

Madwomen: Gabriela Mistral, the Icon, and her Others

In 1945, the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral became the first Latin American writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Eighty years later, she is still the only woman writer from the region to have received this distinction. Today, almost unknown in the English-speaking world, in her native country (as well as elsewhere in the Americas) she is present in public consciousness more because she has become a symbol, an icon in the pantheon of national (and continental) cultural pride—innumerable schools are named after her, as well as streets and city squares, and her portrait is on Chile's 5,000-peso banknote—than because her work is widely read. If there is a shared image of Mistral, it is probably of a rather matronly figure, a notion reinforced by photographs of her in a suit jacket, her visage stern and her hair pinned up. Renowned as a teacher and educator (hence her name on so many schools), she is the kindly but somewhat distant and humourless headmistress of Latin American letters: “national schoolmarm” as Licia Fiol-Matta puts it (*A Queer Mother for the Nation* xvii). Under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1989), this was certainly the official image of the poet: as critic Nicola Miller observes, she appeared to be “an absolute gift to the Pinochet regime, which vigorously promoted the spiritual ‘Mother of the Nation’ as an antidote to Chile’s other Nobel-Prize-winning poet, the Communist Pablo Neruda.” Moreover, much of Mistral’s poetry, with its lyrical yet perhaps abstruse evocations of landscape instilled with spirituality, no doubt further sediments this impression that she was “a passive icon of virtue rather than an agent of social change” (Miller, “Recasting the Role of the Intellectual” 136). She can seem to be the epitome of consecrated, conservative officialdom.

But alongside the buttoned-up official portraiture—encouraged also by Mistral herself; she was, after all, a diplomat who served as Chilean consul in cities throughout Europe and North America and from early on was accustomed to self-fashioning—something is always threatening to escape, especially in her later and even posthumous writings. 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 the conservative, patriarchal culture that marked Chile (and not just Chile) during much of the twentieth century and beyond. No wonder a recent article in *The New York Times* suggests that she is now, however belatedly, “being reclaimed by a

new generation of feminist and L.G.B.T. activists as an anti-establishment icon" (Lankes, "Move Over, Pablo Neruda"). An icon still, but of a rather different sort, in line also with new conceptions of literary value.

1. *Literary Value, Representation, and Iconicity*

Five Latin American writers have been awarded the Nobel Prize, the highest honour for literary achievement. They include the Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz, and the Peruvian novelist and essayist Mario Vargas Llosa. But long before any of these, there was Mistral, who for two decades (until Asturias won in 1967) was the region's sole representative among the select group of global laureates who included such well-known and mostly male, European and North American, writers as William Butler Yeats, Thomas Mann, André Gide, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway.

What did the Swedish Academy, which chooses the winner of this award, see in Mistral and her work? The prize citation states that she was recognized "for her lyric poetry which, 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"). But what does this 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? In your notebook, write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a glass of Chilean white wine, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: White Wine

The poems we have in English translation as *Madwomen* come mainly either from the last volume of poetry Mistral published during her lifetime, *Lagar* (1954), or from a posthumous collection given the title *Lagar II* (1992). A "lagar" is a winepress (it can also be an olive press): the place where crushed grapes are put under pressure so as to release the juice that will eventually become wine. The timing of the pressing is a significant factor in determining the character of the final result: to make white wine, for which Chile is best known, the grapes are pressed before the fermentation process begins; to make red wine, they are pressed following a primary fermentation of juice and skins together.

Winepressing is a purification, leaving a residue (the pomace, including skins, seeds, and stems) that is set aside, perhaps for other uses—for instance, to make grappa—or to be discarded. It also effects a transformation, a change of state in the extraction of liquid from solid, at the price of carefully regulated tension and pressure, neither too much nor too little, a calculated violence integral to the creative process.

One thing to note from the Swedish Academy's rationale for awarding the Nobel prize to Mistral is that they are looking for regional representativity. Mistral is honoured because she speaks for (and about) "the entire Latin American world." Over thirty-five years later, when García Márquez received the 1982 award, a similar logic still held, as his citation declared that the award was "for his novels and short stories, in which the fantastic and the realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination, reflecting a continent's life and conflicts" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 1982"). Introducing Mistral at the 1945 prize ceremony, Academy member Hjalmar Gullberg repeatedly stresses the continental breadth of her fame and significance: "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." Gullberg concludes with the acknowledgment that the prize is as much a matter of "rendering homage to the rich Latin American literature" as it is concerned with crowning what he calls "its queen," Mistral herself, who thereby stands in for an entire literary tradition ("Award Ceremony Speech 1945"). Mistral receives the reward on behalf of others, for her capacity to articulate and ventriloquize an entire continent's feelings and desires.

All this fits within the vision of art and culture—and even scientific endeavour and, for the Peace Prize, diplomacy—that is promoted by the Nobel Prize system as a whole. In each category up for adjudication, the Nobel Foundation awards a single prize (which, in the Sciences and for the Peace Prize, is often shared, but is almost never so in Literature), with great secrecy around the deliberations, but with great publicity and pomp thereafter, the award immediately becoming front-page news around the world, culminating in a formal dinner at which the Swedish monarch bestows the award on its recipient. Beyond the cash that the prize carries with it, above all the Nobel both confers and affirms immense prestige, some of which spills over to those—publishers, journals, and others—associated in one way or another with the prize recipient. This is a

competitive celebration of human achievement that plays out often almost as a team sport! As cultural theorist James English notes of the Nobel Prize (and by extension, also other literary prizes), the prize system is, in the first place, "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," English adds, "special excitements and special opportunities for mass spectacle [. . .] to facilitate a neoclassical convergence between the arts and spectator sport." None of which to say that it is not taken seriously. On the contrary: "It can thus be a nodal point for communitarian identification and pride, a means of positing an 'us' and an 'our' around which to rally some group of individuals" (*The Economy of Prestige* 50-51). Especially when it comes to a prize with the prestige of the Nobel, such awards are important not only for the winners, but also for all those whom they can be said to represent, as though the laureates carried the flag in some kind of international competition in which what is at stake is not simply individual talent but also the relative cultural worth of entire world regions and nation states.

We can thus understand why Mistral's Nobel Prize comes with such rhetoric and the invocation of the "rich[ness]" of Latin American literature as a whole. In the forty-four years (since 1901) that the Swedish Academy had been choosing the recipients for such awards, and despite their strenuous efforts to achieve both universality and objectivity, they had not previously seen fit to give it to anyone from Latin America, and they would not do so again for another twenty-two years (until 1967). They seek to compensate for this 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 achievement or value. 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? Why should the most Latin American writer (whatever that means) also be most worthy of international accolade? 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. Yet 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.

Few of the poems in Mistral's *Madwomen* are very obviously situated in Latin America. Indeed, here more often the poet explores and ventriloquizes figures from either the classical tradition of Ancient Greece (Antigone, Electra, Clytemnestra, Cassandra) or the Bible (Martha and Mary). And the other, nameless, women who populate the text are more like generic types ("The Anxious Woman," "The Fervent Woman," "She Who Walks"), pinned to no particular time and place, in a landscape that could be Chile but could equally be almost anywhere else.

It is true that at other times, for instance in the poems collected as "Poem of Chile" (*Poema de Chile*), Mistral does try to conjure up a sense of national identity, often through recourse to the country's distinctive but varied geography—the desert to the North, the forests to the South, flanked by the cordillera and the sea to East and West. But this threatens to become simply a catalogue of parts. As she suggests elsewhere, in a short article written in Mexico in 1923, if anything what unites Chileans is mobility and flight, a "need to travel" that is "tattooed on our souls" ("Chile" 175). That was true at least for Mistral herself, who 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). Much of this movement may have been in the service of the nation state, as member of its diplomatic corps, but it also kept her distant from it. The paradox of representation is that not only is the sign separate from the thing it designates, but it is also internally divided (signifier and signified, only arbitrarily and contingently related). 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.

2. Doubles, Madness, and Femininity

Gabriela Mistral was split almost from the start. Born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, she took the pen-name Gabriela Mistral from several sources (the Archangel Gabriel, the winds of Southern France; or alternatively from the writers Gabriele d'Annunzio and Frédéric Mistral) and gradually grew into it, though she continued to use her birth-name for official business with her employer, the state. Moreover, her biography indicates tensions between public persona and a fiercely-guarded private life: presented as the "poet of motherhood" ("Award Ceremony Speech 1945"), she never acknowledged having any children herself; portrayed as a model for the lynchpin of the heterosexual family, she was almost certainly a closet lesbian. She was indeed, to pick up on the title of Fiol-

Matta's book about her, a "queer mother" for the nation. Even the design of the most recent version of the Chilean 5,000 peso note suggests more than one Mistral, containing as it does a ghostly double, a "watermark" in translucent plastic, to one side of the main portrait. Mistral contained multitudes.



Chilean 5,000-peso banknote, with portrait of Gabriela Mistral

Doubling and multiplication are main themes of the *Madwomen* collection, established in its opening poem, "The Other" ("La otra"). Here, the relationship between two women, one within the other, is tense and conflictive: "I killed a woman in me: / one I did not love." But as though the speaker could not leave things at that, the poem goes on to describe at length this other woman—or other aspect of the same woman, for she is not entirely other; Claudia Gómez and Paula Tesche call her "extimate," both intimate and external, interior and alien. She is fiery ("the blazing fire"), stubborn, indomitable (she "didn't know how to bend"), but ultimately the speaker starves her of resources or nurturance, "robbing her of my heart's blood" (31). No sooner is one "other" woman killed, however, than others arise: "her sisters keen, / they cry to me for her, / and the fiery clay rakes me as I pass." The speaker suggests that these sisters fashion "another burning eagle" from clay, reproducing and resurrecting the dead other, or, failing that, that they kill their own others, too (33). But the futility of this advice is clear from the fact that this is not the concluding poem of the collection, but the first. 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," in both traditional conceptions of "schizophrenia" and contemporary iterations of "multiple personality disorder" or "bipolar disorder." Such syndromes, and indeed madness itself, are also often gendered: "hysteria," after all, comes from the Greek word for uterus or womb (with the idea, what is more, that it was a *wandering* womb that caused psychic disturbance). Women have repeatedly been portrayed or imagined as inconstant or excessive, breaching boundaries and inducing disorder. With these poems, Mistral may to some extent reinforce such depictions, but she is also 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 Who Walks" ("La que camina"), for instance, describes a woman at the margins of society, who walks without rest "until the others have gone to sleep," who grasps a thorn "because it's her fate," and "falters sun-struck [. . .] on the blind sand." In her wanderings, she is both sustained and ultimately undone ("she lives on it and dies of the same") by a word, "that single word" that is "all she kept and all she carries" (75). As such, she is perhaps the figure of the poet, or rather of *a* poet in that the speaker of the poem offers another model, another way of tending to the word, by speaking of the wanderer's fate without necessarily sharing it herself: "I who tell of her don't know her path / or her sunburned countenance." But even if the two women's paths never exactly cross ("the dark Angel never, never / wanted my path to cross hers"), by invoking this other, almost unknowable woman, the speaker can imagine that "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" (77). In contrast, then, to the conflictive relationship established between the speaker and the other in "The Other," here we see a gesture towards identification, even appropriation, albeit with the acceptance ("with flowing tears") that the other is ultimately unrecognizable, she has changed so much ("she's no longer herself"), and that "she's gone to sleep the fabled sleep" (77). All we have, in this poem and the others in the same collection, 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 was not exactly a reluctant icon, and *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*. She conjures up these other women, these other lives, at the risk of an unravelling that comes with possible over-exposure, with revealing too much. Yet the one also depends on the other, 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.

works cited

"Award Ceremony Speech 1945." *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022.

<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1945/ceremony-speech/>>

English, James. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Fiol-Matta, Licia. *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Gómez, Claudia, and Paula Tesche. "El discurso de lo éxtimo en 'Locas mujeres' de Gabriela Mistral." *Mitologías Hoy* 5 (Summer 2012): 119-26.

Lankes, Ana. "Move Over, Pablo Neruda: Young Chileans Have a New Favorite Poet." *The New York Times*. January 28, 2023.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/28/books/poetry-gabriela-mistral.html>>

Miller, Nicola. "Recasting the Role of the Intellectual: Chilean Poet Gabriela Mistral." *Feminist Review* 79 (2005): 134-49.

Mistral, Gabriela. "Chile." *A Gabriela Mistral Reader*. Ed. Marjorie Agosín. Trans. Maria Giachetti. Fredonia, NY: White Pine, 1993. 173-75.

----- . *Madwomen: The Locas mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral*. Trans. and ed. Randall Couch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

----- . *Poema de Chile*. Ed. Diego del Pozo. Santiago de Chile: La Pollera, 2015.

"The Nobel Prize in Literature 1945." *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022.

<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1945/summary/>>

"The Nobel Prize in Literature 1982." *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022.

<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1982/summary/>>

Image: <https://www.worldbanknotescoins.com/2015/05/chile-5000-pesos-banknote-2009-gabriela-mistral.html>

Song: "Arriba quemando el sol" (Violeta Parra)