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Madwomen:
Gabriela Mistral, the Icon,
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Madwomen:
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Gabriela Mistral was the first Latin American writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Mistral is present in public consciousness more because she has become a symbol, an icon in the pantheon of national (and continental) cultural pride than because her work is widely read.

She is the kindly but somewhat distant and humourless headmistress of Latin American letters: “national schoolmarm” (Fiol-Matta).

But alongside the buttoned-up official
portraiture, something is always
threatening to escape.

Perhaps the striving for an appearance of order and decorum was a response to tendencies towards dissolution and disarray, even madness, that took on specifically gendered forms in a conservative, patriarchal culture.

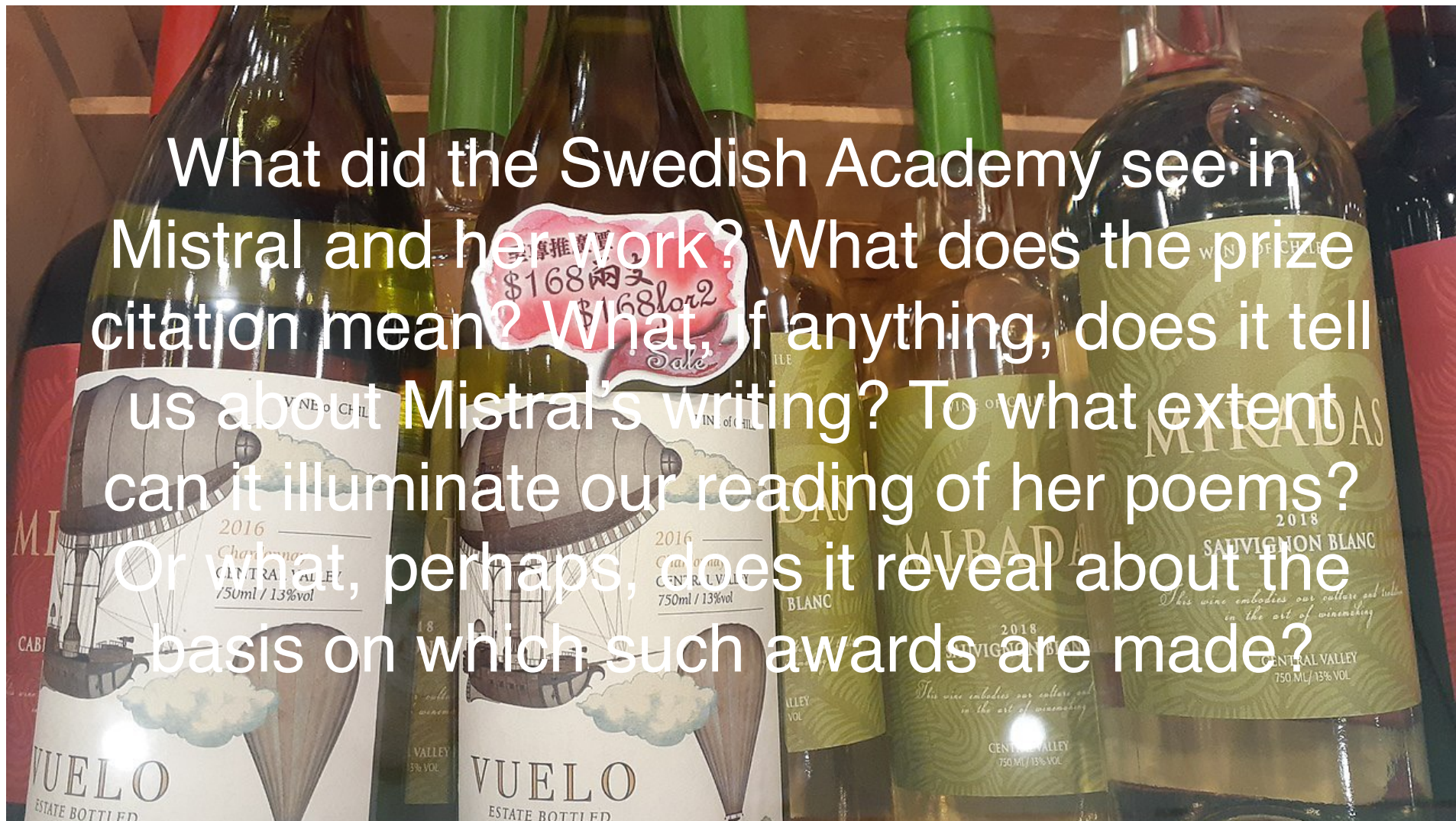


**LITERARY VALUE,
REPRESENTATION,
AND ICONICITY**

“Her lyric poetry [. . .], inspired by powerful emotions, has made her name a symbol of the idealistic aspirations of the entire Latin American world.”

(“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1945”)

What did the Swedish Academy see in Mistral and her work? What does the prize citation mean? What, if anything, does it tell us about Mistral's writing? To what extent can it illuminate our reading of her poems? Or what, perhaps, does it reveal about the basis on which such awards are made?



What did the Swedish Academy see in Mistral and her work? What does the prize citation mean? What, if anything, does it tell us about Mistral's writing? To what extent can it illuminate our reading of her poems? Or what, perhaps, does it reveal about the basis on which such awards are made?

Mistral is honoured because she speaks for (and about) “the entire Latin American world.”

“Her story is so well known to the people of South America that, passed on from country to country, it has become almost a legend.” (Hjalmar Gullberg)

The prize is as much a matter of “rendering homage to the rich Latin American literature” as it is concerned with crowning “its queen” (Gullberg).

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Mistral stands in for an entire literary tradition.

Mistral receives the reward on behalf of others, for her capacity to articulate and ventriloquize an entire continent's feelings and desires.

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This is a competitive celebration of human achievement that plays out as a team sport.

“[The Prize] is a form of play, of competitive struggle, a ‘cultural game’ which can be articulated with or overlaid on any of the many games of culture that we call the arts. [. . .] It introduces special excitements and special opportunities for mass spectacle [. . .] to facilitate a neoclassical convergence between the arts and spectator sport.” (James English)

“It can thus be a nodal point for communication identification and pride, a means of positing an ‘us’ and an ‘our’ around which to rally some group of individuals.” (James English)

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The Academy seek to compensate for the lacuna with the claim that the award is for all of those overlooked during this period.

But we may question why representativity should be the mark of literary value.

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Why should a writer's greatness be measured by the extent to which he or she is in tune with their country or their region?

The Nobel prize helped turn Mistral into an icon, but it was awarded on the basis that she was somehow already iconic, in a circular logic that flattens out difference via the assumption that the region has or should have one voice, speaking in unison through its garlanded representative.

What is in fact most interesting about Mistral is her polyphony, her dissident tendencies rather than the extent to which she indeed conformed to this restrictive model.

The poet explores and ventriloquizes figures from either the classical tradition of Ancient Greece or the Bible. The other, nameless, women who populate the text are more like generic types, pinned to no particular time and place, in a landscape that could be Chile but could equally be almost anywhere else.

If anything what unites Chileans is mobility and flight, a “need to travel” that is “tattooed on our souls” (“Chile” 175).

Mistral spent most of the last 35 years of her life beyond the country's shores, living variously in Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and the United States (where she died, in 1957).

The paradox of representation is that not only is the sign separate from the thing it designates, but that it is also internally divided. To be an icon is to be set apart from the mundane and the everyday, to be both singular and double, exposed to the threat of fatal splitting or dissolution.



DOUBLES, MADNESS, AND FEMININITY

Gabriela Mistral was split
almost from the start.

Her biography indicates tensions between public persona and a fiercely-guarded private life.

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She was indeed a “queer mother” for the nation.

Doubling and multiplication are main themes of the *Mad Women* collection.

“I killed a woman in me:
one I did not love. [. . .]

“I killed a woman in me:
one I did not love. [. . .]

“robbing her of my heart’s blood.” (31)

“Her sisters keen,
they cry to me for her,
and the fiery clay rakes me as I pass.” (33)

The pages that follow are haunted by dozens of “other” others, whose uneasy ghosts (or insistent materiality) can never quite be extirpated or put to rest.

A split self—or multiple selves, or unstable, fluctuating subjectivity or subjectivities—is usually taken to be a prototypical instance of “madness.”

Women have repeatedly been portrayed or imagined as inconstant or excessive, breaching boundaries and inducing disorder.

Mistral is interested in the ways in which women are figured as mad, are driven mad by social structures that try to constrict or contain them, or take refuge in madness as a form of escape or resistance.

“She always walks that same sand
until the others have gone to sleep;

[. . .]

She halts at the foot of the same thorn
and with the same attitude takes it
and she grasps it because it’s her fate.”

(75)

“Whether she lives or dies by it
on the blind sand where all is lost,
from everything fortune had given her
she has salvaged that single word
And she lives on it and dies of the same

That self-same word is what she says,
it’s all she kept and all she carries.” (75)

“I who tell of her don’t know her path
or her sunburned countenance [. . .]

And when I think of her, I possess her,
and for her I recite without rest
the litany of all the names
that I learned, like her a wanderer;
but the dark Angel never, never
wanted by path to cross hers.” (77)

All we have is a trace of the word—
unspoken, illegible, unshared—that the
other woman carries with her, as
imagined by a speaker who has at least
one foot, however precariously, planted
in a social world that recognizes her
and allows her to speak.

Gabriela Mistral may not have wanted to speak for an entire continent, knowing how hard it was even to speak for herself— which self? But she takes advantage of her status as representative, and the representational capacities of language, to make visible the traces of what otherwise escapes the official order of things.

The icon depends on exposure, not unlike the way that it is the faint double at the margin in the banknote's semi-transparent window that certifies that this token of monetary value is the real thing, state-issued and not a counterfeit copy.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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