of childhood in relationship to Pizarnik's work, in particular Tamara Kamenszain, Cristina Piña, Alicia Genovese, Inés Malinow, Delfina Muschiatti, Diana Bellessi and César Aira. According to Kamenszain, 'la pasión de escribir ya es en Pizarnik un drama adolescente y no un capricho infantil',¹⁹ yet the writing self is 'la niña muerta o perdida en el juego de las escondidas' (p. 21). Cristina Piña takes childhood as one of the main themes in her early study *La palabra como destino*, setting Pizarnik's work within a Paz-like framework of harking back to 'el Gran Tiempo mítico, asimilado, poética y vitalmente a la infancia'.²⁰ Childhood thus becomes a dimension of the absolute; in a later article, Piña again evokes this mythical aura by singling out 'la recuperación del espacio mágico de la infancia' as one of Pizarnik's main themes.²¹ Alicia Genovese warns against stereotyping Pizarnik as 'la niña cruel' or 'la nena surrealista, la niña maldita' and against 'confundir un tic personal con la niñez, esa otra orilla, ese topos poético', but she concedes that the childish persona was a mask that Alejandra knew how to wear with great effect.²² Her reinforcement of the boundary between poetic topos and person is apposite yet problematic; it is precisely Pizarnik's own recognition that childhood can no longer be anything for her *but* a poetic topos which causes her such personal anguish and catalyses her absorption of self into poetic persona. Inés Malinow takes a strongly psychological approach to the complexities of Pizarnik's poetic persona: 'acaso su

¹⁸ Lautréamont was Uruguayan, but born in a French colony in Montevideo and educated in France. There are many striking similarities between Lautréamont's approach to his creative work and that of Pizarnik. For instance, his major work *Les chants de Maldoror* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990; first publ. 1868) 's'est développé en contrepoint ou en accompagnement de sa vie, jusqu'à prendre la place de celui qui le composait, jusqu'à le vampiriser' (p. 15); the vampire metaphor is also used by Pizarnik (see *Obras*, p. 213). He often wrote all night in a mode of 'production onirique insomniacque' (p. 36), as did Pizarnik, and in his work he continually evokes other literature in 'une mutation délibérée de textes déjà constitués' (p. 39), a similar process to Pizarnik's re-writings.

¹⁹ Tamara Kamenszain, 'La niña extraviada en Pizarnik', in *La edad de la poesía* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 1996), pp. 19-25 (p. 20).

²⁰ Cristina Piña, *La palabra como destino: Un acercamiento a la poesía de Alejandra Pizarnik* (Buenos Aires: Botella al Mar, 1981), p. 13.

²¹ Cristina Piña, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: La extranjera', in *Mujeres argentinas*, ed. by María Esther de Miguel, pp. 297-332 (p. 311).

ternura por los niños exprese su incapacidad de formar una casa, una familia'.²³ She, like Genovese, points out that there was a theatrical element to Alejandra's personality: 'Este "jugar a Alejandra" es acaso una de las claves de su personalidad. Quizás muere justamente porque ya es grande, ha crecido, tiene 36 años, no es más la adolescente.' (p. [5]) Pizarnik openly acknowledges in a letter to her analyst that she creates this childish or adolescent role, but cannot sustain it indefinitely: 'me siento aún adolescente pero por fin cansada de jugar al personaje alejandrino. De todos modos no hay ante quien jugar, a quien escandalizar, a quien conformar'. (*Correspondencia*, p. 53) Delfina Muschietti, whilst subtitled her study of Pizarnik 'la niña asesinada', finds two sides to this girl: 'la *autómata-muñeca* y la *autónoma*', making reference to Pizarnik's links with the Surrealist tradition, which I shall explore later.²⁴ Diana Bellessi, again like Genovese, warns against only seeing Pizarnik as the 'trágica niña que no crece y que paga con la muerte'.²⁵ César Aira laments that Pizarnik is so often referred to using a few childish metaphors such as 'pequeña náufraga' and 'niña extraviada', since he sees these as mere 'maniquí[es] de Yo' which allow Pizarnik to develop her poetic voice without dissolving into narcissism (Aira, pp. 17-18). This may well be the case, but the fact remains that these are the figures she adopts, in preference to other ways of representing the poetic self.

Examining these critical reflections, it is clear that critics are aware of a strong temptation on the part of readers and other critics alike to describe both Pizarnik's poetry and her as a person using images from the poetry itself. The effect of this is to create a circular system, encouraging identification between the poet, her poetic personae and her poetic creation.²⁶ Ivonne Bordelois, one of Pizarnik's closest friends, refers to her twice in the introduction to *Correspondencia Pizarnik* as 'la pequeña sonámbula', the first time without using quotation marks as if the description were common parlance, and the second time within quotation marks, drawing our attention to

²² Alicia Genovese, 'La viajera en el desierto', *Feminaria*, 8.16 (1996), 10-11.

²³ In introduction to Alejandra Pizarnik, *Poemas*, pp. [2-7] (p. [3]).

²⁴ Delfina Muschietti, 'Loba azul es mi nombre', *Gandhi* 1.2 (1997), p. 8. This article is about Muschietti's as yet unpublished book, *Alejandra Pizarnik: La niña asesinada* (Buenos Aires: Almagesto, announced 1998).

²⁵ Diana Bellessi, 'Un recuerdo suntuoso', *Feminaria* 8.16 (1996), 22-23.

²⁶ See for instance Alejandro Fontenla's prologue: 'Pero ante la necesidad de presentar, de explicar, veamos los problemas. En primer lugar, después de haber leído toda la obra, [...] cómo regresar al lenguaje analítico, cómo decir con palabras que ahora ya no sirven qué es [...] "un canto de niña perdida en una silenciosa ciudad en ruinas".' In *Alejandra Pizarnik, Poemas: Antología* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), pp. I-VIII (p. II).

the fact that it is a description taken directly from the poetry.²⁷ The temptation to blur the line between poet and poetic persona is strong. Whilst it is wrong to conflate them, as Genovese and others rightly object, it is nevertheless indisputable that the person Alejandra Pizarnik became dangerously caught up in the struggles suffered by her poetic persona. Indeed, in a letter to Rubén Vela she makes clear this lack of distance: ‘debo hablar de poesía, de la mía, de la que estoy haciendo, de la que está haciéndome...’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 43). She creates the poetry and the poetry simultaneously creates her. Cristina Piña spells out the inevitable outcome of this symbiosis which shows increasingly parasitic tendencies: ‘la Flora-persona biográfica es sustituida por el personaje Alejandra-poeta maldita, quien, en cumplimiento de su destino literario-vital, muere ritualmente la noche del 25 de septiembre de 1972.’ (*Mujeres argentinas*, p.301)

Diary and Poetry

By comparing published extracts of her diaries with the poetry, and also taking account of other material, I shall examine the Pizarnik myth, concentrating on the contradictory and obsessive nature of her relationship to childhood. Pizarnik herself continually analyses and interprets her own diary as if it were another of the many literary texts which she subjects to intense and careful scrutiny. The other material on which I draw includes correspondence, interviews, statements by friends, articles on her work and by her on others’ work, critical reception in newspapers, photographs of her and reproductions of her drawings. In treating works, diaries and correspondence as a kind of textual continuum, I am consciously interweaving references to Pizarnik’s creation of self and to her poetic personae, whilst being aware of the risks outlined above of simplistically equating them.

The view of childhood presented in Pizarnik’s poetry is never simply that of a lost paradise, remembered with nostalgia;²⁸ there are traces of innocence, but these are brief glimmers in an often nightmarish world which is closely associated with death, fear, violation, abandonment and orphanhood. In her diaries, the emphasis is different; there is a struggle between conflicting voices within the poet: the voices of child, adolescent and adult whose desires compete for protection, love and poetic integrity.

²⁷ ‘No sólo rescatar la memoria de la pequeña sonámbula al pie del abismo [...]’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 20); ‘“La pequeña sonámbula en su cornisa de niebla” convive con una mujer de presencia literaria activa, alerta y rápida.’ (p. 26)

²⁸ Although in a very early interview, after Pizarnik received the Primer Premio Municipal for *Los trabajos y las noches* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1965), the journalist’s final line is that she ‘sigue trabajando sobre Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, y sobre sus nostalgias’ (my emphasis). *El Mundo*, 20 November 1966, [n.p.].

One would expect such differences, given that the diaries are primarily Pizarnik's outlet for expressing her personal vulnerability and anxieties, whilst the poetry – however much a part of her – is necessarily a more considered than 'automatic' aesthetic creation. Nevertheless, Pizarnik published certain sections of the diaries, thereby deliberately placing them in the public sphere and tacitly inviting comparisons between their concerns and the thematics of the poetry.²⁹ Through the diaries, and in her correspondence, she constructed and presented herself as self-consciously as she would a literary character: 'La vida perdida para la literatura por culpa de la literatura. Por hacer de mí un personaje literario en la vida real fracaso en mi intento de hacer literatura con mi vida real pues esta no existe: es literatura.' (15 April 1961; *Poemas*, p. 117) Pizarnik's reading of her own life as detailed in the diaries and revealed in letters to friends becomes caught up with the problematics of her poetry. As Seg laments in *Los poseídos entre lilas*, 'Todos me dicen que tengo una larga resplandeciente vida por vivir. Pero yo sé que sólo tengo mis propias palabras que me vuelven. [...] Es tarde para hacerme una máscara.' (*Obras*, p. 273)

For the Pizarnik of the diaries, looking young is an excuse to behave outrageously, but sustaining this childish mask becomes increasingly difficult. Pizarnik soon begins to lament the fact that she no longer has her childish face which once excused her precocious behaviour. She watches with angst as her youth gives way relentlessly to maturity and critics and readers expect her conduct and poetic output to develop correspondingly. The diaries reveal Pizarnik's repugnance at being absorbed into the seemingly anonymous adult world; she sees this process as tantamount to relinquishing her high ambitions, the precocity of her talent, and her role as the favourite appealing young poet who inspires protective feelings in others. The childlike part of her is that which is the more poetic; adulthood doesn't fit into her concept of a poetic life. For Pizarnik there is thus a permanent tension between poetic concept and mundane reality. How much her late prose works such as *Hilda la polígrafa* are a reflection of these anxieties is a matter for debate; although Pizarnik had been experimenting with lewd word-play at least since the early sixties (see for instance the letters to Ana María Barrenechea and Sylvia Molloy reproduced in *Correspondencia*, pp. 100 and 106 respectively) and indeed had always had a *risqué* sense of humour, these final posthumously-published works seem to hint at a kind of post-adolescent desperation as to what direction her work (and life) was taking, and whether she will

²⁹ 'Diario 1960-1961' was published very shortly after it was written, contributing directly to the creation of the Pizarnik myth in the aptly-named Colombian journal *Mito*, 7.39-40 (1961-62), 110-15. My

ever find the voice she seeks. Antonio Requeni later described these works as ‘intentos desesperados por buscar otros caminos’.³⁰ (*La Guacha*, p. 7) It is as though the widening gap between childish poetic persona and poet causes intolerable anxiety.

From the vulnerable ‘niña extraviada’ of early poems and the naïve stuttering adolescent of early poetry readings,³¹ we witness a gradual shift towards an ‘enfant terrible’ or ‘niña monstruo’; see for instance her poem ‘Para Janis Joplin’ in which she declares ‘por eso me confío a una niña monstruo’ (*Obras*, p. 242). This shift attempts to bridge the gap between childish poetic persona and self, but is also largely motivated by a growing resentment at language’s failure to provide her with security, ‘Un libro o una morada en donde guarecerme’ (*Semblanza*, p. 257). Her reaction is to get back at language, lashing out in desperation, but the continued intertwining of Pizarnik’s poetic and real selves results in revenge on the self as much as on language.

The Poet and Work: Cocteau, Breton and Surrealism

Pizarnik’s self-alignment with a childlike persona clearly emerges with respect to work, and in her development of a distinctive attitude to poetic work in particular. Robin Buss, in his guide to Jean Cocteau’s *Les enfants terribles*, discusses the Romantic concept of childhood as poetic and the related myth of the Poet as a childlike figure.³² This linking together of poet and child is based on them both operating outside the routines of work laid down for the rest of society. Buss then outlines the situation of the *poètes maudits* who suffer as a consequence of ‘bourgeois society’s rejection of the Poet’s child-like vision, of the Poet’s need to remain uncontaminated by everyday life, to do nothing, in order to create’.³³ As much as bourgeois society rejecting her child-like vision, Pizarnik deliberately rejects bourgeois society and stubbornly pits her child-like vision against it. Buss’s description fits Pizarnik quite well, in that many times in her diary, and to friends, she insists on her inability to commit herself to work as others do; her only

quotations will be taken from its republication in *Poemas*.

³⁰ See also *Correspondencia*, p. 109 for Pizarnik’s comment to María Elena Arias López about the most lyrical sections of her late prose: ‘No me gusta. Eso es lo que he sido’, implying that this style no longer expresses her adequately.

³¹ Cristina Piña’s biography of Pizarnik gives a brief sketch of a poetry reading involving Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell (only three years Alejandra’s senior) - suave, elegant, self-assured, and Alejandra - insecure, shy and scruffy. Elizabeth, taking on a sisterly and protective role, rescued Alejandra from her state of chronic nervousness on this occasion (and doubtless on many others) allowing the maturity of Alejandra’s poetry to speak for her. *Alejandra Pizarnik* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991), pp. 77-78.

³² Robin Buss, *Cocteau, ‘Les Enfants Terribles’: Critical Guides to French Texts* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1986), pp. 82-84.

³³ It is not clear whether Pizarnik had any direct connection with Cocteau, although he did not die until 1963, so she could theoretically have seen him while she was in Paris. She may well also have seen Cocteau’s films, which were influential on Latin American cinema and culture.

possible work is to create poetry. Describing the routine office work she undertook sporadically whilst in Paris, she says:

Por más que me demuestre lo contrario no sirvo para las tareas de creación en una oficina simplemente porque no soy de este mundo. Es más: muchas veces quise ser periodista, pero sé bien que lo quise por juego de niña. En el fondo me horroriza escribir sobre no importa qué para ganar dinero. [...] Una oficinista más; lindo destino para una poeta enamorada de los ángeles. [...] ¿Qué artículos de consumo fabricar con mi lenguaje de melancolía a perpetuidad?

En cierto modo no hago nada y por otra parte trabajo más que ningún condenado a trabajos forzados. Es siempre una cuestión filológica. Llamo 'trabajo' a todo: aun a los paseos, a las lecturas, a los encuentros con amigos y conocidos, etcétera.³⁴

She thus believes that her poetry is work, but – as she comments in correspondence – the inability to do that work to a regular daily rhythm makes it difficult to sustain, isolating and obsessive (*Correspondencia*, p. 53). Her scorn for 'artículos de consumo' is plain, but the question of earning a living does however induce a certain amount of guilt on her part; calling everything work betrays a sensitivity to the potential criticism that she is only able to play the part of the bohemian poet because she is supported by money from her bourgeois parents. She resents this safety net and repeatedly attempts to give a more disciplined framework to her poetic work by intending to embark on studies of, for example, the prose poem. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that she did produce a significant body of critical articles on other writers (many published in *Sur*, *Zona Franca*, *Les Lettres nouvelles* and other respected journals) which demonstrate her excellence as a critical reader and writer.³⁵ But even this literary work is still undertaken somewhat grudgingly as 'work', in contrast to her poetry which is her very being. 'Debería dedicarme a la nota sobre Utrillo y, a modo de complemento poético, el art. [sic] sobre el libro de Octavio [Paz]. El primero es *trabajo*; el segundo entre más en lo mío.' (*Semblanza*, p.275) Paz enters more into her poetic 'work' since they share a 'vital attitude' (Wilson, *Octavio Paz*, p. 6) embodied in poetry. Pizarnik's greatest delight at receiving the Guggenheim award in 1968 was that of being able to prove to her mother that her poetic activity was both her destiny and a means, albeit meagre, of

³⁴ First quotation taken from Inés Malinow in her introduction to *Poemas*, pp. [4-6]. Second quotation from *Semblanza*, p. 272.

³⁵ The article on Silvina Ocampo to be discussed in Chapter 4 is a prime example. As yet there is no publication of Pizarnik's collected critical writings, but Leticia Schilman in Buenos Aires is currently gathering together all the relevant material. A letter dated 18 October 1966 to Emir Rodríguez Monegal demonstrates how seriously Pizarnik took this critical writing – but also her difficulty in making herself work within deadlines: 'Desde hace cinco días me dedico únicamente a la nota sobre *Todos los fuegos el fuego* de Julio Cortázar, destinada a *Mundo Nuevo*. Así, no sólo le ruego perdonar esta absurda demora, sino permitir que la prolongue. Si bien no me detendré en la nota todo el tiempo que quisiera, que el libro

earning some money of her own.³⁶ But it is André Breton's typically provocative declaration in *Nadja* on the subject of work which proves the most likely model for Pizarnik's distinction between 'trabajo' and 'lo mío':

Et qu'on ne me parle pas, après cela, du travail, je veux dire de la valeur morale du travail. Je suis contraint d'accepter l'idée du travail comme nécessité matérielle [...] Que les sinistres obligations de la vie me l'imposent, soit, qu'on me demande d'y croire, de révéler le mien ou celui des autres, jamais [...] Rien ne sert d'être vivant, le temps qu'on travaille. L'événement dont chacun est en droit d'attendre la révélation du sens de sa propre vie, cet événement que peut-être je n'ai pas encore trouvé mais sur la voie duquel je me cherche, *n'est pas au prix du travail*.³⁷

Pizarnik read *Nadja* extremely closely, and wrote an article on it in which she expresses the depth of her affinity with the book.³⁸ Like Breton, she would not expect any kind of revelation about her life to come through ordinary work; rather, through poetic Work at which she is constantly 'trabajando mucho, trabajando como quien quiere salvarse' (*Correspondencia*, p. 71). This verb, 'salvarse', with its religious connotations, reveals Pizarnik's substitution of poetry for religious belief, which is further supported by her borrowing and re-evaluation (as a 'poeta enamorada de los ángeles') of religious symbols such as angels, to be discussed towards the end of this chapter. In this respect she can be aligned with both Paz and Breton who Wilson describes as regarding poetry as a 'sacred fever' (*Octavio Paz*, p. 175). The Pizarnik myth thus combines elements of the Romantic and the Surrealist in terms of the artist's relationship to work.

Pizarnik not only has affinities with Breton in terms of her concept of work; through her reading of Breton and friendship with Paz, she also nurtured a certain closeness to the Surrealists in general. Both orphanhood, and open, staring eyes are associated with Surrealism; these become integral characteristics of the childlike personae which people her poetry, and will be discussed in more depth later.³⁹ Neither Paz nor Pizarnik took up the Surrealist practice of automatic writing, however, and

merece, tampoco es posible confeccionar una nota simple y trivial'. Letter courtesy of Princeton University Library.

³⁶ See diary for 26 July 1968: 'Ayer me enteré de que me concedieron la beca. Mi euforia por el aspecto económico del asunto, es decir: hablar de millones con mi madre sabiendo las dos que esa cantidad enorme proviene de mi oficio de poeta. En efecto, es como si algo a modo de destino me ayudara a afrontar mi destino de poeta.' (*Semblanza*, p. 288).

³⁷ André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 68.

³⁸ 'Relectura de *Nadja* de André Breton', reproduced in *Obras*, pp. 393-401.

³⁹ For a full discussion of Paz and Surrealism see Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz: A Study of his Poetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979). For a specific study of the theme of opening and closing eyes, which Paul Éluard encapsulates in his maxim that one should close one's eyes so that the doors of the marvellous open (Wilson, p. 63), see Wilson's 'Abrir/cerrar los ojos: A Recurrent Theme in the Poetry of Octavio Paz', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 48 (1971), 44-56. This theme forms the subject of a short letter from Pizarnik to Rita Geada, reproduced in *Correspondencia* (p. 138), and also becomes a game for Seg in *Los*

Alicia Genovese dissociates Pizarnik from Surrealism on this count: ‘Su manera de corregir en nada podría asemejarse a la escritura automática, ni a ningún otro recurso que no implique la duda, la mayor desconfianza hacia el lenguaje.’⁴⁰ Pizarnik’s ultimate loss of faith in the power of language also represents a crucial difference both from Paz and from the Surrealist position. For this reason, various critics have disputed her inclusion in the category of Argentine Surrealists. Jason Wilson alludes to this problem of classification by calling Pizarnik the ‘most extremist Argentine “surrealist” poet’, (*Cambridge History*, X, 262). Suzanne Chávez Silverman describes Surrealism as ‘the literary movement to which Pizarnik owes her greatest debt and yet from which she differs profoundly’.⁴¹ Francisco Lasarte is more categorical in his article ‘Más allá del surrealismo: La poesía de Alejandra Pizarnik’, where he states that ‘en el fondo, Pizarnik delata una profunda incomodidad ante su propio discurso poético, y esto la diferencia radicalmente de los poetas surrealistas. Su crítica de la palabra es absoluta.’⁴² Aira, however, claims that Pizarnik preserves the Surrealist idea of a work of art as document; according to his reading, her poetry is a document of her persona and the link between poetry and life is preserved.⁴³ Furthermore, Pizarnik participated in those classic Surrealist documents, *cadáveres exquisitos*, which reveal her love of the visual, to be discussed in Chapter 4.

A point of intersection between Pizarnik’s poetry and Surrealism not shared by Paz is the Surrealist movement’s initial interest in the inspiration of those people labelled as mad by society. I say labelled as mad; Breton makes clear his view that there is no clear dividing line between madness and non-madness: ‘L’absence bien connue de frontière entre la *non-folie* et la folie’ (*Nadja*, p. 171). With customary excess, he states in his *Manifeste du Surréalisme* of 1924:

Les confidences des fous, je passerais ma vie à les provoquer. Ce sont gens d’une honnêteté scrupuleuse, et dont l’innocence n’a d’égale que la mienne. Il fallut que Colomb partît avec des fous pour découvrir l’Amérique. Et voyez comme cette folie a pris corps, et duré.⁴⁴

We take Breton’s point, despite his jocular European superiority akin to Ortega’s parental attitude discussed in Chapter 1. Pizarnik’s own horrified fascination with

poseídos entre lilas, who opens and shuts his eyes repeatedly, to the accompaniment of alternate raising and lowering of the level of stage lighting (*Obras*, p. 279).

⁴⁰ From ‘La proyección del verso’, *El Cronista Cultural*, 18 October 1993, pp. 10-11 (p. 10).

⁴¹ ‘The Discourse of Madness in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik’, *Monographic Review / Revista Monográfica*, 6 (1990), 274-81 (p. 276).

⁴² *Revista Iberoamericana*, 125 (1983), 867-77 (p. 867).

⁴³ ‘Seguía asegurando en ella el enlace poesía-vida. [...] En A.P. [sic] la documentación, puramente autobiográfica, reincorpora lo subjetivo, y con ello la calidad; el poema se vuelve documento de su propia calidad.’ (Aira, p. 36)

madness appears to situate this (non-existent) frontier within herself, as will be discussed below.

Those seen as existing on the fringes of society's rules, such as children, were also considered by Breton to be less fettered by social conventions. As regards the inspiration of children or childhood memories, Breton's manifesto has this to say:

Des souvenirs d'enfance [...] se dégage un sentiment d'inaccaparé et par la suite de *dévoiyé*, que je tiens pour le plus fécond qui existe. C'est peut-être l'enfance qui approche le plus de la 'vraie vie'; l'enfance au-delà de laquelle l'homme ne dispose, en plus de son laissez-passer, que de quelques billets de faveur; l'enfance où tout concourait cependant à la possession efficace, et sans aléas, de soi-même.' (*Manifestes*, pp. 54-55)

This idea of self-possession and 'vraie vie' is important to Pizarnik, but is re-interpreted by her in a Sartrean sense, that of an 'en soi' existence. Pizarnik strongly resisted the encroachment of the prosaicness and mundanity of real life on her poetic world, resenting its invasion as do Cocteau's children: 'les guerriers se retrouvaient la proie d'une vie réelle qui empiétait sur le songe, bousculait la vie végétative de l'enfance' (*Les enfants terribles*, p. 126)

Buss situates Cocteau's 'enfants terribles' in the following manner: 'children are not expected to contribute towards society or to obey all its rules. They are allowed to spend their time at play, in the expectation that in the long run they will take their place in the social structure of productive work, politics and so on. The effect of the myth [Poet as child] is to lift the Poet out of the political sphere and to make of him a child whose 'play' will eventually bear fruit.' (Buss, p. 83) In this respect, the rhythm of Pizarnik's poetic 'play' resembles that of Cocteau's children; they too are nocturnal creatures: 'la journée leur pesait [...] Un courant les entraînait vers la nuit, vers la chambre où ils recommençaient à vivre.' (p. 102) Such a chaotic nocturnal world is echoed in Surrealist Dorothea Tanning's painting *Palaestra*. Piña's biography of Pizarnik, Bordelois' testimony and various other letters make mention of Pizarnik's room in Paris, likening it to Rimbaud's 'bateau ivre' as the nucleus of her bohemian existence. Such a den calls to mind Tanning's corridor and the room in which Cocteau's children – who like Pizarnik are really no longer children – play out their manipulative

⁴⁴ *Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 14.

dramas. Crucially, however, their room is a space in which they live and play, whereas the room within Pizarnik's poetry (and fatalistically the room in which she was found after her overdose) becomes associated with death: 'El color del mausoleo infantil, el mortuario color de los detenidos deseos se abrió en la salvaje habitación.' (*Obras*, p. 161) It is as though Pizarnik's poetic dramas are being played out after the final tragic scene of Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles*.

Madness

'Grave, patiente, bossue, elle ressemblait à une folle en train de gaver un enfant mort.' (*Les enfants terribles*, p. 100)

The two Surrealist sources of inspiration mentioned above, mad people and children, make their appearance thematically in Pizarnik's poetry, often intertwined. The kind of texts and authors which form a palimpsest to Pizarnik are not only those to do with children, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, but also with madness and Absurdity; she models poems on Ionesco's *La cantatrice chauve*, Beckett's *Fin de partie* and Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror*.⁴⁵ Her chosen literary family and those authors she wrote about or interviewed frequently touch upon the topics of childhood or madness. Key figures in her personal mythology are 'la reina loca' and 'la niña', and these are often placed alongside one another in nonsense dialogues drawing on *Alice in Wonderland*. Pizarnik's critical works include articles on Silvina Ocampo's *El pecado mortal* (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 4), Breton's *Nadja*, and Artaud; her close reading involved the works of Georges Bataille, and her interview with Juan José Hernández poses questions about 'la [alianza] del mal con la infancia' and 'los gestos de la infancia'.⁴⁶ Obviously the topics of childhood and madness are not exclusive – the articles or interviews would be narrow if they were – but these certainly function as leitmotifs through Pizarnik's critical work as much as her poetic writing, bringing this work closer to what she termed 'lo mío'. A state of madness hovers behind the desperate recourse to childhood in Pizarnik's poetry, and it is portrayed as an essentially solitary world. In 'Fragmentos para dominar el silencio' (*Obras*, p. 123), the poet characterizes her vocation in the following way:

⁴⁵ *La Cantatrice chauve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954); *Fin de partie* (Paris: Minuit, 1957). Pizarnik may have come to Ionesco through her friend Eduardo Paz Leston, who had translated Ionesco in 1967 (see Index Translationem).

⁴⁶ 'Entrevista con Juan José Hernández', *Zona Franca*, 40 (1966), 24-25 (repr. in Pizarnik's *Prosa poética* (Caracas: Endymion, 1987), pp. 71-73). For an excellent in-depth reading of Pizarnik alongside Bataille, see Melanie Nicholson's article, 'Alejandra Pizarnik, Georges Bataille, and the Literature of Evil', *Latin American Literary Review*, 27.54 (1999), 5-22.

Las fuerzas del lenguaje son las damas solitarias, desoladas, que cantan a través de mi voz que escucho a lo lejos. Y lejos, en la negra arena, yace una niña densa de música ancestral. [...] He querido iluminarme a la luz de mi falta de luz.

The two main forces within the poet are solitary women, reminiscent of her Countess Bathory shrouded in melancholy, and the child (asleep or dead?) who is imbued with ancestral music; a powerfully-rooted image, which is at odds with the rootlessness which will be discussed on the section on Childhood and Orphanhood. Have these solitary women, like Cocteau's Elizabeth in the prefatory quotation, force-fed a dead child with ancestral music? More striking still, however, is the fact that Pizarnik's poetic quest is based on a discourse of paradox. Attempting a literal version, this last line could be rendered as 'I have wanted to enlighten myself by the light of my lack of light.' She thus chooses for poetic inspiration the brilliance of unreason.

The thematics of childhood and madness are more directly linked in number XII of 'Los pequeños cantos':

una idea fija
una leyenda infantil
una desgarradura (*Obras*, p. 236)

Both the *idée fixe* and the rip or tear have semantic affinities with madness, but what is interesting to speculate is how these three lines are linked syntactically. Is the *idée fixe* a children's fairytale, or a character from one? Little Red Riding Hood is one such example used by Pizarnik in the poem 'La verdad del bosque' (*Obras*, p. 214). Do an obsession and the fairytale world combine to tear apart the fabric of the poet's precarious existence? In the poem 'Moradas', two of the poet's chosen dwellings involve madness and childhood respectively; she situates herself 'en la memoria de un loco', which could be many things, from highly creative to dangerously obsessive and limitless, and then 'en la tristeza de un niño', which has a ring of pathetic defencelessness to it. (*Obras*, p. 113) The coincidence of the obsession with madness and childhood in both poetry and diaries, coupled with the recurrence of the word *morada* (echoing the title 'Moradas') in the diaries to formulate her longing, only serves to strengthen the identification between diary and poetry, person and poetic persona.

Pizarnik thus dwells obsessively on both madness and childhood as themes, as symbolized by 'la reina loca' and 'la niña'. When these poetic themes are juxtaposed with Pizarnik's Surrealist self-image of child-woman and child-poet, their position of proximity becomes more sinister.⁴⁷ Whilst society and posthumous mythologization

⁴⁷ Marina Warner describes the Surrealists' idolisation of the *femme-enfant* or child-woman as part of their belief that 'infantile sexuality endows the young with the thrilling power of unashamed, uninhibited knowledge'. *Into the Dangerous World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 47.

may have reinforced the Poet-child myth in Pizarnik's case, it is her own confessed fears about madness which raise the issue of the Poet's proximity to the madman/woman. I am not, however, simplistically suggesting that Pizarnik herself was mad. On this point I am in agreement with Suzanne Chávez Silverman, who states in her article 'The Discourse of Madness' that 'I am not dealing with the purported insanity of Alejandra Pizarnik as author in any way. One must note [...] that even when an author considers herself (or is considered by others) to be 'mad', and uses herself as a source, what must be of interest to us, primarily, is not biography but rather the particular adaptation of delusion to the literary creation' (p. 275). I am merely reiterating the close correspondence between person and poetic persona, which result in anxieties and obsessions overlapping between poetry and diaries. That Pizarnik feared madness is supported by Ivonne Bordelois' comment in *Correspondencia*: 'Es curioso que los comentaristas [...] hayan soslayado sistemáticamente el motivo del temor a la locura, muy presente en ella. [...] Este temor resultó además trágicamente profético: recordemos que en 1971-1972 Pizarnik fue internada en el Pabellón Psiquiátrico del Hospital Pirovano, una experiencia probablemente devastadora, de la cual muy poco se sabe, tanto por parte de Alejandra como de sus allegados.' (pp. 58-59) Her powerful attraction for the figure of the *poète maudit*, her poetic crises about language and madness, and her tendency to cultivate the persona of a vulnerable child unable to enter fully the adult world, both poetically and socially, make the poet-child-madwoman triangle an irresistibly compelling framework for examining the Pizarnik myth. Gilles Deleuze nevertheless refers to this triangle as a 'grotesque trinity', drawing our attention to the dangers of blurring distinctions between nonsense language (as epitomized in *Alice in Wonderland*) and delirious or schizophrenic discourse:

A great poet may write in a direct relation to the child that she was [...]; a madman may carry along with him an immense poetical work, in a direct relation to the poet that he was. [...] But this does not at all justify the grotesque trinity of child, poet, and madman. With all the force of admiration and veneration, we must be attentive to the sliding which reveals a profound difference underlying these crude similarities. [...] It is also a problem of criticism, that is, of the determination of differential levels at which nonsense changes shape.⁴⁸

Such distinctions are extremely relevant to a discussion of Pizarnik's work, since she uses both nonsense and violent, magmatic language in her poetry, to extremely tortured Artaudian ends. Artaud links 'j'écris' with 'je délire' and Pizarnik's fears about going mad in her diary are poetically x-rayed in key poems such as 'Extracción de la piedra de

locura', the whole of which reads like an hallucination.⁴⁹ 'Evocas tu locura y hasta quisieras extraerla de ti como si fuese una piedra, a ella, tu solo privilegio.' (p. 135) In this quotation, madness is regarded as a privilege, echoing Breton and Buss. But I would join with Marta Caminero-Santangelo in rejecting the Surrealist view that madness can be liberating or subversive, particularly as regards Pizarnik,⁵⁰ since ultimately, the child world in which Pizarnik's poetic persona seeks refuge is inescapably entwined with madness and the result is devastating.

Pizarnik 'jugando al personaje alejandrino'

'Tu infancia hasta el fin de los días.'⁵¹

'[...] a face that will age only under the blows of perpetual childhood' (*Nightwood*, p. 191).

To see the forcefulness, often seductiveness, of the Cocteau or Bretonesque child-poet image that Pizarnik radiated, one needs only to look at the impression she made on others. Ivonne Bordelois describes her first meeting with the twenty-four year old Pizarnik as an encounter with 'una muchacha vestida con exagerado y afectado desaliño, que hablaba en el lunfardo más feroz, salpicando su conversación con obscenidades truculentas, o deliberadas palabrotas.' (*Correspondencia*, p. 14) The air of rebelliousness is marked, as is the fact that this is a deliberate image ('exagerado y afectado'), which Piña suggests may have hidden personal insecurities (see her biography, pp. 30-45). Dealings with her friends were often marked by her 'demandas infantiles' (*Correspondencia*, p. 20) which produced reactions varying from tenderness and protectiveness to extreme exasperation. León Ostrov, her first analyst, sums up his initial impression of her as 'una adolescente entre angélica y estrafalaria.' (*Correspondencia*, p. 48) Antonio Requeni, who was for Pizarnik an older brother figure, says that Pizarnik's antics (such as impulsively stealing an apple from a fruit stall) 'tenía la virtud de devolverme a la atmósfera alegre y traviesa de la infancia' (*Correspondencia*, p. 62). Pizarnik and her 'poeta hermana' Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell were described as 'dos niñas en busca de los máximos hechiceros',⁵² and her

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, 'Thirteenth Series of the Schizophrenic and the Little Girl', in *The Logic of Sense* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), pp. 82-93 (pp. 82-83).

⁴⁹ The Uruguayan actress Rosa Brill presented this poem as a dramatic monologue; unfortunately I have seen only a video version of it, but this communicates her disturbing portrayal of visionary madness, persuasive hallucinations, terror and desire. Performed live in the Espacio Giesso, Buenos Aires, August and September 1990, directed by Miguel Guerberof.

⁵⁰ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ From Rubén Vela's poem on Pizarnik in *Poesía y libertad* (Buenos Aires: Almagesto, 1996); quoted in *Correspondencia*, p. 38.

⁵² In Jorge Ariel Madrazo, *Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell: Testimonios de fin del milenio* (Buenos Aires: Vinciguerra, 1998), p. 30. The label of 'poeta hermana' comes from Azcona Cranwell's homage to

behaviour with Silvina Ocampo was evidently childish with strong erotic overtones, as will be explored in the following chapter. Numerous friends and acquaintances testify to the markedly infantile aspects of her behaviour. For instance, they recall her fascination with coloured pens and paper, like a child who has just discovered the delights of drawing,⁵³ and her handwriting had the appearance of ‘grafismo infantil’, ‘[la] letra pequeña y redonda de niña aplicada’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 22). Her infantile world included many dolls and little figures, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, which also appear in her poetry, such as Lytwin in *Los poseídos entre lilas* (*Obras*, p. 276). She radiated an aura of immaturity and inability to cope with the serious and adult side of the real world, in particular financial and domestic matters, ‘un estado de ignorancia infantil y perpleja ante las manifestaciones de la cotidianidad.’ (Piña biography, p. 81) Neither was she politically minded, all was subsumed to literature, although this attitude could be read as a political stance in the same way as that of the Surrealists, who believed that the world of dreams and the unconscious should occupy this privileged position. After having met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris, Pizarnik claimed to have talked to this great figure not about women’s liberation, politics or literature, but rather about her ‘piecita y [su] exaltada adolescencia’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 68). Obviously this stance was partly cultivated, contributing to her self-styling as *poète maudit*, ‘ex-centric’ to the bourgeois world of adult responsibility. But as I mentioned earlier, gradually Pizarnik begins to show exasperation at her own dependency on, and perpetuation of, this role of child-poet. She is concerned about growing old, losing her childish face:

Más miedo que antes. Antes me disculpaba mi cara de niña. Ahora, súbitamente, me tratan como a una grande. Ya no me exceptúan por mi edad breve. Ya no es tan breve. Ya no me ampara mi cara de niña. [...] nadie me sonrió con ternura, como pasaba antes, cuando asombraba por mi rostro de niña precoz y procaz.⁵⁴

This fear is echoed in the poetry in ‘Extracción de la piedra de locura’: ‘(Y aún tienes cara de niña; varios años más y no les caerás en gracia ni a los perros.)’ (*Obras*, p. 138) The fear of losing her youthful face is accompanied by the

Pizarnik, ‘Muerte de la poeta hermana’, in *Anunciación del mal y de la inocencia* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1980), pp. 58-60 (p. 58).

⁵³ Cortázar alludes to this in both of his poems of homage to Pizarnik. In ‘Alejandra’, he portrays her paying the boatman of Hades with ‘un cuaderno / o un lápiz de color’ (p. 366), and in ‘Aquí Alejandra’ he addresses her directly, saying ‘Amabas esas cosas nimias / aboli bibelot d’inanité sonore / las gomas y los sobres / una papelería de juguete / el estuche de lápices / los cuadernos rayados’ (p. 280).

⁵⁴ *Poemas*, p. 115. It echoes the sentiments of a Baudelaire prose poem undoubtedly read by Pizarnik, ‘Le désespoir de la vieille’ from *Petits poèmes en prose*: ‘Ah! pour nous, malheureuses vieilles femelles, l’âge est passé de plaire, même aux innocents; et nous faisons horreur aux petits enfants que nous voulons aimer!’ (p. 76). An unpublished poem from 1969 (courtesy of Perla Rotzait), bears the handwritten correction ‘No continúo porque no quiero asustar a los niños’.

irritated acknowledgement that it was indeed a mask or role: 'Como un niño obligado a representar un papel en una obra de teatro escolar. Emito mi parte y me voy. Si me aplauden mejor. Y si no, veo que tuve razón al ser falsa y teatral.' (*Semblanza* p. 271) Genovese's warning against confusing the poetic topos of childhood with a 'tic personal' should perhaps have been addressed to Alejandra herself who apparently so desperately wished the poetic persona to be more than a mere mask.

The major difference between her proximity to childhood and that of Cocteau's children is that their playing of the role is unconscious; it is the narrator who notes the theatricality, not the children themselves:

Insistons encore, aucun des protagonistes de ce théâtre [...] n'avait conscience de jouer un rôle. C'était à cette inconscience primitive que la pièce devait une jeunesse éternelle. Sans qu'ils en doutassent, la pièce (ou chambre si l'on veut) se balançait au bord du mythe. (p. 92)

Fatalistically, Pizarnik is bound to consciousness and thereby to consciousness of her inability to sustain indefinitely the role of child-poet. To the adult, childhood can only be a nostalgic or poetic topos; for Pizarnik, contact with 'real' children was almost repugnant. She liked her sister Myriam's children, and enjoyed reading *Alice in Wonderland* to them, but the possibility of looking after children as an *au pair* in Paris was regarded by her as 'demasiado infernal' (*Correspondencia*, p. 69). Her attitude is one of preferring the poetic concept to the reality, since being faced with real childhood is to acknowledge that she is definitively exiled from it.

It is precisely the innocent ignorance of Cocteau's children that is lacking in the childhood presented in Pizarnik's poetry as well as in the diaries. Whereas Cocteau's children persist in a state of ignorance as regards their role, the Pizarnik myth is built upon a poetic childhood that never possessed such ignorance. Death and aging have already invaded and corrupted it: 'háblame de esas palabras vestidas de féretros / que habitan mi inocencia' (p. 42); 'Recuerdo mi niñez / cuando yo era una anciana' (p. 54). This sense of a fatalistic adult post-lapsarian awareness invading the child is hinted at in the expression of Leonor Fini's *Azuba*.

Rather than writing 'in a direct relation to the child that she was' (Deleuze, p. 82) as this latter quotation might suggest,

Pizarnik instead mediates her own image through literature, making the ‘personaje alejandrino’ a ‘personaje literario’. For instance, in her diary entry for 8 January 1961 she likens herself to Eduardo Barrios’ **El niño que enloqueció de amor**, saying: ‘Estoy muriendo como el niño que enloqueció de amor’, although more appropriate in her case would be ‘la niña que enloqueció de literatura’, since the world in which she moves is highly literary.⁵⁵ The protagonist of Barrios’ celebrated novelette seeks a kind of refuge within literature, in that reading ‘libritos de cuentos’ clarifies his passion and provides a reassuringly blissful framework for his love. The boy says

no hice sino pensar en las hadas, y Angélica [the girl he idolizes] era la princesa y yo el niño que en vez de irse a correr mundo por el camino de flores, se fue por el de espinas; así es que al fin yo me casaba con la hija del rey, es decir, con Angélica. (p. 43)

Ultimately, this refuge in literature proves to be a false comfort and the child goes mad. The voice of Pizarnik’s ‘Extracción de la piedra de locura’ (p. 135) seeks ‘un silencio como la pequeña choza que encuentran en el bosque los niños perdidos’ which similarly draws on a persuasive fairytale framework of the babes in the wood. All is not a fairy tale, however; like Barrios’ protagonist, the ultimate fate of this persona is ‘la locura’. Even when the poet’s life is read as a children’s story, it is a sinister one, revelling in shipwrecks and death:

Tú hiciste de mi vida un cuento para niños
En donde naufragios y muertes
Son pretextos de ceremonias adorables. (*Obras*, p. 94)

As I mentioned in the Introduction, an interest in children’s stories and fairy tales, whether by allusion, writing or re-writing, is one area in which Silvina Ocampo’s texts provide a supportive tradition for Pizarnik’s poetry. The third of the ‘Endechas’ (dirges) sees the poet doomed to a children’s hell along with the ‘baddies’: ‘Aprisionada: no has sabido prever que su final iría a ser la gruta a donde iban los malos en los cuentos para niños.’ (*Obras*, p. 166) We can compare this to her diary for 30 April 1965 when talking about a moment of shared ‘warmth’ with Julio Cortázar; here we witness an internal struggle with the temptation to fictionalize a fairytale narrative for her own life: ‘¿Por qué tengo miedo? Esto no es un cuento de hadas. Sí, lo sé. ¿Entonces? No lo sé, en verdad aún no lo sé. Aún iré al bosque a danzar y a cantar con los otros niños.’ (*Semblanza*, p. 265) Pizarnik thus appears to sense her own tendency to be vampirised by her own poetic personae and their half-childish, half-macabre world, yet she is powerless to prevent it.

⁵⁵ *El niño que enloqueció de amor* (Bogotá: La oveja negra, 1985; first publ. in Chile, 1915).

Childhood as a Sacred Garden: *Alice in Wonderland*

‘Se me ha perdido un niña en el fondo del jardín.’⁵⁶

One model for her poetic persona to which Pizarnik returns obsessively is *Alice in Wonderland*, as observed by Wilson; Alice presents the eternal self-possessed child Pizarnik cannot be. Childhood in Pizarnik’s poetry is often associated with a garden, and Alice’s garden becomes an emblematic sacred place which the poet strives to enter. As with her relationship to Surrealism, we sense the shadow of Octavio Paz, if we recall phrases of his such as ‘No hay más jardines que los que llevamos dentro’ (Wilson, *Octavio Paz*, p. 59). Paz’s 1956 play *La hija de Rappaccini* centres around a garden, one in which there is a plant that will produce ‘delirio de los espejos’, another favourite Pizarnik obsession. The protagonist’s dramatic conclusion is to leap into this garden: ‘Ya di el salto final, ya estoy en la otra orilla. Jardín de mi infancia, paraíso envenado’.⁵⁷ The idea of a poisoned childhood paradise is utterly in keeping with Pizarnik, and the image of ‘la otra orilla’ recalls several of Pizarnik’s own key poems, particularly ‘Rescate’, dedicated to none other than Octavio Paz, which laments ‘Y es siempre el jardín de lilas del otro lado del río.’ (*Obras*, p. 126) ‘Desde esta orilla’ (*Obras*, p. 58) characterizes this shore as ‘esta orilla de nostalgia’; perhaps the poet is already writing from the perspective of the other shore, to which a hand had pulled her in the earlier poem ‘Tiempo’:

Yo no sé de la infancia
 más que un miedo luminoso
 y una mano que me arrastra
 a mi otra orilla. (*Obras*, p. 38)

Returning to the symbol of the garden, Pizarnik’s own comments on Alice’s garden are extremely revealing: ‘Una de las frases que más me obsesiona la dice la pequeña Alice en el país de las maravillas: “Sólo vine a ver el jardín.” Para Alice y para mí, el jardín sería el lugar de la cita o [...] el centro del mundo.’⁵⁸ Alice’s phrase, subtly altered to the more passive and wistful ‘Sólo *quería* ver al jardín’, (*Obras*, p. 219; my italics) which therefore expresses a desire – and probably one which remains unfulfilled – rather than an action, is a haunting refrain throughout Pizarnik’s work; a one-line poem from the last years of her life is poignantly eloquent in its simplicity:

‘Alguien demora en el jardín el paso del tiempo’ (p. 222)

⁵⁶ From a nursery rhyme, quoted by Elsa Bomemann, *Poesía infantil: Estudio y antología* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Latina, 1976), p. 90.

⁵⁷ From *Poemas (1935-1975)* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979), pp. 279-307 (p. 306). This play was translated into French in 1960 by André Pieyre de Mandiargues, a close friend of Pizarnik (*Octavio Paz*, p. 26).

It is as though if only the poet could actually enter this magical garden, she would never have to grow old or be relegated to the past. But getting the key and entering the garden, if we are to learn from Alice's experience, involves a complicated process of becoming smaller and larger alternately, attainable only in the realms of fiction and fantasy. The childhood garden remains sacred by virtue of its very unattainability.

The poem 'Las uniones posibles' gives another clue as to why Pizarnik's version of Alice's garden might be so tantalizingly out of reach. It is to do with the Sartrean distinction (made in *La Nausée*) between 'être pour soi' and 'être en soi', between a 'meta' form of existence doomed to continual self-referential awareness and a simple unreflective existence (essence) like that of an object or like Breton's concept of the 'vraie vie' cited earlier. To be in Pizarnik's garden would be like existing 'en soi', whereas the poet is always condemned to wanting to be in the garden, thinking about entering it, talking about it 'pour soi'. For this reason, the poet of 'Las uniones posibles' strives to annul this vicious circle of consciousness: 'No quiero saber. No quiero saberme saber. Entonces cerrar la memoria: sus jardines mentales' (*Obras*, p. 195). This theory is borne out by Pizarnik's comment in interview to Martha Moia:

Proust, al analizar los deseos, dice que los deseos no quieren analizarse sino satisfacerse, esto es: no quiero hablar del jardín, quiero verlo. Claro es que lo que digo no deja de ser pueril pues en esta vida nunca hacemos lo que queremos. Lo cual es un motivo más para querer ver el jardín, aun si es imposible; sobre todo si es imposible. (Moia, p. 8)

Here again, Ocampo's texts (and intertexts) provide a supportive context in which to read Pizarnik's dilemma. Ocampo's poem 'Los días perdidos', analysed at the beginning of Chapter 2, asked what to do with the keys which could not unlock childhood days. For both Pizarnik and Ocampo, childhood days are a garden which they desire to re-enter, but the Proustian keys do not fit, and cannot be made to fit as they magically do in Carroll's fantasy text.

Pizarnik's poem entitled 'Infancia' (p. 100) presents us with a disconcerting manifestation not of the garden, but of Alice herself:

alguien entra en la muerte
con los ojos abiertos
como Alicia en el país de lo ya visto.

⁵⁸ Interview with Martha Isabel Moia, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: Algunas claves', *Plural*, 18 (1973), 8-9 (p. 8).

Someone is entering death with their eyes open, like Alice in the land of the already seen.⁵⁹ The Alice figure who wanders through this poem is like a displaced Surrealist mannequin whose eyes reflect more than a child's experience; Marcelo Pichon Rivière uses this image in his homage to Pizarnik after her death, once again succumbing to the temptation of superimposing poet and persona: 'In memoriam: Una Alicia en el país de lo ya visto'.⁶⁰ Within such a short poem entitled 'Childhood', this unequivocal linking with death makes Pizarnik's sacred childhood garden more like that of the medieval painter Hieronymous Bosch. Pizarnik was fascinated with Bosch's paintings and in other poems she refers to the 'jardín de las delicias' (p. 157), alluding to Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and describes herself as an 'heredera de todo jardín prohibido' (p. 156). Such prohibition reinforces the dual nature of the garden as symbol: sacred, like an Edenic paradise, or illicit and deadly, like Bosch's hellish garden. Lewis Carroll's Alice describes her garden as 'the loveliest garden you ever saw' with 'bright flower-beds and cool fountains' yet as Carlota Caulfield indicates, in Pizarnik 'se transforma en una visión de un jardín corroído'.⁶¹ In the same way that Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* uses essentially the same landscape for the scenes of sensual pleasure and those of hellish retribution, the garden for Pizarnik is both 'la infancia mágica' and a place full of lilies on the other side of the river, that is, a place strongly associated with death. As

⁵⁹ The structure of this phrase in Spanish mimics the title *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*, thus encouraging would-be translators to keep as close to 'Alice in ----land' as possible. One option would be 'Like Alice in Once-seen land' (to preserve the same initial vowel sound as 'Wonder') but this takes rather a liberty with the sense, which should obviously be 'already seen'. Susan Pensak translates it as 'like Alice in the land of *déja* [sic] *vu*' in *Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings: Poems by Contemporary Latin American Women Poets*, ed. by Mary Crow (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1987), p. 47. Susan Bassnett opts for 'like Alice in Memoryland' (unpublished, courtesy of the translator).

⁶⁰ *Panorama*, 5 October 1972, [n.p.].

⁶¹ Carlota Caulfield, 'Entre la poesía y la pintura: Elementos surrealistas en *Extracción de la piedra de locura* y *El infierno musical* de Alejandra Pizarnik', *Chasqui*, 21.1 (1992), 3-10 (p. 9).

Melanie Nicholson observes with reference to 'El sueño de la muerte o el lugar de los cuerpos poéticos', 'the image of the child in a garden, innocence redoubled, is given a morbid twist, since both child and garden are dead'. (Nicholson, p. 13) The lithograph by Roberta Loach, *Alice Searches for Hieronymous Bosch in his Garden of Earthly Delights* from the series *Fairy Tales for Art Lovers* neatly complements this powerful juxtaposition of child and adult gardens. Bosch's garden was intended to prick the conscience of its medieval viewers, revealing the closeness between life's delights and hellish retribution; Pizarnik and Loach, by thrusting Alice into this very adult world, draw attention to the perverse, erotic and morbid curiosity of childhood, something which throws back to Silvina Ocampo as precursor. Nuria Amat associates Pizarnik's self-identification with Alice with a discovery of the body,⁶² an aspect which is also reflected in the paintings of Alicia Carletti; she has painted a series featuring pre-pubescent girls amongst huge eroticized flowers, superimposed upon scenes from Tenniel's illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland*, such as *Una merienda de locos*.⁶³ Her obsession for *Alice in Wonderland*, which she shares with Pizarnik, is referred to by Miguel Briante as 'la reiterada obsesividad de Alicia para pintar un país de las maravillas poblado de niñas y adolescentes en situaciones tan comunes como equívocas'.⁶⁴

Not only does Pizarnik project onto the figure of Alice both her wistful longings for a childhood garden paradise and her illicit, morbid fears; in the prose poem 'El hombre del antifaz azul', Pizarnik follows very closely the narrative sequence of Alice's

⁶² 'No es por casualidad ni por mera reminiscencia infantil que Alejandra sea también Alicia viviendo su vida en las maravillas. Reduciéndose o alargándose, sometida a los dispares cambios de su cuerpo-niña, busca comprender el mundo maravilloso.' In 'La erótica del lenguaje en Alejandra Pizarnik y Monique Wittig', *Nueva Estafeta*, 12 (1979), 47-54 (p. 50).

⁶³ Jorge Glusberg writing about the Premios Constantini 1998, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes says of Carletti: 'El tema de Alicia Carletti (1946) es la infancia, o si se quiere, la magia de la infancia [...] En sus telas hay siempre una niña o una adolescente serena, natural, rodeada de objetos comunes – flores, animales, muebles – que están como fuera de lugar, como signos amenazantes o, al menos, cargados de misterio. La niña adolescente, sin embargo, no parece inquieta, y es entonces cuando la escena alude a la magia y su ambivalencia, estableciendo simbologías de choque entre lo real y lo imaginario.' Corinne Sacca Abadi, also commenting on the above prize, writes: 'Alicia Carletti pinta, pero su inspiración abreva en fuentes literarias que hunden sus raíces en ensoñaciones infantiles. Sus cuadros evocan un mundo de fantasías, donde los fantasmas no escapan de la cotidianeidad de una infancia erotizada.'

⁶⁴ Miguel Briante, *Alicia Carletti*, November-December 1993 (Buenos Aires: Galería Klemm, 1993) [exhibition catalogue offprint], [n. p.].

fall down the rabbit hole and subsequent episodes, including her shrinking/growing efforts to get the key to the little garden. However, as many authors and indeed film directors have done in the hundred years following the story's original publication, Pizarnik modifies various details in order to stamp it with her own particular interpretation. Most notably, as Isabel Cámara points out, the scene glimpsed through the tiny door is a dangerous and constantly-changing wood, not a neat and civilized garden.⁶⁵ The presence of the wood has the effect of drawing Pizarnik's protagonist 'A.' (identifiable equally with Alice and Alejandra) closer to *Nadja* and therefore making her something of a Surrealist *mujer-niña*.

As A.'s trip down the rabbit-hole is invested with great symbolic significance, so too is the mirror of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. A fascination with mirrors is another point in common between Pizarnik and Ocampo which will be explored in the following Chapter. In the poem 'Tangible ausencia', the poet cries out that 'me llaman de la habitación más cercana y del otro lado de todo espejo' and that there appears 'cada yo y cada objeto con su doble' (p. 208). The curious sensation experienced by Alice, seeing that everything was so close to normal and yet totally opposite is here felt on an existential level as a doubling of already multiple selves. Children's literature thus fails to provide a possible space for the poet to inhabit outside the adult world of non-fantasy, aging, and 'pour soi' existence. The poet realizes that even these apparently innocent worlds are tainted.

'La muerte y la muchacha':⁶⁶ Death

'the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death.'⁶⁷

'sólo palabras
las de la infancia
las de la muerte' (*Obras*, p. 234)

Childhood is seen to be inescapably associated with death in the poem 'Los muertos y la lluvia' where the poet laments: 'Solamente escucho mis rumores desesperados, los cantos litúrgicos venidos de la tumba sagrada de mi ilícita infancia' (*Obras*, p. 208). In this extended prose poem, the poet meditates on the dead in the Jewish cemetery, particularly her father, whose death affected her profoundly and provoked renewed anxious contemplation of her own death. In what way can the poet's childhood be

⁶⁵ Isabel Cámara, 'Literatura o la política del juego en Alejandra Pizarnik', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 51 (1985), 581-89.

⁶⁶ The title of one of Pizarnik's poems, referring to Schubert's song 'Der Tod und das Mädchen'. *Obras*, p. 243.

⁶⁷ Walt Whitman, 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Francis Murphy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 275-81 (p. 280).

considered illicit? This striking adjective opens up vast shadowy and forbidden territories, beyond the constraints which adult society imposes upon childhood. We have to prise open this sacred tomb, desecrate it, to find the answer. ‘Pero ellos y yo sabemos / que el cielo tiene el color de la infancia muerta.’ (p. 37) The poet returns again and again to the death and burial of her childhood; perhaps by merely having countenanced innocence her childhood is deemed illicit, since such shameful naivety and ingenuousness cannot be permitted in a post-lapsarian world. The poem ‘La caída’, referring to the Biblical Fall, reveals a kind of instinctive pre-knowledge of death: ‘Jardín recorrido en lágrimas [...] cuando mi muerte aún no había nacido’ (p. 43). In ‘Tiempo’, the poet’s childhood has the aroma of a caressed bird, ‘Mi infancia y su perfume / a pájaro acariciado.’ (*Obras*, p. 38)⁶⁸ This image is suggestive of affection yet also captivity. There is even a hint of scorn too, scorn for cosseted naivety.⁶⁹ Such scorn is later made much plainer in ‘Las uniones posibles’ (*Obras*, p. 195) which shows the poet delighting fully in an illicit and rebellious identity:

Maravillosa ira del despertar en la abstracción mágica de un lenguaje
inaceptable.

[...] mi deseo de incendiar esta rosa petrificada que inflige aromas de infancia a
una criatura hostil a su memoria más vieja.

The idea that childhood aromas could be *inflicted* suggests an alarming degree of rejection, almost paranoia at being confronted with the evidence of aging symbolized by the fossilized rose.

Death is often euphemistically dealt with in the presence of children, yet the amount of ritual and depth of emotion which surrounds it inevitably makes it a source of great fascination, and perturbation, something which emerges even more strongly through Pizarnik’s intense and internalized poetic voice than it had in Silvina Ocampo. The poet’s childhood appears to be impregnated with death from its earliest moment:

Mi infancia
sólo comprende al viento feroz
que me aventó al frío
cuando campanas muertas
me anunciaron. (*Obras*, p. 48)

These ‘campanas muertas’ suggest muffled bells, tolling as if for a funeral rather than to announce a birth. The poet’s childhood is associated with feelings of being cast out and preceded by death. A diary entry for 23 October 1965 views her lost childhood as a

⁶⁸ I would therefore not entirely agree with Melissa A. Lockhart’s generalization that ‘in *Las aventuras perdidas* childhood is seen as the only time of true innocence and happiness.’ In *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, p. 658.

corpse: ‘De niña yo sonreía, yo aprobaba. Mi memoria vela el cadáver de la que fui. [...] una infancia ultrajada merece el más grave silencio.’ (*Semblanza*, p. 257) This ruined childhood cannot, perhaps, be expressed in words; only in the gravest silence, the aspiration to silence being another of the paradoxical aspects of Pizarnik’s poetry. Corpses are piled up in ‘El sueño de la muerte’ (*Obras*, p. 140) and they form the body poetic, so to speak: ‘Hablo del lugar en que se hacen los cuerpos poéticos – como una cesta llena de cadáveres de niñas.’ This image is violent and surreal, but no mere ‘cadáver exquisito’. So Pizarnik’s reiterated references linking poetry with death and girls’ corpses bring with them a strong sense of taboo.

In the phrase ‘la tumba sagrada de mi ilícita infancia’, the poet entombs her unlawful or forbidden childhood, considering it buried along with the idealized body of her father (‘mi padre demasiado joven, con manos y pies de mancebo griego’, p. 209). We cannot, however, take these numerous representations of the death of her childhood as coinciding simply with the death of her father, since the above-quoted diary entry occurs earlier. Indeed, the poet’s fascination with death can be seen in the very earliest poems; these understandable reactions to the loss of a parent were expressed as part of a much more profound and ongoing seduction by the idea of death. It is surely significant, for instance, that Pizarnik’s first acknowledged collection of poetry is entitled *La última inocencia*; the last vestiges of innocence are revered and clung to, yet simultaneously – in the title poem of this collection – the dominant idea is that of setting off on a journey to death:

Partir
 en cuerpo y alma
 partir. [...]
 no más formar fila para morir.
 He de partir. (*Obras*, p. 29)⁷⁰

We can contrast this use of the verb ‘partir’ to that in Cocteau’s children’s game, where the equivalent French verb ‘partir’ is used in the sense of setting out on a game of the imagination: ‘dans le dialecte fraternel, *être parti* signifiait l’état provoqué par le jeu; on disait: *je vais partir, je pars, je suis parti*. Déranger le joueur parti constituait une faute sans excuse.’ (p. 38) Pizarnik’s use of the verb in Spanish is more radical in that it signifies a journey from which the player cannot return, a journey across to death, like the ‘otra orilla’ discussed in relation to Paz. The hand dragging the poet of ‘Tiempo’

⁶⁹ Compare Stevie Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* in which she alludes to the ‘wide-eyed and daisy-sweet, and solemn-young and sweet sweet smell of childhood’ (p. 22).

⁷⁰ In Rosa Brill’s documentary on Pizarnik, which investigates death through the poetry of Pizarnik, the actress Belén Blanco reads this poem with a wide-eyed and childlike expression of ecstasy and fascination for the idea of death.

across to her other shore is even more explicitly linked to death in two other poems. The first is 'La de los ojos abiertos', in which the poet struggles between a desire for life and her morbid fascination:

pero quiero saberme viva
pero no quiero hablar
de la muerte
ni de sus extrañas manos. (*Obras*, p. 20)

The fascination with death's strange hands seems like an erotic sensation, reinforcing the idea of death as taboo, an arouser of illicit desires. We are reminded of these hands again in 'La danza inmóvil', where 'Se quiso detener el avance de las manos enguantadas / que estrangulaban a la inocencia' (*Obras*, p. 37). Childhood in Pizarnik's poetry is thus made illicit by a morbid obsession with death, the child is referred to as 'la pequeña muerta' (*Obras*, p. 79). It is possible that this obsession corresponds in part to Pizarnik's own feelings as a Jewish survivor, many of whose relatives had died in Eastern Europe during the war. Such feelings also contributed to a sensation of orphanhood.

Orphanhood

'Esta muñeca vestida de azul es mi emisaria en el mundo. [...] Sus ojos son de huérfana.'⁷¹

Morbid fascination is not the only transgressive side to Pizarnik's child poetic persona; a further important way in which the poet regards her childhood as illicit is in the strongly-expressed desire for orphanhood, something which once again emerges both through the poetry and the diaries. Behind this desire lies a genuine feeling of rootlessness; Pizarnik was born into a family of immigrants, whose roots were back in Rovne (alternately part of Poland and Russia). When her parents emigrated to Argentina, they lost not only their homeland, but also the original version of their surname, Pozharnik.⁷² Like so many other second-generation immigrants, Pizarnik was thus orphaned from her family origins.⁷³ Pizarnik could not go back, all her relatives – apart from those who fled to Paris – had been killed. As with childhood, there could be no return. This is perhaps one reason why she fantasizes about her ancestry; precisely because there was no possibility of return, she is free to invent.

⁷¹ From an unpublished poem, one of several 'Textos de 1969', courtesy of Perla Rotzait.

⁷² Information from Piña biography, p. 21. María Elena Arias López suggests that childhood was Pizarnik's 'propia patria', as for Rilke. *Correspondencia*, p. 109.

⁷³ Aurora Alonso de Rocha's *Mujeres cotidianas* documents the feelings experienced by such immigrants through 'Los recuerdos de la señora Rosita': 'la gente que se volvía a su país nos producía un desgarrón tan doloroso que no puedo menos que asociarlo al temor-expectativa que estaba siempre presente en nuestras casas: la vuelta, regresar'. (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1992), p. 204.

The subject of family origins would doubtless have arisen in her sessions with her second analyst, Enrique Pichon Rivière, father of Marcelo with whom she was good friends.⁷⁴ She dedicates ‘Celeste silenciosa al borde del pantano’ to Enrique (*Obras*, p. 202), the text of which refers to the ‘más alto sueño de la augusta infancia’, just the kind of trace that would be explored in these therapy sessions. Pichon Rivière had suffered ‘orfandad paterna’, which would prove a point of sympathy with his young patient, Pizarnik. Pichon Rivière also had many literary interests in common with Pizarnik; indeed he may have helped to stimulate her interest in the Surrealists and in Lautréamont (see Bajarlía, pp. 85-86).

Pizarnik transmutes her lost Eastern European roots into a positive emblem of loss of origins in all senses. Indeed, if there is anything particularly Jewish about her work, it is this feeling of wandering and rootlessness, as noted by Piña:

Lo judío, entonces, incorporado no ya como una tradición donde arraigar sino como la conciencia de la exclusión, la errancia y la extranjería; también, en su articulación extrema, como una forma casi metafísica de orfandad.⁷⁵

Having been christened with the delightfully innocent-sounding first name Flora, after her first collection of poetry she presents a new self-image in her middle name, Alejandra and later its Russian equivalent Sacha, which allude to her exotic yet irretrievable Russian-Polish heritage.⁷⁶ She escapes from her ‘real’ childhood within a caring Jewish immigrant family in order wilfully to inhabit an illicit inner world of voluntary orphanhood and fantasy, akin to the world of Cocteau’s *enfants terribles*, who are all orphans. Pizarnik evidently felt artistically constrained by what she perceived to be a claustrophobic family environment; her diary for 2 February 1961 indicates her desire for artistic orphanhood, through isolation from all her personal relationships, in order to gain a rather solipsistic freedom and concentration on her inner poetic life.

⁷⁴ Enrique Pichon Rivière was crucial to the founding of the psychoanalytic movement in Buenos Aires. He was of Swiss-French Catholic origin, born in Geneva. His parents also migrated to Argentina from Europe, then he moved into Buenos Aires from the provinces. For more information on psychoanalysis in Argentina, see Jorge Balán, *Cuéntame tu vida: Una biografía colectiva del psicoanálisis argentino* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991) and the aforementioned Hugo Vezzetti, *Aventuras de Freud en el país de los argentinos*.

⁷⁵ ‘Judaísmo y extranjería’, in *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, pp. 79-85, p. 82. See also Leonard Senkman, who sees ‘su condición judía vivida en el desamparo y la ajenidad existencial’. ‘Alejandra Pizarnik: De la morada de las palabras a la intemperie de la muerte’, in *La identidad judía en la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Pardes, 1983), pp. 337-40 (p. 340).

⁷⁶ Apparently she was initially ambivalent about dropping the name Flora, as suggested to her by Bajarlía, since she feared a loss of identity (see Bajarlía pp. 73, 84). The Polish-Russian background is viewed with a degree of suspicion, revealed in the naive questioning of ‘Desconfianza’ (*Obras*, p. 197). What is snow, and what is a great-grandfather? But her diary for 8 July 1964 bears witness to her need for, and lack of, a tradition in which to feel rooted: ‘H.A.M. [presumably Héctor A. Murena] de acuerdo conmigo en la falta de tradición, en la tremenda soledad que implica no tener raíces en ningún lado’. (*Semblanza*, p. 261)

Nunca pensé en mis circunstancias personales: familia, estudios, relaciones, amigos. Me limité a sufrirlos como a testimonios opuestos al clima de magia y ensueño de mi memoria. Como si aceptarme con mis circunstancias personales llevara implícito un renunciamiento a algo fabuloso. (*Poemas*, p. 114)

For Pizarnik, personal circumstances, her ‘hogar burgués’ as she scornfully and bitterly refers to it, are a millstone around the poet’s neck. She actively seeks artistic liberation from bourgeois pre-determination, preferring the role of *poète maudit* who is not understood by her natural family, and spiritually orphaned in terms of her vocation. Unlike her ‘poeta hermana’, Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell, who was orphaned at an early age and whose treatment of the subject in her poetry and short stories is primarily autobiographical and cathartic, Pizarnik’s strong feeling of orphanhood predates the death of her father.⁷⁷ It is first and foremost a symbolic, cultural and literary orphanhood, which then becomes intensified. This has earlier literary parallels in Argentina; Francine Masiello notes that ‘orphanhood or abandonment’ is one of the motivations for women’s fiction of the 1920s. She suggests that espousing orphanhood may be – subconsciously or otherwise – a means of resistance, of constructing a feminist version of modernism, freed from the weight of traditional patriarchal models.⁷⁸ Ironically, however, Pizarnik is not really free; those poets most influential on her, including those from whom she derived her model of *poète maudit* were all male: Paz, Baudelaire, Nerval, Novalis and Rimbaud. Indeed, Paz is the most likely candidate for a literary father-figure to the young poet, given that he lent his literary authority by prefacing *Árbol de Diana*; however, Pizarnik claims to have found him too inflexible and masculine a role model: ‘El mismo Octavio es demasiado inflexible, demasiado acerado, o, simplemente, demasiado viril.’ (*Semblanza*, p. 277)⁷⁹

Pizarnik became increasingly obsessed with feelings of orphanhood, as her 1960 diary testifies: ‘¿Por qué no haré también yo un esfuerzo por ordenar y aclarar mi obsesión? Y decidí anotar lo que se refiere a mi sentimiento de orfandad.’ (*Poemas*, p.111) Her ‘will to orphanhood’ and rejection of personal circumstances is radical, however, in its degree of estrangement. Even the self that is speaking is distanced, since she phrases her question in the third person, instead of the more normal ‘¿Quién soy?’:

⁷⁷ For a thematic comparison of Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell and Pizarnik, including the theme of orphanhood, see my article ‘The Unquenched Thirst: An Intertextual Reading of ‘las dos poetas hermanas’, Alejandra Pizarnik and Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell’, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 77 (2000), 271-86.

⁷⁸ See ‘Women, State, and Family in Latin American Literature of the 1920s’, in *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America*, pp. 27-47 (pp.37, 44).

⁷⁹ It is perhaps the fact that for Paz, as for the male surrealists, Woman as man’s Other plays a crucial poetic role. Pizarnik’s interest in Remedios Varo and Valentine Penrose may in part reveal her search for a less masculine Surrealism.

¿Quién es yo?
 ¿Solamente un reclamo de huérfana?
 Por más que hable no encuentro silencio.
 Yo, que sólo conozco la noche de la orfandad
 Espera que no cesa,
 pequeña casa de la esperanza. (*Obras*, p. 246)

Pizarnik's diary from over ten years earlier (25 March 1961) had also proclaimed her identity as that of an orphan, deprived of the powers of speech and hearing: 'Y no soy más que una silenciosa, una huérfana sordomuda, hija de algo que se arrodilla y de alguien que cae.' (*Poemas*, p. 116) But it is in the poem 'Fiesta' that the poet really configures her orphanhood:

He desplegado mi orfandad
 sobre la mesa, como un mapa.
 Dibujé el itinerario
 hacia mi lugar al viento.
 Los que llegan no me encuentran.
 Los que espero no existen.

Y he bebido licores furiosos
 para transmutar los rostros
 en un ángel, en vasos vacíos. (*Obras*, p. 106)

Her orphanhood is necessary to her poetic journey; by likening it to a map, she is putting personal identity in the place of physical, geographical territory. The inner world is substituted for the outer, and her feelings of orphanhood are the guide to exploration of her identity.⁸⁰ The poet, by recognizing herself to be in a state of literary orphanhood, thereby gains a certain freedom and opens the way to a Romantic 'lugar al viento' – the dwelling place of the 'enamorada del viento' (*Obras*, p. 63), 'hija del viento' (p. 39) and Trakl's 'ardiente enamorada del viento' (p. 35). Literary and cultural orphanhood give room to manoeuvre; a literary orphanhood fits with the *poète maudit* image, and cultural orphanhood leaves her to choose her own 'familia literaria'.⁸¹ By carefully outlining her chosen literary family, Pizarnik continues the process of orphaning herself from her real family and exalting instead her inner and literary life. The lost homeland is gradually replaced by a search for a new homeland in writing: 'Algo a modo de patria se insinúa desde estas hojas rayadas como a mí me gusta o como necesito.' (*Semblanza*, p. 285) The feeling of inheriting other writers' works gives a

⁸⁰ For Ocampo, on the other hand, especially in the many poems written from a child's perspective, orphanhood is a source of terror: 'la posible, la aterradora, la intolerable orfandad'. From 'Trenza' in *Amarillo celeste*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Speculation on which literary tradition an Argentine writer belongs to is a perennial favourite for authors and critics alike, but is perhaps most notoriously discussed in Borges' essay 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', *Sur*, 232 (1955), 1-8. First given as a lecture at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores in 1951.

generational continuity within literature which appears stronger than that of her actual family lineage, and in Chapter 4 it will be seen how some of those writers she chooses reveal further affinities with Silvina Ocampo. However, in 'Fiesta', her poetic destiny turns out to be a kind of no-man's-land where those who arrive fail to find her; her journey there is like one of *Las aventuras perdidas* (the title of her second published collection of poetry) since those for whom she waits do not exist. That this poem entitled 'Fiesta' should speak of orphanhood, of a failed encounter, and of poetic thirst in 'vasos vacíos' surely hints at an intertextual relationship to Paz for whom all these themes were crucial.

Given Pizarnik's close friendship with Paz during her years in Paris, and her admiration for him, it is likely that Pizarnik's sense of orphanhood is partly influenced by his aesthetics. Wilson claims that 'Paz inherits the painful cries of the "surrealists", the "existentialists" – all who suffer *orfandad*.' (*Octavio Paz*, p. 6) It seems clear that Pizarnik's painful cries, 'the desperation of the solitary poet' (p. 5), emerge at the moment of real orphanhood in 1966. At the time of her father's death, which is starkly recorded in her diary for 18 January 1966 'MUERTE de papá' (*Semblanza*, p. 275), Pizarnik has to struggle in earnest with the implications of growing older, assuming the responsibilities of adulthood and realizing that the childlike persona of her literary orphanhood (the 'niña desamparada') is forced to become a woman who has lost her flesh and blood father. Her reaction is one of terror. 'Ahora se reunieron todos los terrores infantiles, precisamente ahora en que comienzo a ser adulta. Pero se reunieron por eso.' (15 April 1966, *Semblanza*, p. 276). His death serves to increase the poet's morbid fascination with her own death, and it comes as a shock to her essentially symbolic and poetic cultivation of orphanhood. 'La muerte de mi padre hizo más real mi muerte.' (27 April 1966, *Semblanza*, p. 276).

Precisely at this moment of real orphanhood, the poet's own childlike persona begins to dissolve; she contemplates renouncing both her desire for a literary mother (who would presumably have provided the freedom and inspiration that a caring yet suffocating bourgeois home could not) and her ambition to be exceptional.⁸² Yet she still balks at the thought of accepting her age; it is as though accepting her own death is easier than accepting the inevitable aging process that precedes it. Underlying this is the

⁸² Both Norah Lange and Olga Orozco could have played the role of literary mother for Pizarnik, as could Silvina Ocampo. Resentment against her own mother is expressed in Pizarnik's repeated reference to 'la vieja rezongona' in conversation with Juan Jacobo Bajarlía (pp. 11, 12, 18), although this has an element of exaggerated rebelliousness to impress the lecturer she so much admired.

Romantic myth of the artist who dies young, as did so many of the poets Pizarnik admired, such as Lautréamont, Nerval or Trakl.

Heme aquí llegada a los 30 años y nada sé aún de la existencia. Lo infantil tiende a morir ahora pero no por ello entro en la adultez definitiva. [...] Renunciar a encontrar una madre. La idea ya no me parece tan imposible. Tampoco renunciar a ser un ser excepcional (aspiración que me hastía). Pero aceptar ser una mujer de 30 años... Me miro en el espejo y parezco una adolescente. Muchas penas me serían ahorradas si aceptara la verdad. (30 April 1966, *Semblanza*, p. 277)

Pizarnik was caught up in her poetic persona, the lost or orphaned child; the leap from this to accepting the real loss of her father, and her consequent transition to the older generation, was great. The poem 'Sous la nuit' of 1972 (*Obras*, p. 229) is dedicated to 'Y. Yván Pizarnik de Kolikovski, mi padre'; by giving him his full Russian name, she seems to reach out for her previously-abandoned cultural roots.⁸³ By inserting him textually, her father becomes woven into her poetic and textual orphanhood; not only are her Eastern European roots distant, but now her closest link with them has been transmuted into language. It is interesting to note, moreover, that she now flees the contorted hand which she claimed for a dwelling in the poem 'Moradas': 'me alejo de la mano crispada, no quiero saber otra cosa que este clamor, este resolar en la noche, esta errancia, este no hallarse' (p. 229). The poet is taking refuge in the confusion of the night, in wandering and not finding herself; the map of orphanhood now charts an all-too-physical geography.

Orphanhood is thus for Pizarnik something about which she feels highly ambivalent: on the one hand, it is something she and her family have suffered collectively in the past, and which she suffers again on the death of her father; on the other hand, it represents a space of artistic freedom and an appealingly vulnerable poetic persona through which her feelings may be creatively channelled, and one which resonates with the disarming simplicity of abandoned orphans in children's stories.

Violation of Innocence

More brutal still than solitude and orphanhood in Pizarnik is childhood's symbolic death and burial as a consequence of violation. I return to the previously-cited diary entry for 23 October 1965. As well as watching over the corpse of the child she was, Pizarnik's voice is here described as 'Voz de la violada alzándose en la medianoche.' (*Semblanza*, p. 257) In the poem entitled 'La verdad del bosque' (p. 214) the childhood

⁸³ See also the poem 'Retrato de voces' which is dedicated 'A mi abuela, la princesa Dounia Fedora Kolikovska, a quien ruego perdone mi desinterés por la magia y mi adhesión excesiva al samovar'. (*Obras*, p. 364).

frame of reference is established via the figure of Little Red Riding Hood, only to be brutally violated in the subsequent poems; 'Violario' (p. 215), the very title of which makes a sinister neologism combining elements of 'velorio' (a wake) and 'violar' (to rape), presents a repugnant *femme de lettres / belle-lettriste* who wishes to violate the poet's innocence. 'De un antiguo parecido mental con Caperucita provendría, no lo sé, el hechizo que involuntariamente despierto en las viejas de cara de lobo.' (*Obras*, p. 215) 'Niña entre azucenas' describes the appearance of a hand as a lily made of five phalluses for petals, and in 'Toda azul' from *Textos de sombra* the gardens are significantly those of an orphanage, returning to Pizarnik's obsession with orphanhood, and the flowers are 'flores obscenas'. So on both occasions, the child figure is violated by the irruption of obscenity into her world. As a result of this encounter, the poet vows never again to write a poem about flowers; they have become corrupted and tainted with obscenity.

A comparison with the paintings of Alicia Carletti again helps to illustrate the tone of this poem; the sinister combination of eroticism, fear and repugnance finds a remarkable visual parallel in Carletti's picture, *In Alice's Garden*, where the huge roses possess menacing thorns. Miguel Briante recognizes this feature as a constant in Carletti's work, where 'el misterio de las flores como seres vivos y femeninos y brutalmente carnales' is 'como una amenaza' (Briante, [n. p.]). Carletti's paintings are placed in a Surrealist genealogy by the writer and art critic Marta Traba; such a positioning strengthens the aesthetic affinities between Pizarnik and Carletti. 'As regards Surrealism in the 1970s, [...] mention might be made of [...] the Argentine Alicia Carletti (b.1946). In Carletti's works, in which disproportionate values are assigned to component elements, one can detect a descendant of René Magritte, with his rooms invaded by fruits.' (*Art of Latin America*, p. 164)

The subject of violation of innocence, in which we see a point of overlap with the thematics of Silvina Ocampo, particularly in such stories as 'El pecado mortal' and

‘La Calle Sarandí’, reaches its nadir of abjection in Pizarnik’s most notorious work ‘La condesa sangrienta’ (*Obras*, pp. 371-91). Although the Countess’ victims are adolescents or young women rather than children (‘su edad oscilaba entre los 12 y los 18 años’, p. 378), nevertheless the theme of innocence violated is a constant. Indeed, it is rendered all the more shocking by the detached tone of the narrative, which appears to focus almost exclusively on the perversions of the Countess, to the exclusion of her suffering victims. ‘Han habido dos metamorfosis: su vestido blanco ahora es rojo y donde hubo una muchacha hay un cadáver.’ (p. 377) Like the corpses piled up in ‘El sueño de la muerte’, this girl’s body is a symbol of innocence brutally violated.

Transgression

‘Hay como chicos mendigos saltando mi cerca mental, buscando aperturas, nidos, cosas para romper o robar.’ (*Obras*, p. 219)

The child that suffers has its counterpart in Pizarnik in the child who rebels and transgresses. I have already mentioned the concept of childhood as illicit with reference to morbid fascination. Another facet of the complex Pizarnik child-figure is the transgressive or monster child. It is interesting that in the above prefatory quotation Pizarnik chooses ‘chicos mendigos’ to cross boundaries and to transgress; in this respect she has another affinity with Ocampo, who also has a fascination for these marginal characters. Pizarnik chooses to align the transgressive side of her child persona with the rock singer Janis Joplin, whose childhood and indeed whole brief life was blatantly illicit. In the poem dedicated to Janis from 1972 (two years after Janis had overdosed on heroin) Pizarnik allies herself to the rebellious spirit who communicates a shared emptiness in their lives:

gritar tanto para cubrir los agujeros de la ausencia
eso hiciste vos, eso yo. [...]
hiciste bien en morir.
por eso te hablo,
por eso me confío a una niña monstruo. (p. 242)

Pizarnik’s admiration for Joplin’s death has both cult and Romantic overtones (the artist dying tragically young) but it is also recognition of an enviable release from life’s irreconcilable emptiness and yearning. That Pizarnik should choose to confide in a ‘niña monstruo’ is highly significant; she felt that there was empathy between their predicaments and the Pizarnik of the late prose works is very much a monster child. *Los poseídos entre lilas* is a step in this direction, being characterized – as Cristina Piña and María Negroni point out – by sexuality in a puerile *mise-en-scène*. Piña’s description runs thus:

al margen de su relación central [...] con la sexualidad, está marcado por cierta puerilidad, acorde con el manejo de elementos infantiles a que se recurre: muebles infantiles, muñecas, juegos, juguetes, personajes montados en triciclos – pero eróticos –, referencias a maestras de primer grado.⁸⁴

Negróni links childhood and sexuality through the fetishization of dolls in *Los poseídos entre lilas*, whose setting she likens to a ‘castillo infantil’:

todo se desfigura, se fetichiza: los juguetes se agrandan, el escenario se tiñe literariamente, adquiere un cromatismo kitsch que remite a otros poetas-niños, una maniquí-muñeca [...] duplica en su proximidad con el caballito de madera la pareja de Seg/Car, mientras al fondo los padres [...] contaminan la escena de corrupción y envejecimiento.

Negróni locates the pathos of this absurdist theatre (based on Beckett’s *Fin de partie*) in the emphasis on ‘la infancia manchada’.⁸⁵

Piña and Negróni are the two main critics who have not simply ignored or dismissed the shocking outpouring contained in *La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa*, which is the closest Pizarnik comes to a discourse of madness or childish tantrum; it returns us to the infamous Breton trilogy of poet-child-madwoman or to Deleuzian concepts of delirium.

We might have thought to be [sic] still among little girls and children, but we are already in an irreversible madness. We might have believed to be at the latest edge of literary research, at the point of the highest invention of languages and words; we are already faced by the agitations of a convulsive life, in the night of a pathological creation affecting bodies. (Deleuze, p. 82)

Deleuze’s phrase ‘convulsive life’ is deeply resonant: Pizarnik’s article on Artaud talks of his ‘genio convulsivo’ (*Obras*, p. 425), a word with strong associations with the Surrealists, since Breton’s *Nadja* ends: ‘la beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas’, and also with her own work *La condesa sangrienta* which examines ‘la belleza convulsiva del personaje’, (*Obras*, p. 373).⁸⁶ Elisabeth, the worst of Cocteau’s ‘enfants terribles’, is described as ‘la vierge de fer’, which links her semantically to the Bloody Countess’s ‘Virgen de Hierro’ torture device. Elisabeth is also referred to as ‘l’automate’ (p. 169), which calls to mind Pizarnik’s ‘autómata’(p. 77) or her

⁸⁴ From ‘La palabra obscena’, *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 5 ‘Los complementarios’ (1990), 17-38 (p. 34).

⁸⁵ From ‘El testigo lúcido’, *Revista Tokonoma*, 4 (1997), 142-46 (p. 144). See also the more extended version *El testigo lúcido: Estudio sobre los textos en prosa de Alejandra Pizarnik* (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1994).

⁸⁶ Sarane Alexandrian singles out convulsive beauty as one of the four ‘cardinal virtues’ of Surrealism. *Surrealist Art*, p. 118. Pizarnik’s diary also speaks of a ‘necesidad de vida convulsiva’ (*Semblanza*, p. 289) which strengthens the associations between her attitude to her work and to her own life.

description of Solange in her review of Breton's *Nadja*.⁸⁷ There is thus a semantic web of associations between surrealist child-woman, violence or violation, and madness.

In Pizarnik's late prose works, all these elements of madness, convulsiveness and obscenity combine in the language of a precocious *enfant terrible*, a Janis Joplin-style monster child who parades her knowledge of the adult world reduced to a vulgarized mixture of sex and culture. The narrative voice of these obscene texts flaunts its ability to manipulate language, to expose its contamination with sex. It is like a childish tantrum, getting back through iconoclasm and lavatorial humour at the parent (society and language) for failing to provide her, the poet, with a stable dwelling place. As Cristina Piña describes in her biography of Pizarnik, she unleashes 'la venganza exasperada contra el lenguaje por no ser esa 'patria' que se ha buscado' (p. 228). Pizarnik's child persona is here as far removed from Ocampo's aesthetic route as she ever gets, in that in Ocampo's texts, sexuality (though very much present) is subtly insinuated, for example in 'Albino Orma' where the narrator neglects to give details of a sexual relationship, 'por pudor' (*Cuentos II*, p. 66). Pizarnik's monster child, on the other hand, feels no such reticence, taking every opportunity for the blatant exploitation of sexual puns.

Childish elements combine with sexual humour in sections such as 'La pájara en el ojo ajeno': '*Moraleja*: El niño azul gusta de la paja roja pero la niña roja gusta de la paja azul [...] (Cortina infantil.) Mamá, ¿quién es esa ladrona de marionetas que canta en el jardín?' (*Obras*, pp. 314-15). No longer is the poetic persona vulnerable, despairing, abandoned: now she is more self-consciously rebellious, closer to Pizarnik's real-life alter ego who delighted in cracking obscene jokes at parties whilst cultivating the image of a naïve child. Like a distorted, atonal version of a melody, elements of her earlier, more lyrical poetry (such as the female child and the garden) recur in perverse metamorphosis. The section of 'Hilda la polígrafa' entitled 'Innocence & Nonsense' (*Obras*, p. 348) echoes Paz's pun 'Inocencia y no ciencia'. Whereas Paz implies the natural and intuitive wisdom of the child, Pizarnik inclines towards nonsense language, in the spirit of Lewis Carroll, yet also approaching Artaudian torment. Artaud became bored by Lewis Carroll's 'affected infantilism', saying that 'one may invent one's language, and make pure language speak with an extra-grammatical or a-grammatical meaning, but this meaning must have value in itself, that is, it must issue from torment' (quoted in Deleuze, p. 84). Pizarnik's use of language in *Hilda la polígrafa* is a curious

⁸⁷ Pizarnik apparently wrote an article on automata in literature jointly with Marcelo Pichon Rivière, but sadly it has been lost. Information from Cristina Piña's biography of Pizarnik, p. 179.

mixture of infantilism and torment; in her diary entry for 19 October 1964 on Artaud she draws parallels between his suffering and her own:

Artaud. Deseos de escribir una página sobre su sufrimiento. Su tensión física; sus conflictos con el pensamiento, las palabras. Pero sin retórica, por favor, sin retórica. Lo que me asusta es mi semejanza con A. Quiero decir: la semejanza de nuestras heridas. (*Semblanza*, p. 263)

Gide's description of Artaud, which Pizarnik cites, could apply very well to her *Hilda la polígrafa*: 'un lirismo arrebatado del que llegaban al público sólo fulgores obscenos, imprecatorios y blasfemos' (p. 426). A glance at the 'Índice Piola' (p. 296) suffices to indicate the kind of language the monster child is using; dedicated to Fanny Hill's daughter,⁸⁸ the twenty sections listed range from 'Diversiones Públicas' and 'El textículo de la cuestión' to 'En alabama de heraclítoris'. Pizarnik mixes the style of writing in *Fanny Hill* with that of James Joyce in passages such as the following:

Pero no quiero precipitarme, pensó Tote mientras Joerecto Le [sic] explicitaba, gestualmente y callando, el propósito de que su susodicho ingresara en el aula magna de la Totedeseante que tentaba con la su lengua que, rosada pavlova, rubricaba roborosa la cosa, ruborezándole a la cosa, rubricabalgando a su dulce amigo en sube y baja, en ranúnculo de hojas estremecidas como las vivas hojas de su nueva Poética que Joe Supererguido palpa delicadamente, trata de abrir, que lo abra, lo abrió, fue en el fondo del pozo del jardín, al final de Estagirita me abren la rosa, sípijoe, masjoe, todavía más, y ¡oh!: ¡Joe, llamame Lola! ¡Llamame puta! ¡Y que viva Alicia de las maravillas! (p. 304).⁸⁹

This passage has the effect of violating the innocence of her earlier poetry by associating the garden and Alice with her 'nueva Poética' of eroticism and obscenity. However, the question of whether obscenity is really an adequate classification for such writing is raised, given Seg's declaration in *Los poseídos entre lilas*: 'La obscenidad no existe. Existe la herida. El hombre presenta en sí mismo una herida que desgarrá todo lo que en él vive, y que tal vez, o seguramente, le causó la misma vida.' (*Obras*, p. 262) This idea of a wound (which also occurs in Paz, though with connotations of the female organ) links Pizarnik's writing directly with the cracks, splits and wounds to self and language associated with forms of madness such as schizophrenia. It echoes Pizarnik's

⁸⁸ A reference to John Cleland's scandalous piece of eighteenth-century erotic fiction, *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (London: Penguin, [s.d.]; first publ. 1748-49).

⁸⁹ Joyce appears to have had a degree of influence on Pizarnik's prose writing, from the early experiments with Sylvia Molloy and Susana Thénon published in Haydu to these late prose works. This is slightly surprising, given that she described him as 'un autor frío' and his interior monologue as 'otro juego frío del autor' (*Correspondencia*, p. 34). Juan Jacobo Bajaría's classes on modern literature covered Joyce, and Pizarnik frequently argued with him about the merits of *Ulysses* (see Bajaría, pp. 33, 87, and 133-34). Her Joycean punning is perhaps more mediated through her friend Cortázar's 'gliglico', as exemplified in chapter 68 of *Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1963), though Haydu relates it to that of the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who also alludes to *Alice in Wonderland*: 'observamos [...] su inscribirse en una tradición que cuenta con *Tres tristes tigres*'. 'Las dos voces de Alejandra Pizarnik', in

hero, Lautréamont, who claims that his *Les chants de Maldoror* will leave a harmful impression in the troubled imaginings of the reader, like a ‘flétrissure’ (p. 78) and reminds us of Pizarnik’s interest in Georges Bataille; Melanie Nicholson draws our attention to the closeness between Pizarnik’s aesthetic and that which Bataille describes in his essay on William Blake, where ‘man [complies] with his own laceration’. (Nicholson, p.13) In one of the short poems published in *Zona prohibida*, Pizarnik refers to the female poet as the wounded one who howls: ‘La llagada ulula’, thus presenting her poetry as issuing from Artaudian torment, moving from violation to transgression.⁹⁰

The Sacred and Illicit Combine: ‘Je ne désire qu’un ange’

‘- Siempre tropiezo en mi plegaria de la infancia.
- Siempre así: yo estoy a la puerta; llamo; nadie abre.’ (*Obras*, p. 220)⁹¹

I have discussed childhood in Pizarnik’s poetry in its illicit, taboo or negative associations with orphanhood, madness, violation, transgression and death. The only positive aspect to emerge through the poetry is that of childhood as a sacred place. With reference to *Alice in Wonderland* we have seen how one of Pizarnik’s most compelling sacred images of childhood takes the form of the garden. In the above epigraph from ‘Casa de citas’ the sense of the sacred is achieved by a Biblical ring, alluding to the verse ‘knock, and it will be opened to you’ (Luke 11.9). However, the preceding prayer is a prayer of childhood, one which the poet stumbles over. It is as if she is knocking at the door of childhood rather than that of heaven, and she is denied entry to this sacred place.

The use of quasi-religious sentiment in relation to childhood is confirmation of Pizarnik’s great admiration for French poetry. One of the achievements with which modern French poetry is credited, according to Henri Peyre, is that of rivaling religion and appropriating mysticism, which thus passed from the realm of the sacred to the profane.⁹² The Poet in this situation becomes a kind of ‘angel’ in the sense of being a messenger, and various critics on Rimbaud have described his claims to transcendence as ‘angelistic’, for instance in the poem ‘Mystique’. I have already mentioned in

El puente de las palabras: Homenaje a David Lagmanovich, ed. by Inés Azar (Washington: Organization of American States, 1994), pp. 245-56 (p. 252).

⁹⁰ Alejandra Pizarnik, *Zona prohibida: Poemas y dibujos* (Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 1982), p. 16.

⁹¹ This ‘Casa de citas’ calls to mind Emily Dickinson’s Poem 461, which – as translated by Silvina Ocampo – contains the lines ‘hurgo mi plegaria de la niñez / tan pronto no ser más un niño’. *Poemas*, p. 119. Pizarnik wrote the preceding French phrase in a letter to Antonio Requeni, quoted in his ‘Recuerdo de Alejandra Pizarnik’, p. 208.

connection with Surrealism how Breton and Paz also elevate poetry to this religious status; for Paz, 'poetics (surrealism) replaces religion and metaphysics' (Wilson, *Octavio Paz*, p. 73). Pizarnik too invests poetry with this potential (ultimately unfulfilled) for transcendence, adopting religious symbols such as the angel for her own poetic purposes. She liked Memling's paintings of angels and the paintings of Marc Chagall, whose floating figures and strong Jewish imagery appealed to her.⁹³ His painting *The Falling Angel* (1923-47) (detail shown) may well have influenced her poetic imagery, and her imagination may also have absorbed something from the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti's collection of poems, *Sobre los ángeles*, since the angels in these poems are charged with a similar anguish to those of Pizarnik. This collection was published in 1927-28 in Spain, but Alberti was in exile in Latin America between 1940 and 1960 and an edition of *Sobre los ángeles* was brought out by Losada in Buenos Aires in 1952.⁹⁴ Pizarnik was certainly aware of his work, although her personal reaction to it was somewhat negative.⁹⁵ Both poets are obsessed with a 'paraíso perdido', though Pizarnik's poetry even questions whether her lost paradise, childhood, really was a paradise. Alberti's angels, like those of Pizarnik, are usually malevolent or sinister in character, for example in 'El cuerpo deshabitado' (pp. 250-54):

⁹² In *The Poem Itself*, ed. by Stanley Burnshaw (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 34. See also Piña, *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, p. 22.

⁹³ 'Me enamoré de los pintores flamencos y alemanes (particularmente de Memling por sus ángeles) y Chagall.' Quoted in Antonio Beneyto, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: Ocultándose en el lenguaje', *Quimera*, 34 (1983), 23-27 (pp. 23-24). Chagall's background has parallels with that of Pizarnik; a Russian Jew by birth, he became naturalized French in 1937 and lived in France from 1948 until his death in 1985.

⁹⁴ Rafael Alberti, *Cal y canto; Sobre los ángeles; Sermones y moradas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1952), first publ. 1927. Subsequent references to *Sobre los ángeles* will be taken from the *Poesías completas*, ed. by Horacio Jorge Becco (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1961) and indicated by a page-number in the main body of the text. Another poet who wrote about angels, in particular 'ángeles envejecidos' is Héctor Murena in his collection *El demonio de la armonía* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1964); Pizarnik knew this collection well, since she wrote a review of it, entitled 'Silencios en movimiento', *Sur*, 294 (1965), 103-06.

⁹⁵ In a letter to Ignacio Iglesias, editor of the magazine *Mundo Nuevo*, she comments: 'De la poesía moderna, entre los poetas conocidos debo mencionar a uno que nunca me ha gustado: Rafael Alberti.' Letter dated 21 May 1966; courtesy of Princeton University Library.

Y ángeles turbios, coléricos,
carbonizaron tu alma,
tu cuerpo. (p. 254)

His other angels are similarly at odds with their conventional representation of sublime goodness, since they include ‘Los ángeles mohosos’, ‘El ángel rabioso’, ‘Los ángeles crueles’, ‘Los ángeles vengativos’, ‘Los ángeles sonámbulos’, ‘El ángel falso’, ‘Los ángeles muertos’ and ‘Los ángeles feos’. ‘Los ángeles de las ruinas’ remind us of Pizarnik’s ‘Dama de las ruinas’, the Bloody Countess, and ‘El ángel desconocido’ reveals a crisis of split self which Pizarnik also experienced. In ‘El ángel de la arena’, the poet’s lost paradise is the sea (whereas Pizarnik’s is usually a garden) and the idea of childhood as something not innocent is suggested:

Dos niños de la noche, terribles, expulsados del cielo,
cuya infancia era un robo de barcos y un crimen de soles y de lunas (p. 280).

The final poem of the collection illustrates both the similarities and differences between Alberti and Pizarnik. It is entitled, heroically, ‘El ángel superviviente’, a scenario too optimistic for Pizarnik’s bleak outlook. Although all the other angels have died, this one survives ‘herido, alicortado’. There are, however, sinister symbols in the poem including the speaker’s ‘disimulos de niña que ha dado muerte a un cisne’. Not so far, perhaps, from the protagonist of Pizarnik’s ‘Niña entre azucenas’ to whom ‘Tan ofensiva apareció la imagen de mi niñez que me hubiera retorcido el cuello como a un cisne, yo sola a mi sola’ (*Obras*, p. 218). They are both linked by the powerful image of killing a swan – a reference to Storni’s anti-Modernista poem on Darío – yet in Alberti’s poem this signifies destroying something external, innocent and beautiful whereas in Pizarnik’s it indicates self-loathing and paranoia, echoing the earlier-quoted scorn for a cosseted childhood. In one poem she describes herself as an ‘ángel idiota invadido de malezas que le impidan recordar el color del cielo’ (p. 37); significantly, when she does later recall the colour of the sky, it is ‘el color de la infancia muerta’, dead childhood. In another, where the wind has eaten part of her face and hands, the poet states that ‘Me llamaban **ángel harapiento**’ (p. 111, original emphasis). Pizarnik’s secular use of this sacred symbol is made illicit by association or contamination with death rather than symbolizing redemption and the promise of eternal life; in the poem ‘Exilio’ the poet speaks of ‘Esta manía de saberme ángel’ since her love embraces fleeting things, above all:

ángeles bellos como cuchillos
que se elevan en la noche
y devastan la esperanza (p. 41).

In the later poem 'Las uniones posibles', the poet's desperate final sentence associates angels with a thanatic urge for oblivion, beyond *la petite mort*: 'Amor mío, dentro de las manos y de los ojos y del sexo bulle la más fiera nostalgia de ángeles, dentro de los gemidos y de los gritos hay un querer lo otro que no es otro, que no es nada...' (p. 196). Rather than the guardian angels of Silvina Ocampo's 'Los dos ángeles', or the 'ángel del pasado' as the guardian of memory in 'Autobiografía de Irene' (*Espacios métricos*, p. 82), Pizarnik's angels minister to a childhood irrevocably tainted by both Eros and Thanatos.

Pizarnik's negative reaction to Alberti's poetry perhaps stems from her instinctive rejection of his underlying rhetorical assuredness, which was alien and hostile to the persona she created. Alberti may doubt the self in 'el drama de despertar al mundo adulto', but ultimately believes in language (or rhetorically, in silence) as a medium for expressing this doubt.⁹⁶

Conclusion

There are thus many contradictory facets to Pizarnik's creation of a childlike persona in her poetry and to her self-positioning as child-poet. Of the many incarnations of Pizarnik's child persona, the 'pequeña viajera' is perhaps the most positive of Pizarnik's personae, carrying with it a sense of adventure; her ideal seems to be located somewhere between naivety and obscenity, embracing the surrealist view of life as an 'acto de candor' (p. 25) and liberated by orphanhood. But as in Alice's mirror, she sees 'cada yo [...] con su doble' (p. 208); thus the positive and negative facets of Pizarnik's child persona are doubled, naivety with precociousness, vulnerability with iconoclastic force, the sacred and the illicit. Her childhood may be dead and buried, innocence gone, indeed perhaps always tainted with obscenity and death, yet it is still in some way revered; we remember the 'cantos litúrgicos venidos de la tumba *sagrada* de mi ilícita infancia' (p. 208, my emphasis). As Melanie Nicholson observes, childhood can be associated with 'both primal innocence and Dionysian intoxication'. (Nicholson, p. 12)

Pizarnik's poetic persona, though undergoing drastic transformations, nevertheless retains certain key features throughout her *œuvre*. Referring to the very earliest collection of poems which she later disowned, *La tierra más ajena*, there is a poem entitled 'Yo soy...' in which the poet defines herself using elements that remain recognizable through her later poetry, despite the fact that the self as a unified entity becomes increasingly fragmented.

mis alas?
dos pétalos podridos

Wings commonly signify the ability for poetic flight.⁹⁷ Images of spoilt flowers recur in her subsequent work, for example the rose (Romantic symbol par excellence) becomes a 'rosa desparramada' or 'rosa petrificada' (p. 195), or is chewed and spat out by Death (p. 200).

[...] mi vida?
vacío bien pensado

This considered emptiness comes at the centre (of the centre) of one of her 'Pequeños cantos':

el centro del centro
es la ausencia (p. 234).

[...] mi vaivén?
un gong infantil

Childish objects figure frequently in Pizarnik's images, as has been noted.

[...] mis ojos?
ah! trozos de infinito

This seems to show some initial sense of self-worth as a seer or visionary poet; it also reveals her obsession with eyes, whether the blue eyes of her father, or the 'ojos abiertos' of the doll, like Nadja. Ironically what does not remain constant through her poetry is the ability to define herself as this poem does, to declare confidently 'Yo soy'. Increasingly, words fail, especially those attempting to define the self. Whereas in Paz, 'Por un instante están los nombres habitados' (*Poemas* (1935-1975), p. 152), Pizarnik's perpetual lament is of an uninhabited name, infinitely repeated 'alejandra, alejandra / debajo estoy yo / alejandra' (*Obras*, p. 31).

Paz's idea of childhood as 'inocencia salvaje domesticada con palabras'⁹⁸ would in Pizarnik's case have to be altered to tainted innocence, failed by words; words, rather than domesticating or taming, create a self-referential closed circuit, an obstruction to silence or the 'vraie vie' of an 'en soi' existence. Childhood is perhaps for Pizarnik a vehicle for the expression of her fruitless search for immediacy and authenticity, for words that are actions. Pizarnik declares: 'Voy a escribir como llora un niño, es decir; no llora porque esté triste, sino que llora para informar, tranquilamente.' (*Obras*, p. 214) Describing her own vision of poetry, she wishes it to be 'lo más sencilla posible,

⁹⁶ Jason Wilson, ' "Más o menos surrealístico": La modernidad de Rafael Alberti', in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 485-86 (1990), 59-67 (p. 63).

⁹⁷ As Wilson notes, 'El tópico de "alas" sintetiza la historia de la poesía romántica.' *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 485-86, p. 64.

desnuda, esencial, inocente'; a very child-like vision. That this vision should be distorted and overcome by the tortured adolescence of the late prose works seems, in retrospect, inevitable. In the following chapter, this tortured vision of childhood will be contrasted with that of Silvina Ocampo, and their differing attitudes to self-definition examined.

⁹⁸ 'Soliloquio de medianoche', in *Poemas (1935-1975)*, pp. 112-15.

Chapter 4: Sylvette and Sacha

Friendship and Mutual Friends

'if one *reads* the writer's life as another text [...], as a social narrative whose acts, conducts, attitudes are observed, interpreted, and judged by the community of social readers, then one may find, in the life, grounds for profitable reflection on the text.'¹

Alejandra Pizarnik was a close friend and admirer of Silvina Ocampo. Her acquaintance with the older writer, on paper at least, dates from 1967 when her article on Ocampo's anthology *El pecado mortal* was published in *Sur*. From Pizarnik's letters to Ocampo covering the three years from 1969 to Pizarnik's death in 1972 (*Correspondencia*, pp. 189-212), we can see that both the infantile and the erotic played a part, from Pizarnik's point of view at least, in their idiosyncratic relationship. Cristina Piña describes their friendship as 'una amistad hecha de fascinación, risas, bromas perversas, admiración y complicidad' (*Mujeres argentinas*, p. 318) and sees Ocampo's symbolic world of 'niños perversos' as 'un universo gemelo al de la Alejandra que con sus gestos, su rostro y su comportamiento infantiles, divertía y escandalizaba [...] a sus interlocutores [...], o la que "jugaba" con [...] la muerte' (*Alejandra Pizarnik*, pp. 162-63). It is noteworthy that Piña situates them in twin universes but in doing so she compares Ocampo's work not only with Pizarnik's writing but also, in the first instance, with her life. This underlines the absolute fusion in Pizarnik's universe between self and poetic work. Noemí Ulla, at the end of her introduction to Emecé's new edition of *Viaje olvidado* (which presumably aims to outline the current state of Ocampo's reception and position within Argentine literature) slips in a tantalizingly elliptical reference to Pizarnik:

Silvina Ocampo ocupa un lugar de privilegio entre las escritoras más originales del Río de la Plata, por la audacia de su imaginación y la particularidad de su escritura tan cercana en alguna época a Borges y a Bioy como a Juan Rodolfo Wilcock [sic], a Armonía Somers y a Alejandra Pizarnik. (p. 15) ✓

Her allusions bring together quite different strands of River Plate literature (Somers is Uruguayan); the link with Borges and Bioy is not surprising, nor that with Wilcock given their collaboration on *Los traidores* and Daniel Balderston's article linking their stories, but Ulla does not elaborate on the nature of the 'audacity and particularity' which moves her to link Ocampo with Pizarnik in this way.² I would argue that one of the particularities of both writers is their obsession with childhood. In Silvina Ocampo it is a source of fascination, which she explores in her writing with unflinching sharpness

¹ Sylvia Molloy, 'Female Textual Identities: The Strategies of Self-Figuration: Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Latin America*, ed. by Sara Castro-Klaren, Sylvia Molloy and Beatriz Sarlo (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 107-24 (p. 115).

yet also with poignancy and tenderness, as I discussed in the first two Chapters. Obsession, regression and furiously nostalgic resentment are more the feelings generated in response to childhood in Pizarnik, as seen in Chapter 3. In this Chapter I propose to explore the ways in which these two women (both of whom adopted slightly marginal positions *vis-à-vis* the literary establishment of which they were, nevertheless, a part) found common ground in their fascination for childhood and in certain other thematic and aesthetic affinities. Though from markedly different social situations and historical contexts, the strong infantile element preserved in both resulted in a bond between them which deserves to be examined in closer detail.

It was discussed in Chapter 1 how Silvina Ocampo, her husband Bioy Casares, and Borges formed a group slightly apart from Victoria Ocampo's main *Sur* committee. According to Saúl Yurkievich, there was an easy relationship between Silvina Ocampo and younger writers. He described Silvina as 'abierta, fresca, espontánea'; both she and Bioy Casares were apparently willing to meet with writers of younger generations, an attitude which would have facilitated friendship with Pizarnik.³ Silvina Ocampo's peripheral position, still connected to the centre yet eluding total domination by Victoria, must have appealed to Alejandra Pizarnik; she professed scorn for the bourgeois audience at poetry readings who she referred to as 'señoras con sombreros' (*Correspondencia*, p. 40), yet was drawn to the élite cultural milieu represented by *Sur*, which was comparable to London's Bloomsbury group in its cosmopolitan outlook. Pizarnik enjoyed the idea of shocking the aristocratic Victoria by appearing at her elegant literary gatherings as a precocious 'enfant terrible' in extravagantly scruffy clothes, yet she was undoubtedly fascinated. Such fascination can be seen in some of Pizarnik's letters to Silvina Ocampo, which, although intimate in content, are ostentatiously addressed on the envelope to 'Sra. Doña Silvina Ocampo de Bioy' or 'Madame Silvina OCAMPO de Bioy', enjoying flirtation with formality. (*Correspondencia*, p. 202)

John King describes Pizarnik as 'perhaps the most important young poet to appear in *Sur* in the 1960s' and later 'the most complex and accomplished young poet to be published in the magazine' to which she regularly contributed poetry and reviews from the 1960s onwards.⁴ Another poet attached to the magazine at that time was Juan

² Silvina Ocampo and J. R. Wilcock, *Los traidores* (Buenos Aires: Losange, 1956). Daniel Balderston, 'Los cuentos crueles de Silvina Ocampo and Juan Rodolfo Wilcock'.

³ Private interview with Saúl Yurkievich in Paris, 4 March 1998.

⁴ She published reviews or articles in *Sur* on – amongst others – Silvina Ocampo, Antonin Artaud, Yves Bonnefoy, Alberto Girri, Héctor Murena, and the magazine *Zona Franca*. Full details in the *Sur* index.

José Hernández, who was close to both Pizarnik and Ocampo. Pizarnik need not have courted Victoria Ocampo's attention, however, since *Sur* was never the prime place for Argentine poets to make their mark. As King puts it, 'Poets did not need the recognition of *Sur*, for editorials were willing to publish young writers and little magazines would support new tendencies.' (King, p. 195) But Pizarnik was evidently seduced by this world to which Silvina Ocampo belonged. Like Ocampo, Pizarnik was a younger sister, though one of two rather than of six. Pizarnik felt no great tradition of loyalty to the *patria*, since she was only the second generation of an immigrant family;⁵ Silvina Ocampo's quirky attitude to the *patria*, reflecting it in an 'infiel espejo' at odds with that of her sister may well have struck a chord with Pizarnik.

The relationship between the two women, as the scant documentation presents it, seems to have been more strongly felt on Pizarnik's side. The difference in age should not be forgotten; Ocampo was over thirty years Pizarnik's senior. The younger poet admired the older woman, not only for her writing but for her curiously childlike traits, the acuteness of her perception, her black humour and her inimitable individuality. Pizarnik's correspondence to Ocampo takes the form of infantile letters and drawings, cultivating a highly-charged atmosphere of childish perversity and eroticism combined with literary fervour. The names she uses to refer to Ocampo and herself, Sylvette or Sylvie and Sacha, indicate a desire to foster an intimate atmosphere. Pizarnik delighted in playing not only with names but also with different languages, something which interacted with Ocampo's own multilingual upbringing. For instance, on the back of one envelope, she writes in German 'Du hast kein Herz, Pedro und ich liebe dich so.' By writing this in German, she is able to pun on Silvina Ocampo's initials with the word 'so', meaning 'so much'. (*Correspondencia*, p. 200) Likewise, she addresses Silvina in French as 'Chère musicienne du silence', which would be less effective in Spanish, since the feminine form of 'músico', meaning musician, is 'música', which would be read as the word for music itself, rather than a female musician. (*Correspondencia*, p. 207)⁶

See John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture, 1931-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 194.

⁵ For full biographical details, see Cristina Piña's biography. In one letter to Ocampo, she says 'te bendigo desde el fondo de los fondos de mi casa y de mi raza (de la que me siento desunida, sin embargo los oigo allá lejos cantarme sus ensalmos)' (*Correspondencia*, p. 199). Although the comment is made as a playful aside, the issue was evidently a pertinent one for her, as discussed in Chapter 3 in the section 'Childhood and Orphanhood'.

⁶ Interestingly, the phrase occurs in Ocampo's own poem, 'La busca del cielo' where it does indeed mean music. 'Música del silencio, de la inmortalidad, / seráfica guirnalda, invisibilidad.' In *Espacios métricos*, p. 15.

Pizarnik continually offers Ocampo encouragement and support in her letters, not that Ocampo needed it, since she was continuously productive in her writing, if not in her publication. Such urgings indicate more a projection onto Ocampo of Pizarnik's own insecurity about her expressive abilities.⁷ She communicated with Ocampo not only through letters but through dedication of certain poems. The poem '...Al alba venid...', for example, from the last year of Pizarnik's life, is dedicated to Silvina (*Obras*, pp. 254-55).⁸ It seems to take the form of a dialogue between persistence and protection, a dialogue with the self, between conflicting internal voices. One of these voices is irresistibly drawn to the sound of the wind, the touch of the night and to leaving at dawn, whilst the other wishes to curb these desires. The plurality of self is evident in the line 'Así hablo yo, cobardes' (p. 255) with its deliberate addition of a plural agreement on the adjective. In this poem, the protective impulse is defeated by desperation and a sense of inevitable loss. By dedicating this poem to Ocampo, Pizarnik may have been seeking in Ocampo a protecting figure, as she did in Olga Orozco and her talismans (see Piña, p. 85). At the very end of her life, Pizarnik was evidently still strongly attached to Ocampo, since one of the pieces of paper left in her room at her death was an almost illegible note for Silvina.⁹ Feeling able to confide in Ocampo about her own self-doubts was obviously important to Pizarnik, although a protective degree of self-irony remains in the capitalization of the first phrase in which she confesses:

es una Gran Prueba de Amistad de mi parte esto de no sonreír todo el tiempo y de no decir chistes todo el tiempo, que es lo que hago con 99 de cada 100 personas que conozco. Quiero decir que revelar la tristeza es algo así como la máxima confesión (al menos, en mi caso). (*Correspondencia*, p. 204)

What Ocampo thought about Pizarnik is less clear. Of the letters in the Princeton archives, none are to Pizarnik – it appears that the majority of their communication was by telephone (Piña biography, p. 163) – although it is possible that she may be alluded to in a couple of them. In a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez dated August 1973, Silvina describes how when the boat she was on reached France, she found amongst her luggage a letter from 'Alejandra' from the previous summer. This could refer to Pizarnik, since she was still alive then; she died on 25 September 1972. Silvina, presumably because of her forgetfulness, thinks she is going mad and declares to

⁷ For evidence of this insecurity, see her diary for 24 May 1966: 'Pero lo esencial es la falta de confianza en mis medios innatos, en mis recursos internos o espirituales o imaginarios.' (*Semblanza*, p. 280)

⁸ In Doris Meyer's book *Contemporary Women Authors of Latin America: New Translations*, there appears a translation of Pizarnik's 'Winter story', which also bears a dedication 'for Silvina Ocampo'. This dedication does not feature in the *Obras*, but does appear on a typescript entitled *Los últimos poemas de Alejandra Pizarnik*, in the keeping of the *Clarín* archives, Buenos Aires.

⁹ Information from a letter from Alberto Manguel to 'Manucho' in Paris, dated Buenos Aires 2 October 1972. 'Había dejado un papel casi ilegible para Silvina Ocampo' (p. 2).

Manucho that ‘Volverse loca es para mí sufrir para otros es reír o divertirse.’ Is she referring to Alejandra’s flirtation with madness in this contrast with others? It is likely that Silvina would at least have been aware of Alejandra’s internment in the Hospital Pirovano. Also interesting is the comment in a letter of December 1976 from Silvina to Alberto Girri:

Tres personas me dijeron hace tiempo ‘voy a morir muy pronto’. Yo protesté ‘Yo voy a morir antes’. ¡Las tres murieron! Alberto [surname illegible], Alejandra y Hector. ‘Voy a morir muy pronto’ te digo yo ahora. No puedo sobrellevar la edad que llevo tan infaustamente.

Whereas Alejandra, if this indeed refers to Pizarnik, was unable to bear being 36, Ocampo is here making a protest at the more advanced age of 73. As part of the ‘social text’ of their relationship, to use Molloy’s term again, their difference in age and their differing attitudes to confronting and accepting the aging process are crucial.

To give an idea of their social and literary contexts, I will look in a little detail at the circles each writer frequented. Pizarnik initially studied at the University of Buenos Aires and particularly with Juan Jacobo Bajarlía, who taught there. She was evidently passionate about literature but somewhat scornful of academia, as demonstrated in the parodic ‘Crónica social’ she composed with Susana Thénon for Ana María Barrenechea, who worked in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters.¹⁰ The kind of people she came into contact with through Bajarlía moved in different circles from that of Ocampo, but as I mentioned earlier, the *Sur* group was an important point of intersection between their worlds; José Bianco, Eduardo Paz Leston and Enrique Pezzoni were close to both writers. Their social and literary nexus of mutual friends extended to such great figures as Octavio Paz (also an occasional contributor to *Sur*), whom Silvina Ocampo had first met in Paris in the 1940s, and whom Alejandra Pizarnik met – also in Paris – twenty years later (see Piña biography, pp. 108-14).¹¹ Pizarnik moved in the same Parisian circles as Italo Calvino; she was friends with Chichita Singer, who became Calvino’s wife (see *El Mundo*, 20 November 1966). Calvino was also a friend of Ocampo, as has been noted by his introductions to, and reviews of, her work. Pizarnik had a strong friendship with Julio Cortázar and his wife Aurora Bernárdez. According to Saúl

¹⁰ This piece is reproduced in Haydu, pp. 159-60. It describes Barrenechea as ‘perita y manzanita en Estilinsky y Gramatova’ (p. 159) and the Faculty as ‘la facultad de filosofía y letrinas’ (p. 160).

¹¹ Testimony to the friendship between Ocampo and Paz is given in the article ‘Dos amigos, dos poemas’, *La Nación, Suplemento Literario*, 17 April 1994, p. 3. Paz dedicated the poem ‘Arcos’, written in 1947, to Silvina. Apparently their conversation ‘osciló entre nuestros gustos literarios y la realidad de nuestras vidas. Lo leído y lo vivido, lo amado y lo aborrecido.’ The fact that Bioy Casares and Paz’s then wife, Elena Garro, became intimate (as seen in letters held by Princeton University Library and in ‘La seducción de un dandy’, *Clarín, Suplemento especial*, 9 March 1999, p. 7) would have perhaps contributed to ‘lo aborrecido’.

Yurkievich, Cortázar was quite delighted to find in Pizarnik someone who responded to his ideal of the poet: naive, childlike, not part of this world. The childhood game as a thematic link between Ocampo and Cortázar has already been noted; Cortázar's homage to Pizarnik, 'Aquí Alejandra', alludes to games as a point of contact between himself and Pizarnik. It also mentions Silvina Ocampo as one of the 'intercesoras' who will gather for Pizarnik to protect her.¹² Cortázar is thus an important figure along this aesthetic route followed by Ocampo and Pizarnik; indeed Piña places Cortázar and Pizarnik together: 'hay una profunda similitud en cuanto a su concepción transgresora de la práctica literaria, relacionada con la línea de escritores dentro de la cual se inscriben' (*Poesía y experiencia del límite*, p. 49).

Both Ocampo and Pizarnik were introduced to the circle of Norah Lange, the child muse (as mentioned in the Introduction), whose literary gatherings with her husband, Oliverio Girondo, were attended by many prominent intellectuals. Pizarnik first attended one of these gatherings when she was only nineteen, in 1955.¹³ Lange at the time was nearly fifty, and was contemporary with Silvina Ocampo. Both writers also knew Alberto Girri; Ocampo corresponded with him, and Pizarnik wrote reviews of his work. Marcelo Pichon Rivière and Sylvia Molloy are other important mutual friends of the two writers, making up quite a substantial number.

Pizarnik's own aesthetic route, however, began increasingly to be marked by her concurrent involvement with Surrealist groups and small poetry magazines, and by her psychoanalysis sessions, first with León Ostrov and subsequently with Enrique Pichon Rivière. The vogue for psychoanalysis really took hold in Pizarnik's generation, and Pichon Rivière was one of the main founders of it in Buenos Aires, as mentioned in Chapter 3. Ocampo's occasional humorous references to the techniques of psychoanalysis, see for example 'Albino Orma' where Albino tries to predict the main protagonist's future by interpretation of an inkblot (*Cuentos II*, p. 65), are insignificant when compared to the incidence of such vocabulary in Pizarnik's prose, and engage – as Evelyn Fishburn points out – with 'the excesses of psychodynamic therapy amongst the Argentine middle-classes' rather than with 'the complexities of Freudian theory' (*Short Fiction*, p. 105). Pizarnik perverts psychoanalytical discourse as part of a larger destructive enterprise in the late prose; see for example the pseudo-scientific statement about language and sex made in *Hilda la polígrafa* by no less than 'el Dr. Flor de Edipo

¹² Pizarnik's letter of 3 April 1970 to Ocampo in France tells her about a cassette she has received from Julio Cortázar, which made her cry. She urges Ocampo to show Cortázar this letter. Ocampo and Cortázar are both in the very small circle of close friends upon whom Pizarnik can call.

Chú' (*Obras*, p. 324). The overlap between the Surrealist belief in the inspiration of madness and psychoanalysis' potential for liberation through language feeds Pizarnik's horrified fascination with madness. Silvina Ocampo's only comment about madness, already quoted earlier, was that it was suffering not diversion; her stance is thus anti-Surrealist.

These overlapping yet gradually diverging literary worlds of the two writers form a backdrop for the passionate intensity of Pizarnik's letters to Ocampo, which move from addressing her as 'Usted' through 'Silvina, Sylvie, Sylvette' to 'Ma très chère' (*Correspondencia*, pp. 192, 198, 210). Her signing off likewise increases in fervour, from 'Suya, Alejandra' to 'Tu muy Alejandra, Alejandra, Alejandra' (pp. 192, 195, original emphasis).

Childhood as Cipher?

'En un libro que reúne parte de la correspondencia de Alejandra Pizarnik, se publicaron cartas de Alejandra a Silvina, que entretejen una historia amorosa. Lentamente, esa historia apasionante que tal vez algún día se conozca en detalle, abre las puertas de su recinto secreto.'¹⁴

Such evident passion raises the question of whether Noemí Ulla's linking of Ocampo with Pizarnik could have had another motivation than their obsession with childhood. The friendship between Ocampo and Pizarnik may have just been a point of contact between two highly individual women, sharing literary passions, mutual friends, frustrations with love¹⁵ and a strong attachment to childhood. It may also have expressed the adulation of an older woman by an impressionable young poet, who sensed in her a fundamental integration of adult and childhood self which the younger woman yearned to attain. A third possibility is that Pizarnik's letters might be an expression of sexual attraction channelled through childish eroticism. This seems to be the view of María Gabriela Mizraje, who reads Pizarnik's letters to Ocampo as desperate: 'Silvina Ocampo publica sus *Poemas de amor desesperado* (1949); Alejandra – pendiente de Silvina – escribe cartas de amor desesperado.' (*Argentinas*, p. 275) Ulla's linking of Ocampo with Pizarnik cited above could therefore be read as a tacit reference to a lesbian or bisexual orientation. The last and most deeply-felt of Pizarnik's letters to Ocampo has two passages omitted in *Correspondencia* which point

¹³ According to *Correspondencia* (p. 33), she also met Olga Orozco and Enrique Molina through this circle.

¹⁴ Marcelo Pichon Rivière, 'La vida misteriosa', p. 5.

¹⁵ Pizarnik commented to her companion, Elizabeth Azcona Cranwell, that 'las mujeres feas nunca vamos a tener suerte en el amor' (Piña biography, p.80) and Bioy Casares feared that he had made his wife Silvina very unhappy: 'tengo culpa: yo no le pude dar seguridad a ella que era tan insegura; yo no era doméstico, eso la hacía sufrir. No me juzgaba desde la moral tradicional, pero me quería y entonces me

to an extremely intimate reading, given that the sentence immediately following the first omission exclaims 'je suis avide de jouir (mais jusqu'au péril extrême)' (p. 210) and following the second 'Sylvette, no es una calentura, es un re-conocimiento infinito de que sos maravillosa, genial y adorable' (p. 211).

The section of *Hilda la polígrafa* entitled 'Helioglobo -32-' (*Obras*, p. 305) is dedicated to Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares, and bears a quotation in French from 'L'art de trouver un mari': 'Aussi bien pouvez-vous par une annonce personnelle faire savoir que vous existez.' Following Sylvia Molloy's thoughts on desire governing citation,¹⁶ Pizarnik's literary citation here appears to draw herself and 'Los Bioy' into a kind of *ménage-à-trois*. By this citation, she is in effect putting a kind of personal advert of her own, making it known that she exists and drawing Silvina's attention to this fact, yet addressing both Silvina and her husband. Within the framework of the highly parodic discourse which is *Hilda la polígrafa*, the effect is to mock the advice given by the French citation. The 'posture of enunciation', to use Molloy's terminology, implicitly suggests that something much less conventional than finding a husband would suit Pizarnik's desire. She puts no direct personal advert, unless the whole of the following section is just that; in which case, her message would be 'I exist and am an *enfant terrible* with puerile SOH'.¹⁷

On the question of the sexual orientation of Pizarnik, critics are either silent or divided. Of those critical articles which mention sexuality, many only implicitly associate her with a lesbian aesthetic.¹⁸ See for example Nuria Amat's article 'La erótica del lenguaje en Alejandra Pizarnik y Monique Wittig', which is a Cixousian meditation on Pizarnik's writing, urging Pizarnik to

recupera tu cuerpo a través de la escritura. Tu desorden es un orden. Otro tipo de orden, claro, el tuyo. Como también hay otro tipo de sexo, tantos. Abandona tu vergüenza. Písala. Muéstrate tal y como eres, como sientes, como hablas, y luego sigue hasta el fin, hasta el fondo de ti misma [...] Tal vez hablando sobre lo que no se debe ni se puede, Alejandra encuentre su propia identidad.
(pp. 49-50)

The appearance of her work *La condesa sangrienta*, which has the disturbing effect of forcing the reader into a voyeuristic position like that of the Countess (who derives sexual pleasure from overseeing and participating in the torture of young women)

quería para ella sola. Es cierto, no era una esposa convencional y, desde luego, no era Penélope.' From 'Yo y mi chica', p. 119.

¹⁶ I refer here to material in Molloy's lecture 'Of Quotes and Queers: Coded Literary Inscription in Latin American Literature', given on 9 December 1998 in the Institute of Latin American Studies, London.

¹⁷ In the manner of 'annonces personnelles', where GSOH is 'good sense of humour'...

certainly fuelled speculation as to Pizarnik's sexuality. María Aline Seabra Ferreira avoids the word lesbian, however, concentrating her discussion of *La condesa sangrienta* on the figure of the female vampire. She mentions in passing that 'the tale carries out a profoundly disturbing meditation on the nature of perversity and of sexual difference as far as the Countess's homosexual proclivities are concerned'.¹⁹ David William Foster is apparently bolder, devoting a chapter to 'The Representation of the Body in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik' in his *Sexual Textualities*.²⁰ However, when discussing *La condesa sangrienta* at length in his *Violence in Argentine Literature*, he takes the line that 'it is immaterial whether 'real' homosexuality is involved'.²¹ Molloy sees Pizarnik's attitude towards the Countess' lesbianism in *La condesa sangrienta* as typical of the 'naming while denying [which] is a constant in Pizarnik's work'.²² Suzanne Chávez Silverman declares: 'I see Pizarnik's sexuality not only as 'relevant' but as central, to both her life and her work, especially to *La condesa sangrienta*' and she accuses Pizarnik's biographer, Cristina Piña, of skirting around the lesbian issue with regard to Pizarnik.²³ In a later article, Piña claims that Pizarnik's relationship to her parents, who maintained her financially, affected her ability to grow and develop a sense of self and a sexual identity; Piña is therefore making Pizarnik's infantilized subject position as important as her sexual orientation.²⁴ Piña's current position, stated most clearly at the end of her recent book, *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, is that she disagrees with those critics who feel that it is necessary to investigate a writer's sexuality in order to explain and evaluate their work.

¹⁸ I have unfortunately been unable to access María Victoria García-Serrano's article, entitled 'Perversión y lesbianismo en *Acerca de La condesa sangrienta* de Alejandra Pizarnik', *Torre de Papel*, 4.2 (1994), 5-17.

¹⁹ In 'Alejandra Pizarnik's *Acerca de La condesa sangrienta* and Angela Carter's *The Lady of the House of Love*: Transgression and the Politics of Victimization', *New Comparison*, 22 (1997), 27-57 (p. 47).

²⁰ 'The Representation of the Body in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik', in *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Fiction* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1997), pp. 94-117.

²¹ *Violence in Argentine Literature: Cultural Responses to Tyranny* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), pp. 101-14 (p. 105).

²² 'From Sappho to Baffo: Diverting the Sexual in Alejandra Pizarnik', in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. by Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (New York; London: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 250-58 (p. 256).

²³ To quote Chávez Silverman: 'Piña's insistence on the separation of "vida" and "obra", her privileging of the latter in the name of professionalism (her criteria about what is "relevant") in a writer who was, in Pizarnik's within Piña's searingly intense words, "devorada por el desmesurado afán "de hacer con su cuerpo el cuerpo del poema"', is an egregious example of what Sylvia Molloy has called "anxiety-ridden erasure".' From 'The Look that Kills: The "Unacceptable Beauty" of Alejandra Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta*', in *¿Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings* ed. by Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 281-305 (pp. 284-85).

²⁴ 'Esta relación seguramente determinó su imposibilidad de crecer desde el punto de vista afectivo y lograr, no ya sólo una identidad sexual definida y estable, sino la realización de alguna forma de amor satisfactorio o una aceptación pacífica de su sexualidad y de su cuerpo.' *Mujeres argentinas*, p. 309.

Judging by the published correspondence and by Piña's biography, which – though we should allow for rhetorical flourish – describes Silvina and Alejandra as 'como dos niñas perversas trenzadas en un juego constante de risas y crueldad, de seducción y escamoteo, de complicidad fascinada' (p. 163), the bond between them must have played strongly and simultaneously on the infantile and the erotic. Literary discussion is also present in Pizarnik's letters and apparently in some of their telephone conversations (p. 163), but it occupies a more marginal position (see *Correspondencia*, p. 206). Given the possibility of 'anxiety-ridden erasure' (Molloy) on the part of critics, it would be possible to read the social narrative of their relationship of 'niñas perversas' as having a sexual sub-text; infantilism could have been a defensive strategy on Pizarnik's part to avoid speaking openly about her sexuality, about which she felt insecure. The world of child sexuality may be a displacement, conscious or otherwise, of her adult desires; the childlike plea in one of her letters that some day Silvina will tell her a story 'con caballos de calesita' could be read as simultaneously seeking to seduce and to find maternal protection. That she liked to cast them both in childish roles is reflected in her question to Silvina, '¿qué vas a ser cuando seas grande?' (*Correspondencia*, p. 203).

Returning to Molloy's concept of desire governing citation, critics usually read Pizarnik's poetry as a poetics of suicide, since not only does an obsession with death permeate her own poetry, but she also reads and cites various poets who committed suicide, such as Nerval. Her own death by overdose, although not known for certain to be deliberate, is taken as confirmation of this reading. Pizarnik's citations might be doubly coded, however, in that she cites certain authors in order to create a literary persona and posture of enunciation for herself behind which other selves hide. Both *La condesa sangrienta* and *Los poseídos entre lilas* (with Segismunda's ambivalent 'triciclo mecanoerótico', at once childish and erotic *Obras*, p. 260) are based on other texts; is Pizarnik cloaking herself in other literary works as a way of simultaneously trying out a certain posture of enunciation whilst shielding or protecting herself? Sylvia Molloy, although talking about explicit and declared autobiography, suggests that intertextuality can be an encouragement to writing: 'an often incongruous conflation of possible texts that the writer uses as a literary springboard, a way of projecting himself into the void of writing, even when that writing directly concerns the self.' (*At Face Value*, p. 17) In Pizarnik's case, this might be rephrased as 'particularly when that writing directly concerns the self'. Her incongruous conflation of possible texts

provides a springboard into childhood (Carroll), Absurdity (Beckett and Ionesco) and Surrealism (Breton and Penrose).

I mentioned in Chapter 3 how critics (with the notable exceptions of María Negroni and Cristina Piña) often dismiss the late prose works, favouring the more 'lyrical' poetry. This may be in part an 'alleviation of gender anxiety, or anxiety of contamination' (Molloy) by dismissing these as private scribbles of her most depressed and desperate last months; such a stance would form a parallel to the anxious over-stressing of a poetics of suicide in her other works, to the exclusion of other possible readings. Pizarnik, however, was already doing these iconoclastic experiments in the early 1960s with Molloy and with other friends, so they form part of the whole picture of her creative expression. As a contemporary in Paris with Pizarnik, Molloy shared Pizarnik's enjoyment in creating such punning and scatological texts as are reproduced in Haydu, for example 'Escena de la locura de mademoiselle Pomesita Laconasse'; these texts perhaps reveal enjoyment at finding a release for speaking about sexuality which Pizarnik kept more veiled in her published poems. The section of *Hilda la polígrafa* entitled 'La polka', for instance, contains the following teasing dialogue, all [sic]:

Peresidentes del poker pejecutivo de la Res Pública, nuestro país es homo...
 '¡sexual!' gritaron.
 géneo, burutos. Nuestra apatria es homogenua. Quiero decir, [...] que todos
 somos iguales. (*Obras*, p. 335)

In the same way that it is suggested of Raquel Adler, who was writing mystic poetry in the 1920s, that her mysticism was perhaps 'una especie de máscara legitimadora del erotismo,'²⁵ might puerile humour not be functioning as a legitimizing mask for Alejandra Pizarnik?

Interpreting Ocampo's part in this relationship of 'niñitas perversas' becomes extremely speculative, given the lack of published correspondence. It is noteworthy that in many stories she negotiates an ambiguous subject position, playing with the gender of her narrators, and often keeping the reader in suspense as to the gender of the narrator at the beginning. A comment by her on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale 'El pájaro azul', in which a bird comes every evening to woo a princess at her window, could be interpreted as indicative of Ocampo's rejection of the archetypal heterosexual love paradigm, always veiled in childish humour, since 'en el cuento el pájaro se transforma en príncipe, pero a mí me gustaba más como pájaro' (p. 18). It could equally be read,

²⁵ Delfina Muschietti, 'Feminismo y literatura', in *Yrigoyen entre Borges y Arlt (1916-1930): Historia social de la literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Contrapunto, 1989), pp. 129-60 (p. 156).

however, as a childlike anthropomorphic preference for the company of animals to that of fellow human beings, which was often the case with Ocampo, especially the company of dogs. I mentioned in Chapter 1 Ocampo's flippancy with regard to her family tree; in a letter to her sister Angélica, she demonstrates her willingness to include animals in this family tree as much as the great *próceres* lauded by Victoria, when she objects to a display of antlers on the wall 'como si esos siervos [sic, for ciervos but perhaps enjoying the pun with 'serfs'] fueran mis antepasados asesinados'. (25 August 1970) Interestingly, when explaining to Ulla her ease with animals, Ocampo links them to children, 'son como niños'. (*Encuentros*, p. 43)

Ocampo's frequent distortion and parody of heterosexual love (as typified in 'El asco', *Cuentos I*, pp. 290-93) calls to mind that of the Uruguayan lesbian writer, Cristina Peri Rossi, in such works as *La nave de los locos*.²⁶ In this novel, all potentially amorous situations ridicule or refute the heterosexual paradigm in some way, such as the sumptuously-written seduction scene between the main protagonist, Equis, and a deliciously obese old lady ('El ángel caído', pp. 74-83) or the final lesbian/transvestite show. Examples of such subversion in Ocampo are numerous: in the poem 'Evocación de Córdoba', *Enumeración* (p. 50), 'lunas de miel' is rhymed with 'tímido burdel' and the short stories 'El amor', 'Los amantes' and 'Los celosos' all mock aspects of heterosexual relationships.²⁷ Peri Rossi is also in the same genealogical line as Ocampo through her interest in children as protagonists, particularly in the collection *La rebelión de los niños*.²⁸ Unlike Peri Rossi, however, Ocampo does not frequently propose other forms of love. She only mentions the word lesbian twice; once under cover of darkness in the poem 'Estrofas a la noche' from *Espacios métricos*, pp. 58-65 (p. 60):

Junto al silencio de lesbianas pálidas
sobre el mármol medido por los pasos,
qué espacio agradecido en tenues lazos
de azul jardín y de esperanzas válidas.

The second time is in the story 'Amada en el amado', where the idea of the female character entering fully into her male lover's dreams and experiences raises the

²⁶ *La nave de los locos* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1984). Ulla's linking of Ocampo with Armonía Somers, Ocampo's affinity with Peri Rossi, and the points of intersection between Pizarnik and the Uruguayan poet Marosa di Giorgio, suggest that this aesthetic route could include Uruguayan women writers, as Ulla observes in *Inveniones a dos voces: Ficción y poesía en Silvina Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1992), p. 119. Di Giorgio's writing often adopts 'a style suggestive of a child, an outrageous little girl', and she was inspired by Surrealism. See Kathryn A. Kopple, 'Uruguay's Surrealist Woman Writer: Marosa Di Giorgio's Lines of Escape', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 9.1 (2000), 47-58 (p. 53).

²⁷ The sexual charge in Ocampo's own circle would do nothing but encourage such subversion, given that with the excessively heterosexual exception of her husband and the 'tan sabiamente femenina' Victoria, she was surrounded, in the majority, by homosexual men.

possibility of her becoming a lesbian when he dreams about other women: ‘quisiera entrar en tus sueños, quisiera entrar en tus experiencias. Si te enamoraras de una mujer, me enamoraría yo también de ella; me volvería lesbiana.’ (*Cuentos II*, p. 19). In these circumstances, becoming a lesbian would be the natural consequence of all-encompassing love for a man; just the kind of suggestive paradox in which Ocampo revels. Although Juan José Hernández described Ocampo as having a ‘fuerte pulsión lésbica’, such a reading of Ocampo or of any of her texts as lesbian would be reductive of her multiple ambiguities, which Andrea Ostrov reads as ‘estableciendo [...] una economía del pasaje, del tránsito, de lo fluido’, and dissolving binary divisions.²⁹ Ocampo’s subversion is of love in all its forms, finding degrees of jealousy, hate and resentment in it, whatever the sexes involved. Moreover, looking purely at the social narrative of the Ocampo-Pizarnik relationship, certain passages in Pizarnik’s last letter suggest that Ocampo may have rejected Pizarnik’s advances: ‘no imaginás cómo me estremezco al recordar tus manos (que jamás volveré a tocar si no te complace puesto que ya lo ves que lo sexual es un “tercero” por añadidura. En fin, no sigo.’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 211) ‘En fin’, therefore, ‘no sigo’ and I adopt Piña’s practice of leaving the issue of Pizarnik and Ocampo’s sexuality as a suspended question mark in order to move onto other, more literary, aspects of the Ocampo-Pizarnik relationship.

Pizarnik Reading Ocampo

One useful way of looking at Ocampo as a literary precursor to Pizarnik is to examine in detail Pizarnik’s direct reading of a work by Ocampo. Pizarnik was an extremely careful reader, and particularly of texts with which she sensed a fundamental affinity; as Bordelois puts it, in describing Pizarnik’s response to Amelia Biagioni’s *El humo*, ‘la capacidad de atención casi feroz que ponía Alejandra en sus lecturas, cuando encontraba en un texto poético una correspondencia central con sus propias intuiciones poéticas’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 78). Before doing this, however, I shall compare both writers’ attitudes to writing and to rewriting, since this gives us greater insight into Pizarnik’s need to feel supported by language and by other texts. Noemí Ulla quotes Ocampo as having said that ‘una se siente como sostenida por el verso, la prosa a uno lo deja muy desamparado a veces’ (*Encuentros*, p. 83). Indeed, in a letter to her sister Angélica, dated 4 June 1943, she describes prose as ‘casi hostil’. Pizarnik, too, often expresses a feeling of being ‘desamparada’, and looks vainly for ‘alguna palabra que me ampare del

²⁸ *La rebelión de los niños* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1980).

²⁹ ‘Silvina Ocampo: La identidad en cuestión’, p. 279. Juan José Hernández’s comment was made in an unpublished private interview, 7 August 2000.

viento' (*Obras*, p. 48), yet for her there is no shelter to be found in either poetry or prose. In her diaries for 1966 and 1967 she expresses several times the desire to write a small book in prose like Nerval, in the hope that such an achievement would sustain her. She also notes what Y[ves] B[onnefoy] said about prose: 'decía que la prosa oculta a la muerte. En mi deseo es al revés.' (*Semblanza*, p. 282) The language she is striving for is hidden behind the curtain of death.

Pizarnik's inhabiting of other texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* (as discussed in the previous Chapter) was not only a common Modernist occupation. It also follows on from her desire to find models for her own style, whilst causing her anxieties about finding an individual language. Silvina was far less anxious on this account; the idea of pre-echoes amuses her, as she comments in a letter to Alberto Girri, dated 13 June 1977: 'Siempre alguien escribe en alguna parte las ideas que se nos ocurren, lo malo es que las destruyen. ¡Plagios anticipados!' This concept of anticipated plagiarism is an apt one for looking at Ocampo and Pizarnik, since it combines Ocampo's love of reversing time with Pizarnik's obsession with borrowings and re-writings from other texts.

Pizarnik's article 'Dominios ilícitos', reviewing Ocampo's collection *El pecado mortal*, was published in *Sur* in 1968. It is interesting that 'El pecado mortal' should be the story of Ocampo's that most interests Pizarnik. This disturbing story, which represents for the protagonist 'la imposible violación de su soledad' (*Cuentos I*, p. 440), must have struck a chord with Pizarnik's morbid fascination for the violation of childhood innocence, as exemplified in her poem 'Violario' (*Obras*, p. 215). Indeed, César Aira sees Pizarnik finding in Silvina Ocampo 'negativities' which form part of her own thematics:

Toda la temática de A.P. [sic] está dominada por la negatividad [...] La atrae[n] [...] los cuentos de Silvina Ocampo, en los que aprecia las negatividades acumuladas de lo femenino, lo infantil, el mal y lo fantástico. (Aira, p. 75)

Aira's sweeping inclusion of the feminine, the childlike, evil and the fantastic all under the umbrella of 'negativities' does an injustice to the subtleties of Ocampo's narrative tone. That aside, these so-called negativities that Aira traces back to Ocampo are perhaps not so much appreciated by Pizarnik as *found* by her, or rather, given their negative slant by her. In examining how Pizarnik might have constructed the poem 'Cantora nocturna' (*Obras*, p. 117) Aira sees chance aided by 'reminiscencias de lecturas (¿no hay un cuento de Silvina Ocampo donde una mujer muere de un vestido de terciopelo?)' (Aira, p. 77). Here he is acting like one of Molloy's readers who perceives 'los meandros de [...] lecturas previas', the previously-read story in question being Ocampo's 'El vestido de terciopelo' from *La furia*. Although he does not commit

himself to saying that this is indeed the source, he is pointing out that Pizarnik's oeuvre belongs to an aesthetics of borrowing, re-writing (Aira, p. 53), and that Ocampo's work may well form part of her library of source texts.

There are many important points in Pizarnik's article 'Dominios ilícitos' which show the aesthetic and affective affinities between the two writers: firstly, that Pizarnik singles out 'el modo de hacer visibles las pasiones infantiles' as being the core of Ocampo's anthology *El pecado mortal* (*Obras*, p. 416). Referring back to the section on Childhood as cipher, might Pizarnik's interpretation conceivably also include the making visible of other passions? Pizarnik certainly encourages a reading between the lines, claiming that Ocampo's texts 'dicen incesantemente algo más, otra cosa, que no dicen'. (p. 415)

Pizarnik links Silvina's deviance from tight short story forms with the rebellious children of her narrative. In the same way that she encourages identification between herself and her own poetic personae, Pizarnik links Ocampo's perspective to that of her protagonists. Pizarnik thus fits Silvina into a position within Argentine literature that tallies with that which I outlined in Chapter 1, namely that of the deviant younger sister, unwilling to submit either to the accepted versions of family and nation or to the social and literary order.

The realm of childhood is characterized by Pizarnik as a 'dominio sagrado e ilícito'. This phrase is in quotation marks, but tantalizingly, unattributed. It does, however, make a metamorphosed reappearance in one of Pizarnik's own works discussed in the previous Chapter, 'Los muertos y la lluvia', where it is rendered as 'la tumba sagrada de mi ilícita infancia' (p. 208). This poem was published after the Ocampo collection and review. Whatever the source of the phrase, Pizarnik is tacitly linking the childhood world of her poetry with the childhood world of Ocampo's stories by means of these two highly-charged adjectives, sacred and illicit.

Moving to discuss the fascinating child of the title story, Pizarnik links children's games with more adult ones, bridging the innocent and the erotic. In her study of the Condesa Sangrienta, Pizarnik had described the Condesa's habit of biting her servants in order to cure her headaches as 'juegos de niñas' (p. 383). Obviously this was said with exquisite irony, in that the Condesa would later graduate to far worse atrocities, yet this choice of phrase is significant in that it reveals the associations in Pizarnik's mind between children's games with their elements of ritual and more sinister adult rituals, associations which emerge again in this essay on 'El pecado mortal'. The life and death seriousness of games in Ocampo's work is also a feature of

Pizarnik's poetry. Tamara Kamenszain's article on Pizarnik analyses her game of hide-and-seek with the grave: 'Representa a una niña muerta o perdida o, mejor, dada por muerta en el juego de las escondidas (ese juego inocente donde la boca cerrada de la tumba equivale también a un escondite).' (Kamenszain, p. 20) I commented in Chapter 1 how for Ocampo, playing is often an index of a child's state of mind. The tragic solemnity of Pizarnik's 'La de los ojos abiertos' (p. 20) reveals in the opening two lines a state of melancholy resignation: 'la vida juega en la plaza / con el ser que nunca fui', which suggests either that the poet was always already excluded from simple delight in play like other children, or perhaps that she is definitively estranged from her childhood self. Despite this exile from childhood, the poet has still not definitively entered adulthood but exists, instead, in a kind of limbo, like the boy in Ocampo's 'Carta de despedida' discussed in Chapter 1.

Comparing the two girls in 'El pecado mortal' and 'Autobiografía de Irene', Pizarnik speculates on whether they want to be saints or perhaps want to 'anegarse en las aguas suavísimas de un sueño sin culpa' (p. 416); here onto Ocampo's obsession with the fine line between heaven and hell is superimposed Pizarnik's fascination for death. Of the two characters, 'la Muñeca' is Pizarnik's favourite, precisely – Pizarnik says – because of her 'ojos abiertos'. This is of course an image close to Pizarnik's heart, and in fact, crucially, the phrase 'ojos abiertos' does not appear anywhere in Ocampo's original text; la Muñeca is simply described as spying. The open eyes are part of Pizarnik's interpretation, and a personal obsession as observed in Chapter 3; by singling out this detail, she is connecting Ocampo's Muñeca to her adopted female figures with open eyes, such as Nadja, the Alice of her poem 'Infancia' (*Obras*, p. 100) or the persona of the above-quoted poem, 'La de los ojos abiertos' (*Obras*, p. 20). Pizarnik thus moulds Ocampo's child character as she had moulded Carroll's Alice for her own poetic purposes. Given the fascination of both writers for dolls, as will be discussed shortly, it is no surprise that Pizarnik seizes upon the detail which makes a *mise-en-abîme* of the scene: la Muñeca, inseparable from her doll, becoming like a doll herself in the hands of Chango after fatalistically destroying her own doll.

Pizarnik finds in Ocampo a dialectic between 'desamparo' and 'humor'. Again, this is something evident in her own work, as it emerges in the two facets of her poetry, where the black humour of the late prose acts as counterweight to the desolate lyricism of the earlier poetry. Her overall reading of Ocampo's collection as mutilated childhood taking revenge could act as a guide to her own poetic trajectory; the 'niña desamparada' takes revenge on language for failing to shelter her.

Pizarnik unites all the child protagonists of Ocampo's collection in their discovery of their 'pecado mortal' for which the adults have abandoned them to a 'soledad pánica'. The tone of desperation of Pizarnik's own poetic personae frequently echoes this; as Melanie Nicholson points out, Pizarnik's poetry often emanates 'a bewildered acknowledgement of wrongdoing and of the need for atonement' (Nicholson, p. 12), a weighty sense of 'culpas fantasmas' (*Obras*, p. 158).

In her summing up, Pizarnik situates all the stories within a perspective which encompasses 'la fiesta, la muerte, el erotismo y la infancia' (p. 420). It is interesting to note that Cristina Piña uses precisely these four terms to link Pizarnik and Ocampo: 'las zonas de imantación imaginaria de ambas son similares: la infancia, la muerte, la fiesta, el erotismo'. (Piña biography, p. 162) They are indeed the most apposite nouns to describe the thematic concerns of both writers. After a brief gratuitous reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, again allowing her private obsessions to surface, Pizarnik concludes her essay with a disparaging dismissal of the anonymous preface to Ocampo's collection, which situates Ocampo in relation to categories of the fantastic. At the beginning of her article, Pizarnik had commented that the terms reality and unreality were woefully inadequate when dealing with Silvina's fiction, and here she reiterates this view, placing her apart from any generic discussions of fantastic literature. So, as outlined in my Introductory Chapter, the aesthetic route which follows Ocampo and is charted here by Pizarnik is one which sets itself apart from the fantastic, and prioritizes a child's viewpoint. Pizarnik finds her own version of Silvina Ocampo within this aesthetic, and finds in her reading of Ocampo sympathetic resonances with many of her own preoccupations.

The obvious follow-on to looking at this article is to ask whether there is any evidence of Ocampo reading Pizarnik's work. There is no published criticism, which is not surprising since by and large Silvina's only engagement with other writers was as a reader or through the medium of translation. One *cuento* could, however, offer an oblique literary response to Pizarnik's death. Silvina's *cuento* 'El miedo' opens, like a letter, with the words 'querida Alejandra' and the themes around which this short story are woven could be read as continuing an ongoing dialogue with the memory of Pizarnik through literature. It is set in a large house opening onto a 'jardín abandonado' and explores (in Silvina's humorously excessive manner) themes strongly associated with the younger poet: fear of age, fear of childhood, wandering through woods, confrontation with mirrors which the narrator warns against, advising Alejandra 'no consultar ningún espejo cuando el miedo coloca la mano sobre la garganta' (*Cuentos II*,

p. 326) as if looking into a mirror will reveal that she is getting older, or even perhaps referring to the melancholy mirrors of the *Condesa sangrienta*? She finishes up by suggesting a continued correspondence between the two worlds, thus reaching across the metaphorical river by which Pizarnik was so morbidly fascinated: ‘Decime ahora si vale la pena morir. En mi prójima carta te contaré mis aventuras de este mundo’ (p. 170). The tone of light humour and reassuring normality with which Silvina tackles these big questions points out the differences between their styles. In the poetry from ‘El infierno musical’ of 1971, fear is very much a present force; the poet claims ‘Conozco la gama de los miedos’ (p. 154) and she writes to combat this fear: ‘Escribo contra el miedo’. Silvina’s story could therefore be seen as responding to Pizarnik’s desperate cry, attempting to reassure her. Like Orozco, Silvina is able to speak to Pizarnik from the perspective of maturity, yet where Orozco assumed a protective and maternal role, Silvina’s attitude towards Pizarnik is more ambiguous. What is certain is that their literary interests overlapped.

Elective Affinities

Not only did Ocampo and Pizarnik have a nexus of mutual friends; they also shared certain members of a literary family. Pizarnik was manifestly very interested in Kafka and Lewis Carroll; her debt to the latter has already been documented in the previous chapter and her diary testifies to her obsession with the former.³⁰ The two influences combine in her poem, ‘El hombre del antifaz azul’ (*Obras*, pp. 175-80), in which the protagonist ‘A.’ (Alejandra or Alice?) parades her erudition by comparing her metamorphosis to Gregor Samsa, of Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’.³¹ Juan Malpartida suggests that Pizarnik’s move between Carroll and Kafka is an inevitable one: ‘Del jardín de Alicia pasó – casi no hay distancia – al castillo de Kafka.’³² The cover blurb for Ocampo’s *Cornelia frente al espejo* links her too with these writers: ‘Como Lewis Carroll, y como Kafka, autores los dos cuyas sombras planean por este libro, Silvina Ocampo sabe regresarnos a un estado de inocencia sin acudir a lo *naïf*...’. In interview with Raúl Gálvez, Ocampo declares ‘I liked Kafka because he always surprised me [...] for me, he was a prodigy.’³³ Both Kafka and Carroll were taken up by

³⁰ ‘Lecturas: releo un párrafo por día de los diarios de K[afka] a fin de darme fuerzas.’ (*Semblanza*, p. 285) ‘Leer sin falta un párrafo de K., como quien lee la Biblia.’ (*Semblanza*, p. 287)

³¹ *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Secker & Warburg, 1933).

³² ‘Alejandra Pizarnik’, *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos: Los Complementarios*, 5 (1990), 39-41 (p. 40).

³³ Raúl Gálvez, ‘Silvina Ocampo’, in *From the Ashen Land of the Virgin: Conversations with Bioy, Borges, Denevi, Etchecopar, Ocampo, Orozco, Sabato* (Ontario: Mosaic, 1989), pp. 130-58 (pp. 149-50).

Borges; he wrote prologues to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Carroll's *Obras*.³⁴ These authors were evidently part of the wider cultural heritage amongst Argentine literary intellectuals of the time, although they found particular favour with Pizarnik. Ocampo's debt to Carroll is less directly textual than that of Pizarnik, although as has been observed previously, an Alice-like logic operates in her children's stories and – perhaps through Borges – she picks up on *Looking-Glass* time to catalyse her own temporal experiments. Borges' 'Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain' includes a paraphrase of a work, 'la "novela regresiva, ramificada" *April March* [...] en que la muerte precede al nacimiento y la cicatriz a la herida y la herida al golpe.' (*Ficciones*, p. 84). The book Borges 'cites' mirrors Lewis Carroll's *Looking-Glass* world, where the White Queen lives backwards by remembering forwards:

'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked.
 'What sort of things do you remember best?' Alice ventured to ask. 'Oh, things that happened the week after next,' the Queen replied in a careless tone.
 (*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 59)

The reverse way of living is demonstrated as the Queen first screams, then sees her finger bleeding, then finally pricks it on her brooch. This reverse way of living was discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to Ocampo's 'Autobiografía de Irene'. Albert Bensoussan in 'Les jolis contes du Sud' also likens the late work 'El espejo de Cornelia' to Carroll:

la maison de vie se réduit aux dimensions d'un miroir au-delà duquel commencera toujours le monde à l'envers d'Alice... ou de Cornelia. [...] Un mystère court entre les lignes: si l'homme connaît la voie du bonheur, pourquoi court-il en sense inverse? Est-ce la leçon du pasteur Dodgson? (p. 200)³⁵

Other aesthetic affinities shared by Ocampo and Pizarnik include major areas of French literature and art; I mentioned in the Introduction their familiarity with French culture, and both of them translated poetry from French.³⁶ Helena Araújo in 'Ejemplos de la niña impura', (p. 34), links Ocampo's 'El pecado mortal' to Artaud and Mandiargues, both of whom were writers strongly associated with Pizarnik's aesthetic. I have observed Pizarnik's closeness to Cocteau; Ocampo too enjoyed Cocteau, introducing Bioy to his writing.³⁷ Proust, Sartre and Genet were common influences at the time, all

³⁴ See *Prólogos, con un prólogo de prólogos* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1975), pp. 103-05 and 108-11.

³⁵ By this he is, of course, referring to Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, Lewis Carroll's real name.

³⁶ Ocampo's translations include poems by Baudelaire, Nerval, Ronsard and Verlaine. Pizarnik adored numerous French writers, in particular Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Artaud, Michaux, Breton, Sartre and Bonnefoy; she translated some of Bonnefoy's poetry.

³⁷ 'Ella me hizo conocer a escritores franceses, contemporáneos, como Cocteau, Gide [...] Valéry.' Bioy Casares, *Memorias* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1994), p. 87.

read by Ocampo and Pizarnik.³⁸ Sartre, in particular, seems to have made an impact; Pizarnik's confession to 'la sensación inigualada de estar demás, de estar de sobra en mí' (Diary for 13 April 1961, *Poemas*, p. 117) has definite Sartrean overtones. Pizarnik yearns for an 'en soi' kind of existence, resenting her inevitable state of 'pour soi' as mentioned in Chapter 3. Like Sartre's Roquentin in *La Nausée* who is disgusted by the self-sufficient existence 'en soi' of tree roots, Pizarnik's persona complains that 'Las cosas no ocultan nada, las cosas son cosas [...] Y los perros ofendiéndome con sus pelos ofrecidos, lamiendo lentamente y dejando su saliva en los árboles que me enloquecen.' (*Obras*, p. 184) It is clear from this quotation that Pizarnik differs radically from Silvina in her attitude to dogs and trees. This may seem a trivial point, but it is actually extremely significant in terms of the two writers' attitudes to the 'en soi' existence of the world of objects. Ocampo, though sometimes finding objects infernal ('Los objetos') is on another level extremely at ease with the world of objects and animals, particularly trees, plants and dogs. To give just a few examples, trees form the subject of an entire book in *Árboles de Buenos Aires*,³⁹ and dogs are the protagonists of the stories 'Clavel', 'Nueve perros', 'Keif', 'Carl Herst', 'Mimoso' and 'Los mastines del templo de Adrano'. In both 'Hombres, animales, enredaderas' and 'Sábanas de tierra', a male protagonist becomes either transformed or absorbed into the plant world, as if becoming part of their 'en soi' existence and in 'La mujer inmóvil' a woman becomes the mermaid in a fountain. Whereas Pizarnik asks in desperation, 'si digo pan, ¿comeré?' (*Obras*, p. 239), forever tortured by the gap between objects and the words that name them, Ocampo's sense of dislocation, when felt, is more affective than existential. Rather than coming up time after time against the circularity of a 'pour soi' existence, Ocampo frequently sidesteps into an alternative to explanation, a childish way of storytelling which operates like an 'en soi' existence: 'le monde des explications et des raisons n'est pas celui de l'existence' (*La Nausée*, p. 184). She celebrates paradox and alternative modes of explanation, but never goes as far as Pizarnik in doubting the language in which to express such paradox.

As well as a shared affinity for French literature, literature in English is another point of contact between the two writers. Ocampo was much more *au fait* with English than Pizarnik was; however, both had read and enjoyed the poems of Emily Dickinson, to whom Pizarnik dedicates the early poem 'Poema para Emily Dickinson' (*Obras*,

³⁸ Piña claims that Proust's *En busca del tiempo perdido* (read by Pizarnik in its Spanish translation) was 'uno de los libros que incidieron en su concepción del artista de manera decisiva' (Piña biography, p. 140).

³⁹ *Árboles de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Crea, 1979).

p. 31), and whose work Silvina translated. Ocampo and Pizarnik can be seen to meet in Dickinson's Poem number 135, the first line of which Ocampo renders in Spanish as 'El agua se conoce por la sed' (p. 39). Ocampo's love of expression through contradiction here meets one of Pizarnik's key metaphors for her ultimately doomed quest for an expressive language.⁴⁰ Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* is another key text, read by Pizarnik (probably in Spanish translation) and Ocampo, from which certain thematic affinities appear to stem, as I have indicated in my prefatory quotations.⁴¹ Indeed, Miguel Dalmaroni sees Pizarnik's work from *Los trabajos y las noches* onwards as part of an ongoing 'lectura-reescritura de los relatos de Djuna Barnes'.⁴² Reading enthusiasm for Barnes' text between the lines of Ocampo and Pizarnik's work again foregrounds both writers' ambiguous approach to gender and the feminine.

Both writers are fascinated by transgression and by games; the kind of childish games played by Pizarnik with Orozco over the telephone were also characteristic of Ocampo, as described by Francis Korn and Juan José Hernández.⁴³ Ocampo's delight in perpetuating and observing childish perversity feeds into the transgression and game-playing portrayed in her fiction, whereas Pizarnik's 'jugando al personaje alejandrino' as discussed in the previous chapter, is described by Piña as having 'la ingenuidad del niño que juega a ser adulto sin percibir el verdadero riesgo de ese juego en el que peligró la vida.' (p. 146) Poetry went from being a game to being a destructive force as she took the rules of the Surrealist or *poète maudit* game too literally. Unlike Ocampo's girl protagonist of 'La hija del toro', whose game consists of throwing the effigies of others on the bonfire, Pizarnik seems to throw her own effigy to be ritually consumed. As Olga Orozco said of Pizarnik, 'la poesía le carcomía la vida'.⁴⁴ This word, *carcomer*, is a strongly Ocampoesque word as already discussed in Chapter 2 in the section on Ocampo's writing for children. It thus links Pizarnik semantically with such protagonists as Icera, who didn't wish to grow up, or with Ocampo herself, whose imagination 'la carcomía' during her childhood.

As well as elective affinities in terms of their literary interests, there exists a network of thematic affinities between their works which revolves around the central preoccupation with childhood. Some of these themes have already been mentioned in

⁴⁰ This metaphor of thirst is explored in detail in my article 'The Unquenched Thirst', pp. 272-78.

⁴¹ For references to Barnes, see Piña biography: 'ciertos libros y autores queridos, como [...] Djuna Barnes y su memorable *El bosque de la noche*' (p. 191) and Ulla, *Encuentros*, p. 41.

⁴² Miguel Dalmaroni, 'Sacrificio e intertextos en la poesía de Alejandra Pizarnik', *Orbis Tertius*, 1 (1996), 93-116 (p. 98).

⁴³ Private interviews on 24 July 2000 and 7 August 2000 respectively.

⁴⁴ In private interview, August 1998. Orozco published a collection of poems entitled *Los juegos peligrosos* (1962) where the obsession with death which infused Pizarnik's games is also apparent.

previous chapters with respect to the writers individually, but will now be looked at in a comparative light.

Thematic Affinities: Gardens (in Ruins)

‘Los jardines a veces se entristecen
y se enferman lo mismo que sus dueños’ (*Los traidores*, p. 12)

For Ocampo, the garden is the scene of childhood nostalgia, of which the prime example is the collection of sonnets, ‘Sonetos del jardín’, which are wistful in tone and evoke the poet’s absent mother. In ‘Tácita’ from *Espacios métricos* (p. 25) the poet pleads: ‘Devuélveme, oh Tácita, lo que no dije entonces / en tus jardines tristes de mármoles y bronce.’ In the poem ‘Buenos Aires’ we see a strong nostalgia for gardens which are now bare: ‘la severa / nostalgia de jardines ya baldíos’ (*Enumeración*, p. 18). The difference between Ocampo’s use of the garden in her poetry and that of Pizarnik is that Ocampo is far more attuned to nature. The gardens for which she expresses nostalgia are real gardens, particularly those of the Buenos Aires of her childhood; Pizarnik’s, on the other hand, are largely symbolic gardens such as the Garden of Eden – evoked in the poem ‘La caída’ as a ‘Jardín recorrido en lágrimas’ (*Obras*, p. 43) – or Bosch’s ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’. Pizarnik is doomed never to enter the garden she so much strives to enter, whereas through the power of imagination and dream Ocampo is fulfilled, finding ‘un jardín que no era triste.’ (*Espacios métricos*, p. 61) Indeed, the power of imagination carries her into a garden in her children’s story, *El tobogán*; like Alice, the cat in this story manages to ‘volverse chiquitito’ [n.p.] and gets into a magical garden inside the ‘cofre volante’. In her *Árboles de Buenos Aires*, the poet desires to have always lived in a garden, not out of any nostalgia for a paradise lost, but ‘para ser de noche árbol, y árbol también de día’.⁴⁵ Although the garden is intimately linked to her childhood, it is through particular instances of childhood games with particular trees, rather than in a generalized symbolic way. ‘¡Cedro, recuerdo de mi infancia intacto [...]!’ or ‘¡Ombú que fuiste casa de muñeca [...]!’⁴⁶ In this way Ocampo expresses a sense of loyalty to nature which ensures constant contact with her childhood self and yet also gets as close as is possible to existing ‘en soi’, and forgetting the self: ‘el [sauce] que me hizo olvidar que soy Silvina’ (p. 16).

Pizarnik’s gardens, by contrast, are mostly sad or ruined and do not represent this potential for childhood plenitude; the memory of childhood is no longer ‘intacto’. Alicia Borinsky points out Pizarnik’s debt to Rubén Darío in her use of the garden as

⁴⁵ Quoted by Angel Mazzei, ‘El temblor de lo inadvertido: *Árboles de Buenos Aires* por Silvina Ocampo y Aldo Sessa’, *La Nación, Cultura*, 27 January 1980, p. 6.

setting, but her relationship to the Darío garden is ambivalent (Borinsky, pp. 297-99). In 'Extracción de la piedra de locura' she depicts the following scene:

En un muro blanco dibujas las alegorías del reposo, y es siempre una reina loca que yace bajo la luna sobre la triste hierba del viejo jardín. Pero no hables de los jardines [...] Habla de lo que sabes. [...] Oh habla del silencio. (*Obras*, p. 135)

The allegory of repose which the poet has drawn on a white wall is no more than a 'visión enlutada, desgarrada, de un jardín con estatuas rotas' (*Obras*, p. 139); rather than being a place of rest, or even of wistful nostalgia, it is a devastated place which only serves to remind the poet of her futile strivings for silence.

Pizarnik sent a postcard to Ocampo of a countryside scene with a red background and pink and orange flowers; it bore the following inscription:

este jardincito se formó mientras te escribía., S. tan esto y aquello,⁴⁷ tan Sylvette y además tan de salir de sí por eso Sylvette 'cuaja' (sic mis amigos de España) a las maravillas. Jardín de Sylvette a la hora de las maravillas. (*Correspondencia*, p. 199)

Pizarnik's extensive use of Alice's garden as a symbol has already been discussed in Chapter 3; here Pizarnik is effectively placing Silvina Ocampo into her created fantasy world, but changing the emphasis from place to time, viz 'la hora de las maravillas' instead of 'el país de las maravillas'. Privileging an instant in this way intensifies the feelings involved, and it is significant that the only one of Pizarnik's gardens which is not sad is that linking Sylvette and Alice, overlaying childish associations with erotic ones rather than with death. Pizarnik also draws Silvina into her Nadjan world in another letter, which finishes with the challenge 'et laissons que le monde se réduise à un seul bois noir pour nos yeux étonnés' (*Correspondencia*, p. 201). This places Silvina and herself in a mysterious black wood, which they look at with the wide *femme-enfant* eyes of surprise. The last letter she wrote to Silvina again alludes to this image of the two of them in a wood: 'aquí hay un bosque musical para dos niñas fieles: S. y A.' (*Correspondencia*, p. 210). She thus reinforces their childlike image, whilst also investing the wood with her own ambivalent associations of music: either hellish (as in 'El infierno musical') or representing a possible 'patria'.

Dolls

'The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll, because it resembles, but does not contain life, and the third sex, because it contains life but resembles the doll.' (*Nightwood*, p. 210)

⁴⁶ 'Los árboles', *Revista de Occidente*, n.s. 34.100 (1971), 12-16 (p. 15).

⁴⁷ It is possible that the initial S. which appears in Pizarnik's diary for 15 October 1964 also refers to Silvina. In this entry, Pizarnik writes: 'No escribir, no preocuparse por escribir. No jugar a ser Flaubert. S. comprende. La que no comprende soy yo.' (*Semblanza*, p. 263)

'The doll is a private vessel into which are distilled fears, hopes, sorrows, and magic make-believe. The diabolical is not less than the angelic. One begins with innocence, and the experience of time breeds knowledge and the power for good and evil. Time transforms the levels of play [...]'⁴⁸

The childish and the erotic are also intertwined not only in Pizarnik's fantasy garden but in the use by both Ocampo and Pizarnik of the doll as symbol. In literature, and particularly literature to do with childhood or the early stages of an autobiography, the figure of the doll – often a treasured and over-loved object – is a powerful image. It is one which recurs in both Pizarnik and Ocampo, and usually with great potency, combining sexuality and innocence. The quotation from *Nightwood* above indicates the correspondence between the doll and the child, or the immature, as Barnes prefers. Such correspondence is menacingly portrayed in Dorothea Tanning's *The Guest Room* where the girl's immature body echoes that of the doll in the bed; her nakedness emphasizes her vulnerability beside the hooded dwarf and shroud-like black canopy above the bed. Ocampo recognizes the doll's symbolic and representational function in the poem 'La cara', where one of the photographs in which the poet sees herself is as a child, pictured cradling one of her dolls. That the pose does not come entirely naturally to the child is suggested by the verbs 'aprender' and 'requerer':

En la segunda [fotografía] aprendió
con una muñeca de frondosa cabellera
la postura que requiere el amor maternal.⁴⁹

The doll thus becomes a symbol of the need to learn to grow up, adopt different roles, but in 'Icera' the doll fulfills the opposite symbolic role, that of the desire not to grow up, wanting to remain, as Pizarnik puts it, 'pequeña y perfecta' (*Obras*, p. 415).

A *cuento* by Silvina Ocampo published in *Sur* as 'Yo' is republished in the later collection *Los días de la noche* as 'La muñeca', and in this story the doll takes on a

⁴⁸ Carl Fox, *The Doll*, photos by H. Landshoff (New York: Harry N. Abrams, [n.d.]), p. 36.

⁴⁹ 'La cara', in *Retratos y autorretratos*, p. 117. Interestingly, in the version published the previous year in *Amarillo celeste*, the word 'incipiente' is inserted before 'amor maternal'. Its suppression in the later version perhaps suggests that the child and doll are adopting a visual set-piece pose of mother and child,

greater significance.⁵⁰ The story is recounted by a first person narrator and the subject at the beginning is identity; the narrator's mother apparently died just after the narrator was born, but accounts of both her mother and her birth differ widely. With the change of title from 'Yo' to 'La muñeca', the emphasis of the story is shifted from the condensed *Bildungsroman*esque process of development of the character to the culmination of the story, where the eponymous 'muñeca' appears. This doll, which says 'papá' and 'mamá' when shaken, at once symbolizes the narrator's being accepted into the Rosas family and also her distinctness from them; it provides confirmatory proof of her visionary abilities, for which she is labelled 'bruja', but is given as a token of affection. It also seems to symbolize, ironically, her move away from childhood and innocent games into the turbulent times of adolescence; she anticipated the doll in a vision when the house was in an 'estado de perturbación' (*Cuentos II*, p. 96), and its eventual arrival coincides with a huge thunderstorm, following her shame at being discovered playing naked with Horacio by the pool.

This last idea of a doll being associated with the shame and guilt of sexual precocity is evident in another of Ocampo's better-known stories, 'El pecado mortal'. This story has been analysed in depth by various critics, including Pizarnik (as discussed earlier); of most relevance here is the fact that the child who is drawn into sexual complicity with Chango, the male servant of the house, is throughout referred to by him as 'Muñeca'. She thus becomes like the immature of Barnes' *Nightwood*; her nickname encapsulates her state of immaturity. Association of something supposedly pure with sexual guilt is hinted at in the very opening line of the story, which declares: 'Los símbolos de la pureza y del misticismo son a veces más afrodisíacos que las fotografías o que los cuentos pornográficos.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 437) Within the house, the playroom is next to the 'letrinas de los hombres' (p. 438); this proximity between the place of supposedly innocent play and the 'entrada vergonzosa' to a place associated with bodily functions, where even the pipes make intestinal noises, is deeply symbolic. So too is the fact that the narrator (who curiously addresses a second person, 'tú', either her younger self or a confidant but thereby seeming to draw in the reader) refers to the men's room as 'el recinto vedado' (p. 438) lending it the attraction of the forbidden. On the day of a funeral, Chango is left in sole charge of the girl, who is playing with her dolls house. After a disturbing scene in which Chango gains the girl's voyeuristic complicity, her reaction is to tear the hair of her doll out with a comb. This violent act

whereas the inclusion of the word 'incipiente' would indicate more that these feelings may genuinely be stirring (or female role models expect that they should) even in a young girl.

prefigures what will happen to la Muñeca herself as she lies on the floor with the doll's ribbon in her hand. With the doll's name, she shares the doll's fate of being violated; both she and her own doll become playthings which are abused. The doll is therefore associated with initiation, but also with a kind of seduction. As in Nabokov's *Lolita*, which Silvina Ocampo defended in the pages of *Sur*, the degree of the girl's collusion is left ambiguous.⁵¹ Such an atmosphere is beautifully captured in Alicia Carletti's *El desván*, where the posture of the girl, the vivid red of the walls and the broken pieces of wood speak volumes.

Ocampo's later *cuento* 'Átropos' talks about a young girl's early fixation with death, worrying about what will happen to her abandoned dolls. Abandoning dolls is a symbolic move away from childhood dependency and the poignancy of this process is captured in Ocampo's poem 'Albertina', about a favourite doll (*Canto escolar*, pp. 51-55). That the doll should be called Albertina perhaps alludes humorously (for an adult reading this 'children's' poem) to Proust's *Albertine disparue*.⁵² The poet details her affection for this doll, 'desobediente y para mí perfecta' (p. 53). However, at a certain point the child, partly through fascination and partly through a lack of awareness of limits, begins to destroy the doll.

comencé a destruirla poco a poco.
Jamás sabré por qué fui tan dañina.
"Has sido sin quererlo mi asesina.
Te perdono pues soy una muñeca",
me dijo. "Tengo un alma. No soy hueca." (p. 54)

In a disturbing parallel to the scene of violation portrayed in 'El pecado mortal', the doll's neck gets broken and clothes ripped. Tears of desperate remorse follow, but to no avail: '[...] No se movió. / Olvidada me olvida. Ni me vio.' (p. 55) Where in 'La cara' the doll was symbolic of learning about adopting different roles, here the doll symbolizes the process of learning about emotions such as loyalty and betrayal. The

⁵⁰ *Sur* 272 (1961), 45-57; *Los días de la noche* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1970).

⁵¹ 'El caso "Lolita"', *Sur*, 260 (1959), 52-53. 'Que Nabokov estuviera cazando mariposas durante el tiempo que escribió *Lolita*, no me sorprende: sus descripciones brillantes y vívidas, aun en las páginas más dolorosas y sórdidas, se asemejan un poco a esos paisajes hechos con alas de mariposas, tan bonitos y artificiosos, y de pronto tan monstruosamente reales y sobrecogedores.' (p. 53)

⁵² Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue; ou, La Fugitive* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925).

doll is forgotten and therefore forgets her. Furthermore, the last three words indicate the child's acknowledgement that her whole relationship with this favourite doll was of her own making, in her own fantasy. The doll never saw her because dolls cannot see. Only her childish powers of imagination gave the doll vision. Realizing this is relinquishing the wondrous ability to play games of the imagination.

Dolls make frequent appearances in Pizarnik's poetry, indeed 'las solitarias muñecas de Pizarnik, al fin, forman una vasta familia dispersa a lo largo de sus textos' (Mizraje, *Argentinas*, p. 281). Pizarnik's closeness to Surrealism has been pointed out,

and the doll is a Surrealist fetish-object *par excellence*. One famous example is Hans Bellmer's sculpture 'Poupée' of 1930 or in the field of literature, Paul Éluard's poems *Jeux vagues la poupée* which were inspired by photographs of Bellmer's doll.⁵³ The French doll illustrated has the staring blue eyes which become an obsession with Pizarnik, carrying associations of death, but also of her father's eyes. Other Latin American writers interested in Surrealism take up this object and invest it with great significance, for example the Mexican

writer Carlos Fuentes. The figure of the dwarf *Herr Urs von Schnepelbrucke* in his *Cambio de piel*, for instance, is a repairer of dolls.⁵⁴ Herr Urs mends dolls that have been destroyed, 'generalmente, por un exceso de celo materno' (p. 117). His claim that the German people are essentially innocent is supported by an analogy with children and dolls:

Por eso nuestros actos son a menudo desmesurados, porque son emprendidos sin una experiencia que sepa dictarnos los límites de la acción. [...] No puede juzgarse con gran severidad a un niño que le arranca el brazo a su muñeco. ¿Nunca han visto a un niño hacerlo? Su pequeño rostro se crispa con un placer momentáneo, pero en seguida estalla en lágrimas al ver el resultado. Entonces hay que acariciarle la cabecita y reparar el desperfecto. (p. 117)

In Herr Urs' discourse, the broken doll is thus made to bear no lesser symbolic weight than that of the Holocaust.

Pizarnik's use of the doll as symbol is also weighty, but not with this specifically historical resonance. Like the protagonist of Ocampo's poem from *Canto escolar*, one

⁵³ Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), I, 1005-10.

⁵⁴ *Cambio de piel*, 5th edn (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1991; first published Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1967).

of her alter egos – the ‘niñita lautrémontiana’ – destroys dolls. Her violence is very specific, however: she has the idea of ‘sacar siempre los ojos de las muñecas para ver qué hay detrás’ (*Obras*, p. 395). Both Ocampo’s child and this ‘niñita’ have a fascination for the doll, for its power to resemble and yet not contain life, other than the marvellous life invested in it by the imagination, but whereas Ocampo explores the child’s affective relationship to the doll like a person, Pizarnik’s slant is far more Surrealist, concentrating on the idea of vision and the poetic gaze. In her ‘Hombre del antifaz azul’, which re-writes Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole, Alice encounters a doll in the pool of tears instead of a mouse. Whereas in Lewis Carroll’s original text, Alice offended the mouse by talking about cats, here, ‘A’ offends the doll simply by asking questions and by talking. (*Obras*, p. 180) Rather than certain subjects being offensive, language itself is an offence. The choice of doll as subject rather than mouse seems to hark back to Djuna Barnes’ idea of the doll’s ‘rightness’, resembling yet not containing life; it has existence without the circularity and alienation of language and possesses an ‘en soi’ completeness which should not be questioned. We can compare Pizarnik’s ‘Retrato de voces’, *Obras* p. 364, in which the poet carries out a dialogue with her doll, to the kind of dialogues in *Alice in Wonderland*. She says the doll is so small; the doll replies that it is she that is too big. Lytwin in *Los poseídos entre lilas* is described as ‘una muñeca verde’ who speaks with a ‘vocecita’ (p. 277) and whose comments are equally reminiscent of Alice: ‘No soy tan pequeña; sos vos quien es demasiado grande.’ ‘Soy un yo, y esto, que parece poco, es más que suficiente para una muñeca.’ (p. 282) Again drawing on Alice, the text seems to suggest that the doll’s smallness represents an unattainable ideal, as it did for Ocampo’s *Icera*. A further pair of poems, ‘Devoción’ and ‘A tiempo y no’ (*Obras*, pp. 198-201) continue this intertextual play with *Alice in Wonderland* and feature a doll prominently. In both, the doll’s participation is limited to opening and closing its eyes, a Surrealist trait as discussed in the previous chapter. In the poem ‘Tragedia’ (p. 216), the sound of the dolls’ eyes opening and closing in the wind is the eerie backdrop to a dolls’ tea party. Childhood is represented by dolls in the poem ‘Nombres y figuras’ which wistfully extols ‘la hermosura de la infancia sombría, la tristeza imperdonable entre muñecas’ (*Obras*, p.158). This childhood world is not portrayed as a happy one; there is, however, a definite sense of indulgence in its gravity and luxurious sadness. Another persona frequently used by Pizarnik, the ‘muñequita de papel’ (p. 144) is a mere flimsy paper version of a doll, not the genuine object; it becomes a kind of self-caricature.

The most weighty of Pizarnik's uses of the doll as symbol is to be found in the poem 'Piedra fundamental'. In this poem, the poet herself is characterized as a doll, but a doll that has lost that quality of 'en soi' existence and is therefore wreaking revenge on other dolls. 'Las muñecas desventradas por mis antiguas manos de muñeca, la desilusión al encontrar pura estopa (pura estepa tu memoria)' (*Obras*, p. 153). The placing of the adjective 'antiguas' is important; preceding the noun as it does, it means 'former' or 'one-time' and therefore places her doll-like hands unequivocally in the past. The graphic image of ripping open the stomachs of the other dolls leads to the punning discovery of pure stuffing (pura estopa), whereas her memory is pure 'Steppes' (pura estepa), geographically symbolic of her Russian heritage, like the 'muñecas rusas' Juan José Hernández remembers seeing in her room. This reading of the doll as symbolic of roots buried deep inside is further supported by the later sentence: 'Yo quería que mis dedos de muñeca penetraran en las teclas. [...] Yo quería entrar en el teclado para entrar adentro de la música para tener una patria.' (*Obras*, p. 153) Her use of the doll becomes bound up with a crisis of personal identity and an overwhelming sense of exile and not belonging. That this linking of the doll with personal identity oversteps the boundaries of her work and acquires importance in her life is clear from photographs of her with dolls, and from the fact that after her death, her dolls were found made up.⁵⁵ So, in comparing the use made by Ocampo and Pizarnik of the figure of the doll, for Ocampo it appears to be linked with the identity of her child protagonists, marking their progression into adolescence, or their resistance to this progression. For Pizarnik, the doll is a regressive symbol, expressive of her search for an 'en soi' existence, childhood and a *patria*. That she does not find this is evident in 'Noche compartida en el recuerdo de una huida' which imagines the poet's own death, accompanied by a 'cortejo de muñecas de corazones de espejo con mis ojos azul-verdes reflejados en cada uno de los corazones.' (*Obras*, p. 143) The dolls remain in their hermetic object-world, abandoning the poet to eternal reflections of self. This last example provides a link to another thematic affinity shared by Ocampo and Pizarnik, namely that of mirrors.

Mirrors

'era un pecado
para la dueña infantil de una cara

⁵⁵ See Piña in *Mujeres argentinas*, ed. by Miguel, p.299: 'cuando al día siguiente los amigos entraron en su departamento [...] encontraron las muñecas maquilladas'. That the presence of these dolls has contributed to the mythologizing of Pizarnik is apparent from Requeni's elaboration of this detail through hearsay in 'Recuerdo de Alejandra Pizarnik': '(según me han dicho, abrazada a una muñeca)' (p. 209).

mirarse demasiado en un espejo⁵⁶

'si tuviera un espejo, objeto que los niños no dibujan' (*Cuentos I*, p. 480)

'He tenido muchos amores – dije – pero el más hermoso fue mi amor por los espejos.' (*Obras*, p. 125)

The mirror is, as Wilson observes, a 'poetic commonplace' (*Octavio Paz*, p. 66), yet the use to which Ocampo and Pizarnik put this 'dead, literary symbol' is revelatory of their differences in 'vital attitude'. In Ocampo's 'La cara apócrifa', the poet looking at her own face in the mirror as a child, suggests that 'tal vez Narciso temblaba en aquellos ojos azules / y profería secretos eróticos' (*Amarillo celeste*, p. 43) and indeed the 'Diálogo de Narciso' (*Espacios métricos*, pp. 44-48) had earlier explored the intricacies of the relationship between self and reflection. However, 'Sinmí' (*Amarillo celeste*, pp. 9-11) provides sufficient insight into the vanity of the relationship to exclaim 'Oh Narciso estúpido' (p. 10). Ocampo is thus simultaneously aware of the attractions and the potential dangers of mirror-gazing.

Ocampo's protagonists often glimpse in mirrors what their adult face will be, for example Irene in 'Autobiografía de Irene', who looks into a mirror, sees her future self and exclaims '¡Ah, ya no me asusta el porvenir!' (*Espacios métricos*, p. 84). I explored in Chapter 2 how Irene's fantastic experiences with the mirror support Ocampo's basic belief that child self and adult self co-exist in a person. That a mirror can reflect aspects of both old and young self is extended by Ocampo to the fantastic idea that mirrors may somehow contain all the people that have ever been reflected in them; the people reflected there may come out, either to 'atacarnos o protegernos o pervertirnos' (*Amarillo celeste*, pp. 12-14, p. 12). Mirrors may also be the source of nostalgia; the mirror in the 'Sonetos del jardín' contains the imagined reflections of her mother who has abandoned the child to go out ^{for} of the evening. As is her wont, Ocampo frequently scrutinizes the concept of mirrors from a child's point of view, where any reflecting surface carries the potential for a distorted presentation of identity, not just mirrors but also the polished counter of a shop, or the concave and convex sides of a spoon.

La conocí diminuta
adentro de una luciente cuchara de plata
abría y cerraba la boca
cuando yo no sabía aún quién era.
Como a un simio curioso la contemplé.
Di vuelta la cuchara: la vi al revés.⁵⁷

Ocampo thus uses mirrors as a starting point for meditations on the construction of identity, primarily from a child's point of view. They are also, as in *Through the*

⁵⁶ Silvina Ocampo, 'La cara apócrifa', in *Amarillo celeste*, pp. 40-46, (p. 43).

⁵⁷ I am quoting from the 1973 version published as 'La cara' in Facio's *Retratos y autorretratos*, p. 116. The word 'aún' is added to this version; it is not present in *Amarillo celeste*, p. 41.

Looking-Glass, the gateways to fantasy worlds, such as that entered by the child of Ocampo's poem 'El sueño': 'entro en mundos de espejos' (*Canto escolar*, p. 40). Mirrors, of course, send us back to Borges as well, in such pieces as 'Los espejos' and 'Los espejos velados' from his collection *El hacedor*,⁵⁸ though unlike the declaration made in his 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' that '*Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables*' (*Ficciones*, p. 15), Ocampo's attitude is to revel in their multiplicatory properties.

Pizarnik's relationship to mirrors in her poetry is a more tortured one. Alfredo Roggiano claims of Pizarnik that 'su realidad fue la del espejo, *espejo prismático, deformante* hasta lo grotesco, fragmentador infinito de un rostro que jamás puede reconocerse.'⁵⁹ The whole of the third section of 'Extracción de la piedra de locura' is entitled 'Caminos del espejo': 'hoy te miraste en el espejo / y te fue triste estabas sola' (*Obras*, p. 22) The poet is isolated by the mirror, rather than accompanied by myriad former reflections as was Ocampo's child observer. Looking in the mirror, the poet seems to see not her present self but the child she was and the corpse she is eventually to become; the sixth poem of 'Caminos del espejo' (p. 131) is shocking in its brevity: 'Cubre la memoria de tu cara con la máscara de la que serás y asusta a la niña que fuiste.' The references to past and future sum up Pizarnik's poetic strategy: the mask of death used to frighten the child that she was; this seems to be in direct opposition to the attitude of Ocampo's Irene, whose fear of death is removed. Yet this frightening scenario is at other times almost a childish game; the child gets an illicit thrill out of seeing how much she dares frighten herself, and the wolf girl of 'Extracción de la piedra de locura' plays this game: 'Ingenuamente existes, te disfrazas de pequeña asesina, te das miedo frente al espejo'. (p. 136) We can compare this quotation, which was from 'La enamorada', to the much later poem 'En contra', where the poet's attitude has turned to violent despair: 'el amor me obliga a las muecas más atroces ante el espejo' (*Obras*, p. 184) This is perhaps the curse of Narcissus warned against by Ocampo. Mirrors do, however, have potential for Pizarnik; in her eternal quest for some kind of 'patria', which she occasionally hopes to find in music, mirrors have a part to play. Like Alice going through the looking-glass, Pizarnik's poetic persona hopes to achieve some kind of musical epiphany through touching or even playing upon mirrors.

cuando el palacio de la noche
encienda su hermosura

⁵⁸ *El hacedor* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960).

⁵⁹ Alfredo A. Roggiano, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: Persona y poesía', *Letras de Buenos Aires*, 2 (1981), 49-58 (p. 50).

pulsaremos los espejos
 hasta que nuestros rostros canten como ídolos (*Obras*, p. 81)

This thematic idea is repeated shortly afterwards: ‘Pero con los ojos cerrados y un sufrimiento en verdad demasiado grande pulsamos los espejos hasta que las palabras olvidadas suenan mágicamente.’ (*Obras*, p. 84)

But such revelatory potential is not always apparent, and mirrors – such as that into which the melancholy Countess of *La condesa sangrienta* obsessively gazes – can devour the one who looks into them; another of Pizarnik’s many poetic personae is ‘la que fue devorada por el espejo’ (p. 63). Cristina Piña discusses the central image of the melancholy Countess Bathory gazing into her mirror in terms of Lacan’s mirror stage (*Poesía y experiencia del límite*, pp. 46-48). The Countess appears fixed in this pre-symbolic stage of simultaneous fascination with, and aggression towards, the reflected female Other. In many of Pizarnik’s poems, rather than conferring a sense of personal identity, mirrors appear only to fragment and undermine this, leading to desperate self-questioning: ‘¿Cómo no me suicido frente a un espejo[...]?’ (p. 53) Even in Pizarnik’s diary, the mirror is an obsession as it tortures her with reminders of her real age and her apparent immaturity: ‘Pero aceptar ser una mujer de 30 años... Me miro en el espejo y parezco una adolescente. Muchas penas me serían ahorradas si aceptara la verdad.’ (*Graziano*, p. 277) If gazing at her own image is tortuous, looking at paintings provided a possible comfort for Pizarnik.

Painting

‘children who have a little knowledge of life will draw a man and a barn on the same scale.’
 ‘Your devotion to the past’, observed the doctor, [...] is perhaps like a child’s drawing.’ (*Nightwood*, p. 161)

The gaze in the mirror was not the only visual obsession of Pizarnik and Ocampo; both were also extremely interested in painting and the correspondence between the two writers was frequently enlivened on Pizarnik’s part by the inclusion of pictures or drawings. The letter from Pizarnik to Ocampo dated 6 December 1969, for instance, includes a reproduction of Odilon Redon’s lithograph ‘Sur la Coupe’ from the series ‘Dans le Rêve’ (1879), a letter to Antonio Requeni contains a ‘Dibujo con dos niñas enlazadas’ (*Correspondencia*, p. 60) and many of Pizarnik’s letters – not only those to Ocampo – are decorated with her own tiny sketches. These are extremely characteristic in their naive, childish appearance, offering a visual equivalent to the importance given to the child’s perspective in her writing; Rubén Vela described them as ‘garabatos

inocentes'.⁶⁰ Silvina Ocampo, when asked for her favourite painter, responded 'un niño', revealing similar affinities.⁶¹ In 'Noche compartida en el recuerdo de una huida', Pizarnik's poet implores her addressee to conjure up a typical child's painting in song, since she harbours a fantasy of living inside a picture (as she similarly desires to find security within other texts):

Y luego cántame una canción de una ternura sin precedentes [...], una canción como un dibujo que representa una pequeña casa debajo de un sol al que le faltan algunos rayos; allí ha de poder vivir la muñequita de papel verde, celeste y rojo; allí se ha de poder erguir y tal vez andar en su casita dibujada sobre una página en blanco. (*Obras*, p. 144)

Here music and visual art, in the form of a tender song and a child's picture, combine to articulate her search for verbal expression.

Whilst in Paris, Ocampo took lessons with de Chirico, an artist whose visual vocabulary featured doll-mannequins and mirrorings. Some of Ocampo's paintings were exhibited in 1940 at the Amigos del Arte.⁶² Certain of her poems, in particular the 'Epístola a Giorgio de Chirico' (*Poemas de amor desesperado*, pp. 65-67), deal with the concept of a visual imagination, and many of Ocampo's stories which conjure up the intense emotions of a child find a visual parallel in the intensity of groups of children or pre-pubescent girls in the paintings of Leonor Fini and Alicia Carletti, as I have indicated by the illustrations in Chapters 1 and 2. Ocampo's own paintings or drawings often take children as their subject. More revealingly, even when her subject is a person of quite advanced years, Ocampo's portraits or sketches appear to draw out childlike qualities. This is the case with the sketch she made of the poet Amelia Biagioni in 1987.⁶³ Ocampo's contemporary and close friend, Norah Borges (Jorge Luis Borges' sister) displayed her 'Recuerdo de

⁶⁰ Rubén Vela, 'Alejandra Pizarnik: Una poesía existencial', *Alba de América*, 2.2-3 (1984), 149-54 (p. 152).

⁶¹ Odile Baron Supervielle, 'Silvina Ocampo responde a Proust', p. 3.

⁶² Reviewed in *Sur*, 71 (1940), 82-85 by Julio E. Payró. The diffidence about self-promotion of her literary work is equally apparent with regard to her painting; Payró describes her as 'una pintora que se desdeña a sí misma y se abandona, solicitada por otras actividades intelectuales' (p. 82).

Infancia' at the same Amigos del Arte exhibition in 1940; childhood is also a prominent subject in her paintings, and a 1925 poem of Francisco Luis Bernárdez describes Norah as 'la niña que sabía dibujar el mundo'.⁶⁴ Norah Borges provided covers or illustrations for several of Ocampo's books, such as *Autobiografía de Irene* and *Las invitadas*;⁶⁵ the cover of the latter features four children communicating by sign language, capturing the mysterious secrecy of the story 'Tales eran sus rostros'. She also illustrated Norah Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia* and Marcel Schwob's *La cruzada de los niños*.⁶⁶ Word and image are given equal prominence in the volume *Breve santoral*, which is a collaborative project between Silvina and Norah; it features a number of Saints, each with a corresponding poem by Ocampo and image by Norah Borges.⁶⁷ Ocampo was thus very open to the correspondence between verbal and visual imagery. Indeed, in a picture given to Francis Korn to thank her for the gift of a set of coloured felt tip pens, the colour range of the pens is integral to the development of the poem. The pens cover the shades from dark grey to light blue; Ocampo's poem is about a pair of sirens who swim up the River Plate, and its final few lines suggest the metamorphosis of colour effected by them:

[...] si
 el Río de la Plata se
 pone azul será por la
 suave influencia de ellas.

Ocampo changes pens as she moves through the poem, illustrating the grey-blue transformation, and draws the twin sirens alongside, uniting visual with verbal. Borges is quoted as saying that Silvina came to poetry through painting and that 'la inmediata certidumbre de lo visual persiste en su página escrita.'⁶⁸

⁶³ Drawing courtesy of Amelia Biagioni.

⁶⁴ In *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Borges, [1996]), pp. 15-16.

⁶⁵ Illustrated versions of 'Autobiografía de Irene' appear twice; first *Autobiografía de Irene* (Buenos Aires: Círculo de Lectores, 1982) and subsequently in *Cuentistas y pintores argentinos*, selection and prologue by Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985).

⁶⁶ *Cuadernos de infancia* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1944); *La cruzada de los niños* (Buenos Aires: La Perdiz, 1949).

⁶⁷ *Breve santoral*, prol. by Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1984).

⁶⁸ 'Silvina Ocampo, más que una fuente de inspiración', *Clarín, Suplemento especial*, 9 March 1999, p. 6.

Pizarnik continually evoked painterly aesthetics in her poetry, alluding – as did Ocampo – to works of art. For example, several of the poems in *Árbol de Diana* explicitly mention artists: ‘un dibujo de Wols’, ‘exposición Goya’ and ‘un dibujo de Klee’ (*Obras*, pp. 80-81), as noted by Michal Heidi Gai.⁶⁹ It is often remarked that she composed poems on a blackboard, drawing pictures to signify in place of a word that eluded her.⁷⁰ Pizarnik, it should be remembered, also took an initial interest in studying painting, though less formally than Ocampo. According to Bajarlía she studied sporadically in the Surrealist *taller* of Juan Batlle Planas with whom Ocampo was also acquainted.⁷¹ Batlle Planas apparently said of Pizarnik that ‘a esta nena hay que comprarle papel para escribir sobre los sueños. Confunde los pinceles con los lápices’

(Bajarlía, p. 42). There is a review in *La Nación*, 6 July 1965, of an exhibition in which she participated where the unnamed reviewer refers to ‘el mundo superrealista de Alejandra Pizarnik’. The continuity of expression between her poetry and her highly infantile drawings is remarkable; Carlota Caulfield is currently working on a book of Pizarnik’s correspondence with Antonio Beneyto and examining the closeness between the written word and drawings or sketches in her work.⁷² In their style, as can be seen in the example here reproduced from a

letter to Antonio Beneyto, her sketches are reminiscent of the drawings of the Spanish poet García Lorca or of the artist Joan Miró.

Pizarnik was drawn to painting on account of its superior ability to express without falseness and disjunction; whereas language might strive towards silence and inevitably fail to achieve it, painting came much closer. She found freedom in painting, in contrast to the inherent tensions of poetry: ‘buscar “mis” palabras implica una tensión

⁶⁹ ‘Alejandra Pizarnik: *Árbol de Diana*’, *Romanic Review*, 83 (1992), 245-60 (p. 250).

⁷⁰ ‘Lo hago de una manera que recuerda tal vez, el gesto de los artistas plásticos: adhiero la hoja de papel a un muro y la contemplo’. Quoted by Antonio Fernández Molina, ‘Alejandra Pizarnik: Mensajera de la luna’, *Quimera*, 123 (1994), 50-51 (pp. 50-51).

⁷¹ See her letter to her sister, Angélica, 13 August 1954, in which she asks Angélica to give the address at which she is staying to Batlle Planas ‘con quien tengo que hacer un libro’.

⁷² There is also apparently a thesis which I have been unable to consult. Natalia Gómez, *Alejandra Pizarnik and Painting* (unpublished master’s thesis, Arizona State University, 1992).

que no existe al pintar'. (Beneyto, p. 27) Pizarnik loved Surrealist painting, and her reaction to it is perhaps not what one might expect: 'La pintura surrealista me alegra como nada en el mundo. Me alegra y me serena.' (*Semblanza*, p. 261) Happiness and serenity are not states of mind instantly associated with Surrealist painting; Pizarnik's reaction to it indicates something about her belief in painting's power to express what words cannot, and it is probably through this felicitous expression that she achieves serenity.⁷³ Ocampo, likewise, was attracted to the Surrealists, though more for their strong visual dream-imagery.⁷⁴ Both Ocampo and Pizarnik were also fascinated by the paintings of the sixteenth-century Flemish artist Hieronymus Bosch, who was championed by the Surrealists. Carlota Caulfield notes that two of Pizarnik's works (*Extracción de la piedra de locura* and *El infierno musical*) coincidentally echo the titles of paintings by Bosch, and that 'también comparten con [la obra de Bosco] el ambiente de absurdos, pesadillas y sueños.' (Caulfield, p. 6) It should, however, be noted that Pizarnik did not take the title directly from Bosch, but from a collection of indigenous Argentine Indian texts lent to her by Ivonne Bordelois. (Piña biography, p. 193) Ocampo mentions Bosch in her poem 'El angel de la guarda' from *Breve Santoral* (p. 32) and Eugenio Guasta links Ocampo to Bosch, as he had earlier to Goya: 'sus seres diminutos, los niños alucinados, son torturadores enloquecidos escapados de un cuadro del Bosco.'⁷⁵ Ocampo says to Manuel Mujica Láinez in a letter dated 15 April 1972:

Quiero mostrarte unos dibujos de mi infancia y como sos el único que entiende literatura como pintura recurro a vos. Quisiera dar vida a aquellos engendros que vivieron escondidos años en una carpeta. Mi infancia es lo que más me conmueve de mi pura vida tan feliz.

Painting is thus something which for Ocampo began in her childhood and understanding it is closely linked to the understanding of literature and expresses an important part of her life. Artistic expression is as meaningful to Pizarnik, but this also means that a lot is at stake. When verbal language is tainted and compromised for her, so too it seems is visual expression, despite her hopes to the contrary. In *Hilda la polígrafa*, the character Dr. Flor de Edipo Chú indicates the potential explosivity of language: 'Conocer el

⁷³ Cortázar's poetic homage to Pizarnik after her death, 'Aquí Alejandra', includes a litany of names which were significant to her; the Surrealist painters Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington, who frequently painted diminutive female figures, both appear amongst her heroines.

⁷⁴ Ocampo's 'El sueño recurrente' is just one example of how Ocampo's knowledge of Surrealist painting influenced her verbal imagery. The doric column in the following extract calls to mind Surrealist paintings such as that of Paul Delvaux, *The echo* (1943): 'El recuerdo conserva una antigua retórica, / se eleva como un árbol o una columna dórica, habitualmente duerme dentro de nuestros sueños / y somos en secreto sus exclusivos dueños' (*Los nombres*, p. 29).

volcánvelorio de una lengua equivale a ponerla en erección o, más exactamente, en erupción.’ (*Obras*, p. 324) ‘A.’, another of Pizarnik’s alter egos, responds plaintively ‘Usted prometió enseñarme a pintar con un pincel, no con la lengua’. Aside from the literal joke about painting with the tongue, this pitiful cry recalls the situation discussed in Chapter 2 of Ocampo’s story ‘La lección de dibujo’. But here, A. is taught not by her childhood self but by a phantasm born of a magmatic subconscious, whose advice on effectively communicating life’s absurdity is ‘No olvides nunca degradar los colores’ (*Obras*, p. 324). Such a statement strikes at the root of visual expression (colours) in the way that Pizarnik’s poetry strikes at the heart of language, exposing the gaping wound between word and world. So where Ocampo increases the possibilities for expression through her affinity with painting and visual art, Pizarnik represents more vividly her tortured vision of childhood and of the garden, and further diminishes her hopes of finding a ‘morada’ in any medium, verbal, visual or musical. Her visual and verbal vocabulary is reduced to a ‘vicariolabio’ or ‘vacablufario pictórico’ (p. 324).

‘¿Quién soy?’: The Self/Selves

‘¡Soy nadie! ¿Quién eres?
¿Eres – nadie – también?
¡Somos entonces un par! [...]
¡Qué horrible – ser – alguien!’ (Emily Dickinson, Poem 288, trans. by Ocampo, p. 68)

In Chapter 1 I discussed Silvina Ocampo’s elusive self in her poem ‘La cara’, and its alternative version ‘La cara apócrifa’. Ocampo takes infinite delight in the shifting experience of people and things through time. The final line of the poem ‘Escalas’ (*Los nombres*, p. 10) encapsulates this difference within similarity: ‘siempre lo mismo que será distinto’. Even the poem’s title, which can mean scales (in music or measurement) but also ports of call or stoppings-off, indicates a semantic journey. Ocampo enjoys the many varied repetitions, and this includes the image of self, which is never the same, ‘ni siquiera en el espejo’ (‘La cara’, p. 118). In a letter to Alberto Girri, dated December 1976, Ocampo raises the question of identity: ‘“Quien soy” pienso cuando me veo en el espejo como si fuera alguien que hace un siglo fuera?’ This query sees the self as someone from the past; poetically, she answers by defining herself in the present as intimately linked to the past:

Soy la pobreza de los pies desnudos,
con niños que se alejan, mudos.
Soy lo que no me han dicho y he sabido [...]
Soy todo lo que ya he perdido [...]
Soy todo, pero nada, nada es mío,

⁷⁵ Guasta, ‘Dos juicios sobre *La furia*’, p. 63.

ni el dolor, ni la dicha, ni el espanto,
ni las palabras de mi canto.⁷⁶

Ocampo thus defines herself in a teasing way; rather than describing how she is as a person, she evokes the space which in her fantasy she wishes to occupy – romanticized poverty – and adds to this other elusive elements which make up the sum of her experience, of which the image of children walking away, mute, is highly visual. ‘All that I was not told and have known’ has the air of a child’s intuition, instinctively grasping the truth behind adults’ dissimulation; ‘all that I have now lost’ communicates nostalgia. The poet’s final summing-up, that she is everything, but nothing is hers, not even the words of her song has a paradoxical feeling of great liberation. Accepting successive selves allows her to be everything but requires her also to relinquish everything, including her own words.

Perhaps the most appealing self-definition, and one which communicates Ocampo’s exquisite sense of humour, is to be found in her poem for children, ‘Las promesas’, where each of a class of children tells ‘la Patria’ what he or she will be when they grow up. One wishes to be a poet:

Me amaré a mí la gente más sensible
porque seré un poeta incomprendible. (*Canto escolar*, p. 69)

The humour, irony and perfect synthesis of child and adult perspectives is priceless. On the one hand, delicately sensitive adult readers are mocked by the fact that their refined taste is for something incomprehensible. On the other, the child issues this adjective as a kind of challenge to his or her fellow-pupils, making incomprehensibility a pinnacle of refinement whither to aspire.

For Pizarnik, on the other hand, such a teasing attitude to self-definition is impossible, let alone in the future tense. As discussed in Chapter 3, poetically Pizarnik cannot even phrase the question, ‘¿Quién soy?’, but rather ‘¿Quién es yo’, immediately presenting us with her sense of estrangement. Borinsky gives us one possible answer, describing it as ‘el yo, autobiografiado en una niñez virtual omnipresente’, but any answer has to be within the framework of Rimbaud’s dictum, ‘Je est un autre’.⁷⁷ It is surely significant that one of the poems in the collection she renounced, *La tierra más ajena*, should be entitled ‘Yo soy...’; such a confident attitude to self-definition, even if the definition is highly negative, rapidly became alien to Pizarnik. The poet Amelia Biagoni implicitly poses the question ‘¿Quién soy?’ in her collection *El Humo*, a fact

⁷⁶ ‘Canto’ from *Sur* 170 (1948) pp. 13-14, p. 14.

⁷⁷ Alicia Borinsky, ‘Muñecas reemplazables’, *Río de la Plata Culturas*, 7 (1988), 41-48 (p. 46). Rimbaud taken from the ‘Lettres dites du voyant’, in *Poésies*, p. 200.

which is picked up by Pizarnik in her letter to Biagoni praising the poems: 'Hay alguno [...] que alude [...] al **quién soy**' (*Correspondencia*, p. 81, original emphasis). Pizarnik's readings of other writers frequently reveal her own obsessions, as was made clear earlier in this chapter with respect to her reading of Ocampo. Pizarnik's answer to the question '¿Quién soy?' might be similar to that of Rubén Darío where he declares: 'Yo supe de dolor desde mi infancia; / mi juventud ..., ¿fue juventud la mía?, / sus rosas aún me dejan su fragancia, / una fragancia de melancolía...'.⁷⁸

It is interesting to look at the opening of Breton's *Nadja* which also questions identity: 'Qui suis-je? [...] en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je "hante"?' (p. 9). Later, the question is asked 'Qui est la vraie Nadja?' (p. 133) and 'Qui est elle?' in an illustration (above). We might well ask 'Qui est la vraie Alejandra?', especially given the similarity between the illustration in Breton's book and a drawing of Alejandra's. Pizarnik's drawing, however, contains two people within it, as if the identity of the person were double or divided. The question again recurs in English in a text Pizarnik wrote in collaboration with her friend Sylvia Molloy in Paris. ' "Who am I?" estalló.'⁷⁹

Pizarnik's lack of faith in the ability of language to be anything other than secondary and referential extends most profoundly to her own identity, as can be seen from the brief but telling poem, 'Sólo un nombre' (*Obras*, p. 31):

alejandra, alejandra
debajo estoy yo
alejandra

The multiplicity of selves presents an existential problem for Pizarnik; her poetic persona becomes inescapably fragmented, lamenting

⁷⁸ 'Yo soy aquel que ayer...'. First published 1905 and reprinted in Rubén Darío, *Páginas escogidas*, ed. by Ricardo Gullón (Madrid: Cátedra, 1979), pp. 91-95 (p. 91).

that 'Los tres que en mí contienen nos hemos quedado en el móvil punto fijo y no somos un es ni un estoy.' (*Obras*, p. 164) The monster child self which is revealed and refracted in the late prose works also poses the question of identity at the very close of *Hilda la polígrafa*, but in the colloquial and obscene language which characterizes these desperate texts: '¿Quién sos, ché? dijo la monstrea [...]' 'Soy el Divinio Mascharita de Sader, rey del Pigmorf-Histeriamocos-Motel' (*Obras*, p. 362). With semantic echoes of Sade, Masoch, Pigmalion metamorphosis and hysteria, Pizarnik explodes any notion of stable identity, floundering instead into perversion, transformation and madness. Whereas Ocampo, through her examination of the workings of memory, nostalgia and the vagaries of the aging process is able to come to terms with life being a succession of different selves into which 'los rituales exorcismos / [...] nos van multiplicando' (*Los nombres*, p. 69), Pizarnik experiences a radical splitting of the self in the present moment, a schizophrenic plurality of voices. Although both, as I indicated earlier, experience a certain 'desamparo', for Pizarnik this has a devastating effect, whereas for Ocampo it is somehow creatively liberating, generating fruitful paradoxes such as that expressed by the bare-back rider, 'La amazona del circo': 'Sin peligro me sentiría desamparada' (*Canto escolar*, p. 49).

As regards the creation of a literary persona in the sense of reader reception and a place within Argentine literature, the two writers again differ. Ocampo does not share Pizarnik's anxieties about being consigned to literary history; it is only important to her to have moved someone with her writing. In a letter to Manuel Mujica Láinez dated 31 December 1973 she asks: '¿Qué es el éxito? Saber que uno ha conmovido a alguien. Es claro que cuando te conmuevo a vos siento que es ya la gloria, algo muy importante me influirá sobre la historia de la literatura aunque todo lo póstumo me harte!' Her attitude towards literary history is thus characterized by a certain degree of flippancy, similar to that of her attitude towards the Ocampo name and the 'patria' discussed in Chapter 1. Pizarnik, on the other hand, is horrified by the thought that she will become *passée*: 'El vanguardismo será clasicismo y otros jóvenes rebeldes se reirán de él. Pero...¿es posible soportar esto? Quiero morir. Tengo miedo de entrar al pasado.' (*Correspondencia*, p. 49) These contrasting attitudes are representative of more general differences between the two writers as regards the process of aging and the operation of memory. Being consigned to literary history is accepting mortality and accepting that readers will make countless posthumous assessments and reassessments of one's work.

⁷⁹ From 'Escena de la locura de mademoiselle Pomesita Laconasse', reproduced in Haydu, pp. 165-68 (p. 165).

Pizarnik seems, by her adoption of the *poète maudit* lifestyle, to wish to dictate the terms under which she will enter literary history. One ludic dramatization of self-identity within her poetry presents a possible caricature:

‘¿Quién es usted? Deberíamos presentarnos.’
 ‘Madame Lamort’, dijo. ‘¿Y usted?’
 ‘Madame Lamort’. (Pizarnik, ‘Diálogos’, *Obras*, p. 197)

Vivir, morir, partir: The Night and Death

‘Parecido al deseo de existir
 es el deseo oscuro de morir:

lo han pronunciado todos tus amantes.’ (‘Estrofas a la noche’, *Espacios métricos*, p. 60)

‘It is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide.’ (Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 155)

Pizarnik’s creative rhythm made for a largely nocturnal existence, as discussed in Chapter 3, and the night was for her linked to death, which is viewed comfortingly as the ‘hermana mayor’ (*Obras*, p. 30). Using this analogy puts the poet in the role of younger sister and associates death with childhood. It is with a definite sense of pleasure in the poem ‘Artes invisibles’ that the poet says defiantly:

yo me entrego a mi muerte,
 con puñados de infancia,
 con deseos ebrios (p. 42).

Having scorned life as ‘esta lúgubre manía de vivir’ (p. 22), as if ridiculing and chastising herself for any attachment to it, she appears to echo the sentiments of Emily Dickinson’s Poem 335, here quoted in Ocampo’s translation: ‘No es morir lo que duele más – es vivir’ (p. 84). ‘Partir’ and ‘morir’ are two verbs whose potential holds the poet spellbound. Such is the identification between the revered death and the night, that the daytime is associated with extremely negative qualities; in the poem ‘Noche’ (p. 26) the fear that this night may not really be night is expressed by the awful possibility that it may in fact be a ‘sol horrendo’. Beyond even this warring between the sister night and the alienating day is the inescapable fact (expressed in the unlucky poem XIII of the ‘Caminos del espejo’) that ‘Aun si digo *sol y luna y estrella* me refiero a cosas que me suceden.’ (p. 132) Sun, moon and star, the emblems of day and night which should open up great metaphorical realms to the poet, are still experienced as things which happen to the poet. Once again we are returned to the Sartrean circularity of existence, where sun, moon and star are simply the consciousness of looking at sun, moon and star.

Ocampo also views the night sympathetically, using the sororal metaphor: ‘Hermana plácida, ah, si no tuvieras / que abandonarme siempre por el día.’ (‘Estrofas a la noche’, *Espacios métricos*, p. 61) In addressing this sister night, she declares that all

lovers of the night have expressed the dark desire to die, as seen in the prefatory quotation above. In this respect, she is attuned to Pizarnik's aesthetic; the difference, however, is that Ocampo's empathy with the night and death is only in a poetic sense, not something felt deeply within herself as in Pizarnik. As in so many of her works, for example *Los días de la noche*, she prefers to focus on paradox, here that the dark desire to die should be so close to the desire to exist. If she can view living and dying with equal detachment it is because she sees them as organic, natural processes:

Vivir me parecía un acto muy lejano
que el corazón del pez desechaba en mi mano; [...]
y morir simplemente un acto que las rosas
evitaban sembrando fragancias tenebrosas. (*Los nombres*, p. 42)

A mature acceptance of death comes with living, loving and aging; crucially, her analogies encompass both an adult and a child's way of loving, returning us to her intertwining of youth and age:

Partimos como parte a la deriva
un madero en el záfiro del mar;
como todos los hombres que al amar
se entregan a una muerte progresiva; (p. 69)

Partimos como parte el que se adhiere
al candor que lo salva del pasado,
como un niño que encierra enamorado
en cualquier cosa todo lo que quiere. (p. 70)

Pizarnik, on the other hand, cannot attain this state of mature acceptance. Her idea of 'partir' is more of a mesmerising challenge, as already discussed in depth in Chapter 3 with reference to Cocteau.

Divergences

Whilst sharing certain literary and thematic affinities, the vital attitudes of Pizarnik and Ocampo diverge. Both explore in their differing ways the traumas of childhood and of the move from childhood to adulthood. Both redefine the sacred and illicit in childhood, Ocampo by revealing their proximity or even overlap, and Pizarnik by to some extent reversing the accepted polarities: what is normally transgressive or illicit for Pizarnik becomes sacred. Life itself is normally regarded as sacred, yet Pizarnik's attitude to it is that it is a 'manía de vivir'; death, on the other hand, is viewed with fascination and revered. In the short stories of Silvina Ocampo, so too in the poems of Pizarnik, the child's world holds as much terror as the adult's onto which it borders. As observed in Chapter 1, for Ocampo 'los niños tienen su infierno' (*Cuentos I*, p. 134) with which Ocampo empathizes; the fragile tiny figures of Pizarnik's poetry cannot escape from the

horrors and fears which overwhelm their creator; again and again they are drawn into surrealist nightmares, such as the 'centelleante niña de papel plateado a medias ahogada dentro de un vaso de vino azul' (p. 141) or the 'niña perdida en una silenciosa ciudad en ruinas' (p. 143).

When not writing about children (or animals and plants), Ocampo frequently explores the paradoxical absence of the loved one when they are present, the non-coincidence of self with self and the ambiguities of memory. Throughout her work there is a marked resistance to facile explanation; through paradox she generates meaning. Ocampo succeeds in expressing the 'infinita desolación que no tiene paliativos' but 'esto tampoco está en sus poemas puesto con palabras'.⁸⁰ Pizarnik strives for such expression, but cannot get beyond the Catch 22 of words, a situation which Ocampo recognizes as a peculiarly human predicament: 'Evadirse del lenguaje, cuando en realidad uno busca el lenguaje para expresarse; eso es lo raro del hombre.' (*Encuentros*, p. 121)

Both writers like childhood's disarming logic, Ocampo because it allows acceptance of the paradoxical, Pizarnik because 'ubicarse en una mirada de niño que 'sabe' más allá de toda explicación o razonamiento' (Piña, p. 138) gets beyond her insoluble dilemma of language. Ocampo strives for a child's perceptiveness:

Todo eso que escribía cuando era chica lamentablemente se ha perdido, porque veo que los chicos escriben cosas muy interesantes, cosas simples y directas. Encuentran una frase simple, que no encuentra una persona adulta, aunque se esfuerce en imitar a un niño, nunca llega a esa perfección. (*Encuentros*, p. 16)

The loss of childhood is in this sense the loss of simple and direct communication. Pizarnik is searching for something one stage further back. She glimpses in childhood the way towards this language which is at one with body and action, this directness, so her yearnings are directed towards childhood; she realizes, however, that childhood was not a perfect world, so her vision of the childhood garden-paradise becomes corrupt.

Ocampo accepts this corruption in her deeply symbolic description of the family house: 'el último piso estaba destinado a la pureza y a la esclavitud: a la infancia y a la servidumbre. (A ti te parecía que la esclavitud existía también en los otros pisos y la pureza en ninguno.)' (*Cuentos I*, p. 437) Typically for Ocampo, the meaningful observation is tucked away in parentheses: childhood is not pure, and adulthood, whatever social standing, does not give freedom. Both are bound in different ways. These observations are encapsulated in the narrative framework of an adult looking back at childhood; the perspective of maturity is able to weigh up the accuracy of a

child's intuition, to accept aging and to dwell at each stage on retaining youthful traits in age.

Pizarnik, by contrast, cannot make this synthesis of adult and child perspectives. She and her poetic personae are driven, angst-ridden, possessing a great sense of urgency but without knowing its goal: '¿cuándo comenzó esta urgencia por llegar cuanto antes a ninguna parte o por no faltar a una cita con nadie?' (8 June 1967, *Semblanza*, p. 283) So whilst Sylvette and Sacha may have found a focal point of convergence in a shared fascination for childhood, their differing attitudes to it through their writing and their lives led to a divergence in their aesthetic and existential routes.

⁸⁰ Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, review of *Espacios métricos* in *Sur*, 137 (1946), 82-86 (p. 85).

Conclusion

'We are but older children'¹

'Les yeux de ces enfants qui sont nos yeux anciens'. (Éluard, *Œuvres*, II, p. 443)

Both Ocampo and Pizarnik create a space for themselves within the framework of childhood. Both have been mythologized, Ocampo because of her popularity yet obscurity, Pizarnik because of the *poète maudit* aura around her. My aim has been to draw together these mythologized figures of Argentine literature and examine in detail one aspect of the myth which surrounds them, that is the fascination with childhood. Ocampo fits quirkily into the highly intellectual society of which she was part, returning frequently to children or childlike characters and making their world her world; Pizarnik largely absents herself from the radical student and feminist movements of her contemporaries, and instead turns inward, making her poetic persona's locus the memory of childhood, plumbing the depths of her inner feelings of loss and nostalgia for this childhood, associating it with orphanhood and a precocious fascination for death. Although Ocampo's childhood world is generally more grounded than that of Pizarnik, especially when comparing narrative with poetry, it reflects the peculiarities of her childhood upbringing in the absence of school (with the obvious exception of the *Canto escolar*) and the idealization of poverty.

I began by indicating how at the time when Silvina Ocampo started writing, and Victoria Ocampo was establishing *Sur*, there were examples of a certain European tendency to adopt a superior, parent-child position with regard to the Americas. Marcos Aguinis's *Un país de novela*, first published in 1988 (the same year as Ocampo's last collection of stories) perpetuates from within Argentina this emphasis on age difference, referring to it as a 'país joven'.² By this time when Silvina was composing her last two published works, Argentina had gone through the horrific repression and disappearances of the so-called 'Dirty War' and through a stage in which such parent-child rhetoric had also in effect been applied by the military junta to its own nation. Through writers such as Valenzuela and the poet and chanteuse María Elena Walsh we see the subversion of both parent cultures, Valenzuela playing with European fairy tales in *Simetrías* and both writers ridiculing those figures who treated their own nation as children, Valenzuela in *Aquí pasan cosas raras*, and María Elena Walsh in her articles, collected as *Desventuras en el país-jardín-de-infantes: Crónicas 1947-1995*.³ The term 'país-jardín-

¹ Lewis Carroll, prefatory poem to *Through the Looking-Glass*, [n. p.].

² Marcos Aguinis, *Un país de novela: Viaje hacia la mentalidad de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1988), p. 16.

³ (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe / Seix Barral, 1995).

de-infantes' implies a country of children who are cosseted, not permitted to think for themselves. So childhood continues to play a dominant part in the rhetoric of Argentine nationhood whether as constituted from outside, or from within the country, throughout the twentieth century. This thematic thread of childhood thus has many varied strands, of which I have looked at those with more emphasis on the personal than the political.

In tracing the aesthetic route of Silvina Ocampo, I have sought to examine how she locates her fiction in relation to several of these discourses involving childhood. She chooses to include a child's perspective in her 'enumeration' of the *patria*, she scrutinizes the workings of nostalgia, demythifying childhood innocence, and proposes a flexible attitude to the perceived boundaries between childhood and adulthood. For Ocampo, focusing on the negative as well as the positive aspects of childhood has the concomitant effect of turning the spotlight on those things which we would rather ignore about adulthood, such as hypocrisy; Mónica Zapata asserts that 'la lectura de los cuentos de Silvina Ocampo [...] nos perturba [...] al sugerimos lo que preferiríamos seguramente no ver en nosotros mismos' ('Entre niños y adultos', p. 358). Rather than directly challenging established attitudes using childhood symbolically, as might Victoria through essays and personal crusade, or Valenzuela and Walsh through political satire, Silvina Ocampo's highly perceptive observations on child and adult emotions are more suggestive and oblique.

Ocampo's œuvre does in some sense turn the Europe/Argentina parent/child construction around, however, in that for her France is associated with her childhood and therefore where Victoria had extrapolated youthful promise from the label of America as child, Silvina's poetry makes France (and metonymically, Europe) the repository of aspects of childhood memory. The resultant perspective can be read in the sonnet 'El Balcón' from, significantly, *Enumeración de la patria*, emphasizing that this sense of perspective is an integral part of how she composes her view of the Argentine nation:

En el verano de un balcón, en Francia,
mirábamos los cedros extranjeros
y un demasiado azul en la distancia
lago, lejos de ceibos y jilgueros.

Nos gustaba una patria más vacía:
No hay aquí una palmera, yo decía.
No nos despierta el canto de las aves
con las aguas barrosas, con las naves!

¡Ah! yo prefiero el Río de la Plata.
Fiel a la ausencia y todavía ingrata,

soy a veces aquí una forastera:

falta ahora el balcón, no la palmera,
faltan cedros, y no costas barrozas.

¡Ah, qué azul era el lago y había rosas! (pp. 73-74)

The perspective of the sonnet is that of narrating a past situation in France, from the present moment in Argentina. While in France, the cedars seemed foreign and the lake appeared excessively blue, emphasized by the forced enjambement delaying the noun. In the second verse, the *nosotros* form begins to sound like Victoria's tone of spokesperson for Argentina, stirring suitably patriotic sentiments. But thereafter we are wrenched into the present, in which – true to Ocampian paradox – the poet is faithful to absence, sometimes feeling a stranger or foreigner in Argentina, as did the child looking at the sky in the 'Quintas de San Isidro'. We see Ocampo with a wry smile lay bare the operation of nostalgia in the way that the blueness of the lake takes on a desirable quality once it is transformed into a memory. Not only does the grass always seem greener (or the lake bluer) on the other side of the fence; the spatial perspective is also reinforced by the chronological dimension. The poem 'A Francia en 1942' develops this idea, explicitly associating France with childhood, but Ocampo then proceeds to dissolve the divisions: 'Pienso ahora que entonces me enseñabas tus signos [...] / como si fuera adulta.' (*Enumeración*, p. 140) 'En mí tal vez no había / confusiones de patrias: eras el mundo entero' (p. 140). What Silvina tries to recapture is the child's obliviousness to adult definitions and divisions; the child can learn in as mature a way as if she were an adult, whilst remaining unconstrained by national boundaries. As the poem progresses, it narrates her return and re-discovery of France. Older now, she perceives differences rather than a ⁿcont^um of experience: 'Me extrañaba que fueras tan distinta de América' (p. 141). France becomes something symbolic. '*Me faltarás un día, serás preeminente / – ahora lo presiento – serás la prolongada / ansiedad del regreso.*' (p. 143, original italics) Linking France to her childhood in this way, Ocampo is able to express something profound about the nostalgia for return to the land of childhood, whilst simultaneously communicating sentiments about another country. The fact that this poem is directed towards a France at war only serves to intensify the emotions involved: 'Creerán que te han perdido los que te aman, Francia. / [...] sin ti perdieron algo virtual como la infancia.' (p. 145)

We can contrast Ocampo's relationship to France with that of Pizarnik. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Pizarnik's experience of France between 1960 and 1964 was a passionate encounter with her literary Mecca, the Paris which had produced the

poètes maudits she so much admired. Rather than representing childhood, Paris for her represented the realization of a degree of independence and the launching of her personal 'bâteau ivre'. But the 'personaje alejandrino' which was moulded in France, the orphan 'viajera' with the wide eyes of Alice or of a Surrealist 'mujer-niña' was one that could not be sustained since it could not accept the changes and compromises of aging. Pizarnik's absolute commitment to making poetry a living act required a Paris that would allow her to inhabit this highly precarious world, not one which – treacherously – would have changed on her return in 1969. Unlike Ocampo, she could not keep going back to Paris because it marked, inevitably, the elapsed time; as Piña puts it, 'Alejandra llegó a un París irremediamente *adulto*' (biography, p. 208). Ocampo was able to return precisely because of her more flexible attitude to memory, acknowledging and accepting change and the workings of memory and nostalgia.

Both writers imply that living *en soi* is the ideal existence. In Silvina Ocampo, this is more nearly achieved in childhood, when 'Había tiempo para todo, principalmente para olvidar.' (*Cuentos I*, p. 278) It is as if in childhood, precisely this absence of the need to preserve, remember and cherish is what is so precious. This obliviousness to future nostalgic anxieties is contrasted with Pizarnik's ideal of the *en soi* existence; not obliviousness but oblivion. In Pizarnik we first see a 'conscious rejection [...] of the kind of constrained voice appropriate to human – adult – society. [...] Pizarnik seems to affirm, as does Bataille, that the kingdom of childhood, with its violence and madness, represents a more authentic existence than the one to which adult society eventually forces children to submit, or die.' (Nicholson, p. 10) When the violence and madness threatens to overwhelm the poet, she succumbs to the lure of oblivion. Ocampo is at once less extreme and perhaps therefore more poignant, since she accepts the adult world, submits to it yet continues to see it through the eyes of a child, with all its hypocrisy and paradox. The relationship between adult and child self, particularly as revealed through her poetic works, comes across as a dialectic of remembering and forgetting, returning to childhood or allowing it to come back to you. Nostalgia can then be harnessed to play a vital and revitalizing role, since its activation encourages, paradoxically, fluidity of time and survival of child elements.

The survival of child elements is only a compromise however; both writers recognize that we can never fully return to the *en soi* obliviousness of childhood – or indeed, in Ocampo's case, to what was a time of violent jealousies, loyalties and moments of initiation. As Warner remarks, 'we can only perform childlikeness as far as we can observe it or recall it. We are doomed to an ironic innocence.' (Warner quoting

Novalis, p. 38) Ocampo's multi-layering of child and adult perspectives, celebration of paradox, her superimposition of the traits of youth and age and her reversal of time solve this problem in an aesthetic fashion; Pizarnik's response – unable to separate her personal and poetic dilemma – is one of increasingly black irony, and eventually no pretence at innocence, preferring precocity, violently sexual destruction of the symbolic realm of language and the choice of 'llorar' or 'ladrar', as in the poem 'Para Janis Joplin' (*Obras*, p. 242).

Although Pizarnik appears to be the more subversive writer of the two, Ocampo is shocking by her placing of cruelty within an apparently familiar and often domestic setting: we might say that for Ocampo, 'cruelty begins at home'. In interview, she expresses her hope that she may appeal to young people through her lack of virtue:

Mis compatriotas no aprecian mis libros excepto, tal vez, los jóvenes, porque soy demasiado argentina y represento al escribir todos nuestros defectos. Me salvo de las virtudes. Pero, quién no tiene virtudes de las cuales se salva y defectos atractivos. (Torres Fierro, p. 60)

Her infinitely subtle ironic humour also increases her appeal. Pizarnik does undoubtedly appeal to 'jóvenes', but through the seriousness of her enterprise, rather than through any hint of humour, since the vicious punning of the late prose goes beyond puerile humour towards annihilation. As noted by Piña,

para los jóvenes su poesía se presenta como una apuesta sin concesiones, en la que se pone en juego la totalidad de la existencia con una seriedad y una entrega que, sin duda, responde a la apetencia de absolutos que la psicología ha señalado como propia de ese período vital de definición de vocaciones.⁴

If there is an aesthetic route following Ocampo's use of childhood, it is therefore diverse and divergent. A reading of Ocampo's work through childhood as theme and perspective can touch and irradiate Pizarnik's texts by uncovering a supportive network of literary, artistic and thematic affinities, by exploring the limits of childhood cruelty and initiation, and by placing childhood at the heart of identity. If there is a route following on from Pizarnik, as Diana Bellessi suggested, it is necessarily in the negative mode outlined by Gabriela De Cicco:

La genealogía es amplia y amorosa, pero si insistimos en quedarnos en la línea de sombra de los poemas de Pizarnik sin intentar resemantizar la lengua poética heredada, no podremos avanzar mucho, clausurándonos en la mera repetición de un fragor fascinante pero que ya ha dicho (hasta donde pudo) lo que quería.⁵

Pizarnik's continuation of the Ocampo route is truncated, since where Ocampo's approach to language is to favour confabulation and exaggeration, avoid explanatory

⁴ 'La poesía como riesgo y necesidad', in *Poesía y experiencia del límite*, pp. 87-103 (p. 89).

tropes and privilege the child's viewpoint over nostalgia, so that we are left to intuit and infer from the unsaid or the apparently trivial detail, Pizarnik is committed to pure poetry, to traversing an internal world with the doomed quest of achieving the oblivion of silence through the medium of language. Even when she attempts narrative it follows an Absurd or dreamlike plot based on another text, such as those by Beckett, Ionesco or Carroll. The characters are still very much linguistic incarnations of the self and language remains an ultimate stumbling block.

Where Ocampo has access to the childhood garden, albeit through the nostalgic vision of the 'Sonetos del jardín', Pizarnik is condemned to a Nadjan wood in the arms of death, 'La muerte y la muchacha / abrazadas en el bosque' (*Obras*, p. 243). Where mirrors are for Ocampo confirmation of the ever-changing and unrecognizable nature of self, to Pizarnik they represent unbearable multiplicity and fragmentation of identity. If Cortazarian games are a serious matter in Ocampo's fiction, for Pizarnik they become, tragically, a 'juego peligroso' in life. Word-play, the Surrealist game *par excellence* is also part of Pizarnik's play in the prose works, 'esa compulsión al juego de palabras, ese juego que viene de la tradición surrealista' (Pezzoni, quoted in *Correspondencia*, p. 17). Ocampo revels more in paradox and oxymorons than lewd and ludic puns.

In the last of her letters to Ocampo, Pizarnik confesses to her 'sos mi paraíso perdido. Vuelto a encontrar y perdido.' (*Correspondencia*, p. 211) She thus associates Ocampo with this magical realm and senses that somehow she has preserved the childhood world within; in Ocampo, the 'nena todavía vibra'. We could imagine Ocampo's possible response to Pizarnik through her translation of Dickinson's Poem 990: 'No todos los que mueren temprano mueren jóvenes' (p. 264). She no doubt recognized that for Pizarnik – although thirty years younger – death was 'el país de lo ya visto'; youth had gone and her nostalgia was for a childhood that was already inescapably tainted with death within life: 'Me rememoro al sol de la infancia, infusa de muerte, de vida hermosa.' (*Obras*, p. 222)

⁵ 'Alejandra Revisited', *Feminaria*, 8.16 (1996), 17-18 at <http://www.monmouth.edu/%7Epgacarti/piz-art.htm>

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