Óscar Masotta and the Decentering of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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Óscar Masotta was an Argentine critic, aesthetician, polemicist, occasional organizer of Happenings, and psychoanalytic theorist. Between the early 1950s and the late 1970s, he was associated with some of the most notable cultural and intellectual institutions in Buenos Aires. In the early part of his career, he wrote for *Contorno*, an influential but short-lived left-wing magazine of Sartrean inspiration that incubated the careers of a generation of writers. In the second phase of his intellectual trajectory, he was closely affiliated with the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, the institutional epicenter of the avant-garde of the late 1960s. In the final decade of his life, Masotta dedicated himself to

the translation and exposition of the work of Jacques Lacan, and to the foundation of the Escuela Freudiana de Buenos Aires, modeled upon Lacan's École Freudienne de Paris. Despite his significance as a critic of literature and art, it is Masotta's role as an expositor of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Argentina, a country where Lacan's influence has arguably eclipsed his importance in his native France, that has assured him a prominent but controversial place in the country's intellectual pantheon.

Presently, a "retorno a Masotta" is underway – so the writer, psychoanalyst, and longtime Masotta collaborator Germán García declared in the cultural supplement *Ñ* in 2010 (GARCÍA, 2010, p. 6). Citing the republication of Masotta's major writings and a growing interest in his work in Argentina and abroad, García hailed the Masotta revival as the just due of a cultural critic and theoretician who exercised a wide-ranging impact on the intellectual life of Argentina in twenty years of activity. Other articles noting the recent rediscovery of Masotta have referred to him as a "pionero," "fundador," "maestro de una generación," and "the *fons et origo* of Lacanian analysis in Argentina" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 11).

García's declaration of a "return to Masotta" self-consciously echoes his (and Masotta's) master Lacan's "return to Freud." Yet rather than clarifying Masotta's cultural importance, García's allusion makes plain what a curious position he occupies. After all, the rallying cry "return to Freud" allowed Lacan to frame his project as a journey to the source that would circumvent the expositors and interpreters who shaped the history of psychoanalysis after Freud's death. A "return to Masotta" would be the opposite of a return to origins: a return to a thinker who had explicitly understood his enterprise as a return to another thinker (Freud) by way of yet another (Lacan). In other words, the present-day reader of Masotta would be making a return to Masotta's return to Lacan's return to Freud: an unusually circuitous intellectual path. Yet it would seem that Masotta in fact viewed his enterprise in precisely those terms. Redoubled phrasings like the ones I have just been using are rife in his writings. For instance, he introduces *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan*, as "un seminario sobre un seminario que comenta un texto literario que ejemplificaría a la teoría" (MASOTTA, 2008, p. 153); elsewhere he refers to "nuestra lectura de

nuestra lectura del cuento de Poe y de la maqueta de Lacan" (Ibidem, p. 121); and at the opening of an essay appended to the *Introducción*, he announces: "Es Althusser – quien lee a Marx no sin haber leído a Lacan – el que nos sugiere el sentido y el alcance de la tarera: leer a Freud" (Ibidem, p. 189).

Recent commentators on Masotta's work have highlighted the frequent mise-en-abyme effects of his rhetoric, and have generally viewed such convolutions as evidence of a tortuously mimetic and derivative intellectual posture. For instance, the historian of psychoanalysis Mariano Plotkin remarks skeptically: Masotta "took [his] identification with the French master to the extreme. In [his] texts it is sometimes difficult to understand whose voice we are hearing. Is it Lacan's? Is it [Masotta's]? Or is it Lacan's through [Masotta's]? Here is Masotta on Melanie Klein, for example: 'What do we think about Melanie Klein? From the beginning it is easy to guess we are not Kleinians . . . Lacan, however, is cautious.' It seems that Lacan's caution qualifies Masotta's reservations toward Melanie Klein" (PLOTKIN, 2001, p. 210).

Philip Derbyshire has issued similar judgments on what he calls Masotta's "reading[s] of reading[s] of literary text[s]" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 18) and "exposition[s] of text[s] about the possibility of exposition" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 18). For Derbyshire, Masotta's rhetoric "devalues the position of the peripheral reader inasmuch as it places him/her in a position of repetition of the centre, even as such iteration opens up to unwilled novelty" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 16). With reference to Masotta's commentary on Lacan's commentary on Poe's "Purloined Letter," Derbyshire asserts:

> on the model developed within the Seminar, Masotta, as intermediary, is occupied by the letter, the signifier – Lacanian theory – yet can do no more than bear it, utterly incapable of manipulating it, since the signifier speaks the subject. And the dissemination which threatens any interpretation can only be vitiated by repeating the message to the letter – "the laborious work of reading" or citation. The threat of the purloining of the text requires that the text be merely repeated. (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 20).

He continues:

> Such mimicry is one solution to the problem of a self-constituted intellectual periphery to its supposed centre, a relation that marks a constant trope of Argentine culture through the twentieth century. We might consider this to be a form of colonialism at the level of theory, where the model of the intellectual, the conceptual apparatus and the problematic of theory are all produced elsewhere and transferred to the new terrain as if the gap between origin and margin did not exist" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 22).

Derbyshire adds that while "Masotta registered this problem in his critique of *Sur*," the influential literary magazine published by Victoria Ocampo, he reenacts it in his exegeses of Lacan.

What is strange about Derbyshire's critique is that Derbyshire himself seems to be "occupied" by Lacan's letter, and thus by Masotta's letter: that is, psychoanalytic theory, Masotta's adherence to which is the object of his critique, in fact forms the conceptual basis of that critique. Derbyshire's reading of Masotta as, in his term, a "cultural symptom," is itself "symptomatic" of a textual "return of the repressed" much like what he identifies in Masotta's own writing. Likewise, his argument that Masotta ends up repeating other Argentine intellectuals' repetitions of the center is itself a repetition of Masotta's critiques of other Argentine intellectuals. In the very process of demonstrating that Masotta's rhetorical deference to Lacan puts him in the position of only being influenced, never influencing, Derbyshire in fact reveals himself to be influenced by Masotta. Thus, Derbyshire's "textual position is both dominant and precarious" (DERBYSHIRE, 2009, p. 13) – much as he says is the case with Masotta. Indeed, Masotta might well be describing Derbyshire's critique when he characterizes his own commentary on Lacan as "un texto que repite y trasforma el texto de un autor . . . sin dejar de avisar al lector que ahí donde repite tal vez traiciona y ahí donde trasforma no es sino porque quiere repetir" (MASOTTA, 2008, p. 24).

I should clarify at this point that I share Derbyshire's conclusion that Óscar Masotta's writings on Lacan are fundamentally self-referential: they are at least in part efforts to theorize their own conditions of production. As Derbyshire puts it, Masotta's "forms of reading from the periphery . . . exemplif[y] the dilemmas of a peripheral

intelligentsia in relation to metropolitan theoretical production." Yet as the foregoing reading of Derbyshire's reading suggests, the relationship between center and periphery in Masotta's readings of Lacan may prove more complicated than it might initially seem. As we have seen, Derbyshire, an author located in the ostensible center (London) critiques a writer from the ostensible periphery (Buenos Aires) for being too beholden to the center, yet his own argument reveals a beholdenness to the same intellectual from the ostensible periphery he is critiquing. A more extensive of Lacan's relations with Argentina and Latin America further complicates assumptions about the relationship of periphery and center. As it turns out, the mise-en-abyme effects of Masotta's rhetoric enact and repeat an eccentricity and marginality at the core of the Lacanian enterprise itself, qualities that Masotta's repetitions of Lacan render more fully visible.

Clearly, Lacan and Lacanian theory emanate from a long-acknowledged center or capital (Paris) that has a prolonged and complicated history as a source of cultural and intellectual models for the Latin American intelligentsia. The fruitful reception of Lacanian psychoanalysis in Argentina, in large part due to the work of intermediaries like Masotta and García, forms part of this larger history of absorption and transformation of Parisian models. Yet the origins of Lacanian theory are caught up in an overlapping but distinct geopolitical map of intellectual capital, one in which the positions of Lacan and Paris are more precarious that the foregoing overview might lead us to assume.

To make this point clear, I would like to briefly revisit some of the large body of work by U.S. scholars on Lacan's seminar on Poe's "Purloined Letter" (Masotta's key text) and the polemic it unleashed. As Jeffrey Mehlman and Jane Gallop both point out, the prolonged transatlantic dialogue between France and the United States occasioned by the "Purloined Letter" seminar turns out to be an uncanny repetition of the seminar's origins: on one level, a French psychoanalyst's reading of a story by a North American author set in Paris with a French "analyst" – Poe's August Dupin – as its protagonist; on another level, a French psychoanalyst's attack on the dominance of an American version of psychoanalysis – ego psychology – that had become central and hegemonic enough to relegate the heresies of a European analyst

like Lacan to the intellectual margins. Lacan's institutional authority as founder, pioneer, and master paradoxically emerged out of the isolation occasioned by repeated denials of recognition by the North American-dominated International Psychoanalytic Association. Lacan was preoccupied not only with his own institutional status but with the decentering of Paris and of Europe in a post-war world in which the United States was newly ascendant in psychoanalysis as in other realms. His response to his own marginalization, one might suggest, was to systematize in texts like the "Purloined Letter" seminar the impossibility of mastery and the untenability of any center.

While Lacan's transatlantic antagonism with the United States has received extensive attention, his apposite and equally revealing relationship with Argentina and Latin America has been largely neglected. Decades before Masotta began his labors as a Lacanian exegete, Lacan and Argentina were what we might call "extimate" friends, and Argentina was "in" Lacan before Lacan was in Argentina. For even as he severed ties with ego psychology, its North American institutional base, and its French sympathizers, Lacan sought out South American alliances, a process that would culminate in a visit to Caracas shortly before his death and in his successor Jacques-Alain Miller's close ties to the continent.

A piece of evidence for Lacan's South American strategy may be found in the library of the Villa Ocampo, the primary residence of prominent Argentine writer and publisher Victoria Ocampo and the focal point of the latter's famous literary salon. Among the Villa's large collection of memorabilia attesting to Ocampo's friendships with the major figures of the modern artistic and intellectual avant-garde are four works bearing Lacan's inscription. A survey of Ocampo's epistolary corpus reveals that she first met Lacan during a 1930 trip to Paris, when he was a young psychiatrist in training with close associations with the surrealists. Between 1932 and 1976, Lacan sent Ocampo personally signed copies of four of his major publications, each containing a fondly affectionate dedication. We may safely speculate that Lacan was operating with some awareness of Ocampo's sphere of influence in the world of Spanish-language letters, largely the product of her control of the prestigious journal *Sur*. Published by Ocampo between 1931 and 1992, *Sur* had as one of its missions

the dissemination of major European intellectual and cultural trends in Argentina and Latin America. Had Ocampo chosen to provide a venue for any of Lacan's work, it would have reached a wide Spanish-speaking audience, but neither *Sur* nor the publishing house associated with it published any work by or about Lacan, nor did Ocampo use her influence to seek publication in Spanish for any of Lacan's writings.

In one of her 1930 letters about Lacan, Ocampo describes the young psychiatrist as having "sueños napoleónicos de poderío" (OCAMPO, 1997, p. 24). We can assume that she recognized in Lacan's attempts to solicit her attention to his ideas as a somewhat imperialistic effort to expand his sphere of intellectual influence into the Spanish-speaking world. This initially failed attempt on Lacan's part might be usefully compared to earlier French geopolitical strategies that emphasized the common "Latin" culture of France and Latin America as the basis for cultural and political alliances. If Lacan's relationship with the United States forced him into a position of belligerent marginality and isolation, his "unrequited conquest" of Argentina entailed in contrast an assumption of his own centrality in relation to a supposed periphery that he hoped would be duly receptive to his influence. If Ocampo's indifference frustrated this gesture of mastery – the kind of gesture his own theory persistently ironizes – Lacan's textual debts to Ocampo's associate Jorge Luis Borges bring further complications into play.

John Irwin has made a forceful case that it was a reading of Borges that "originally directed Lacan to the numerical/geometrical dimension of 'The Purloined Letter' and thus suggested Poe's tale as an ideal text for an analytic reading that would project the structure of the Oedipal triangle onto the reciprocity of blindness and insight in the psychoanalytic encounter" (IRWIN, 1994, p. 442). As he notes, "[t] he probability of Lacan's having been influenced by Borges should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the enormous appeal Borges's work had for French intellectuals in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s" (IRWIN, 1994, p. 448). Irwin also delineates a more precise pathway for Borges's influence on Lacan: the work of critic and social theorist Roger Caillois, a longtime associate of Lacan. Caillois spent the years of the Second World War in Argentina, where with the help of Victoria Ocampo he started an exile literary journal in French that published

some of the first French translations of Borges's work. Later, Caillois oversaw the publication of a complete translation of Borges's *Ficciones*. Also during his time in Argentina, Caillois started writing about the history of detective fiction. This led to an exchange with Borges in the pages of *Sur*, which touched upon the role of Edgar Allan Poe in the development of the genre.

Irwin draws further evidence from the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" itself. In a brief footnote to the seminar, Lacan alludes to Borges's "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," which had been published in French in 1955. Borges's works, Lacan remarks, "harmonize . . . well with the phylum of our subject" (MULLER; RICHARDSON, 1988, p. 53). Irwin remarks that

> there is something odd about this footnote, an uncanny feeling that is usually the aura of an unconscious mechanism, of repression and return. For while it is not at all clear that Borges's essay on Wilkins "harmonizes so well" with the subject of Lacan's "Seminar" . . . it is quite clear that [other] work of Borges's [i.e. his detective fiction] harmonizes only too well with the subject of Lacan's "Seminar". (IRWIN, 1994, p. 445).

Irwin goes on:

> Lacan's reference to the Wilkins essay may indeed represent the return of a repressed content, the resurfacing of Lacan's sense of how much his own reading of "The Purloined Letter" either owed directly to or was anticipated by Borges's rereading/rewriting of Poe's story . . . If this originality anxiety existed for Lacan, then his footnote to Borges would be the trace of an inner division, the visible mark of his inability . . . to acknowledge explicitly a debt of influence to, or the simple priority of, Borges in a matter so central to his interpretation of Poe's tale. (IRWIN, 1994, p. 446-447).

Lacan, as his correspondence with Ocampo reveals, long sought to create a channel of influence from Paris to Buenos Aires; he also conveyed his work to the Swiss-born Argentine psychoanalyst Enrique Pichon Rivière, who eventually brought Lacan to Masotta's attention. But if Irwin is correct, Lacan instead found the direction of influence reversed when Ocampo's literary associate Borges provided the basis for his own reading of Poe. If the theoretical foundation of Lacanian

theory owes something to Argentina via Borges, the survival of Lacan's sanctioned institutional legacy eventually relied just as significantly on Latin American alliances. The dissolution of the École Freudienne in January 1980 left Lacan with few allies in France, and it was no accident that he and his chosen successor Jacques-Alain Miller traveled to Caracas in July 1980 to convene the growing community of Spanish-speaking Lacanian analysts, the emergence of which owed much to Oscar Masotta's efforts. The Lacanian institution survived through its partial Latin Americanization, through the becoming institutionally central of what Lacan had earlier imagined as a peripheral territory to be conquered.

Instead of offering an exhaustive reading of Masotta's work, I have attempted to provide a new context for thinking about his intellectual labors as a reader of Lacan. Masotta's marginal reading of Lacan suggests an understanding of Lacanian theory as an interrogation of marginality as a pervasive condition in a decentered symbolic universe. It also grounds the theoretical work of decentering crucial to Lacan's thought in specific axes of cultural geopolitics. Masotta's reading of Lacan's readings of Poe and Freud offer ways of thinking about the reconfiguration of cultural geography that becomes obligatory in a world without a defined center. A passage from Barbara Johnson's "The Frame of Reference," a commentary on the polemic surrounding the Seminar on the "Purloined Letter," is particularly pertinent to Masotta's decentering of the already decentered Lacan:

> *it is the act of analysis which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the act of analysis of the act of analysis which in some way disrupts that centrality*. In the resulting, asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis . . . can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a stable sequence, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects" (MULLER; RICHARDSON, 1988, p. 213-214).

If Lacan read Freud, to use Masotta's phrasing, not without having also read Borges, then Masotta's repetition of the center is a repetition of a center that already repeats the periphery, and thus signals the emergence of a cultural map in which such terms can no longer be sustained. Masotta suggests as much when he writes that

"nuestra cercanía . . . a los textos de Lacan" is in fact an effect of "la distancia y las mediaciones entre nuestro texto y el terreno en cuestión" (MASOTTA, 2008, p. 175).

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