

Introduction

ABOUT MISTRAL

Ten years or so ago, my friend Diana Bellessi sent me from Buenos Aires a little paperback book, a selection of poems by Gabriela Mistral. I read it and fell in love. This book is the result, the love-child.

Like most North Americans I knew nothing about the poet. She was a whole world to discover, a wild terrain, a new language.

I'll say little here about her work; it seems better sense to let it speak for itself. My introductions to the six parts of the book sketch out her life story and the nature of the poems. Of her life it's enough here to say that she was born in Chile in 1889, traveled and lived all over Europe and the New World, and died in the United States in 1957.

I do want to talk about her current obscurity, for she was a famous poet in her lifetime. One would expect a Nobel Prize winner to be well represented in English. All I have found is a small volume of translations by Langston Hughes; a larger selection by Doris Dana; a good recent selection by Maria Giacchetti of poems and prose; and a translation by Christiane Jacox Kyle of some early prose-poems.⁽¹⁾

It is not just a problem of language, or a North-South problem. Mistral's work is only partly accessible even in Chile. Her roving life left her works curiously dispersed. The four books of poetry published during her lifetime came out in New York, Madrid, Buenos Aires, and Santiago de Chile. A posthumous "Nobel" edition of the four books was published in Spain, and there is a Chilean *Poesias Completas* (Editorial Lord Cochrane, 1989); both are out of print, and I have never even

seen the latter. For the four principal books, the paperback single-volume edition from Editorial Porrúa in Mexico is the only one available in this country. The *Poema de Chile*, first published posthumously in Spain, can be found in a Chilean paperback edition.⁽²⁾ Palma Guillén de Nicolau, who wrote the excellent introduction to the Porrúa volume, writes that the uncollected prose might fill three or four volumes. There has never been a scholarly, annotated, or variorum edition of the poems. Mistral's uncollected poems have never been brought together. It seems that the country she loved and left has loved and neglected her.

The problem of Mistral's reputation also has something to do, alas, with gender. Having been adulated as a poetess, she is not read as a poet.

Who's afraid of Gabriela Mistral?

I'd say that anybody who reads her might well be afraid of her. She can be frighteningly strange. Many of those who wrote about her had to tame her, to reduce her, before they could admire her. The formidable woman who scared off her suitors and fled from her patrons got petted and patted down into acceptable femininity. Biographers have magnified an adolescent romance into a lifelong obsession, while either deploring or ignoring the fact that she lived most of her life in sexual independence of men. They have crooned over her for being childless, while scarcely mentioning the fact that she had a child by adoption and brought him up for seventeen years. The "Gabriela" they give us is all cliché—a blighted romance then a lifetime of tears . . . a sexless schoolmarm yearning over children . . .

She was a school-teacher and also an eminent, internationally recognized, professional educator. She was for years a brilliant cultural envoy for her government—Madrid newspapers in 1933 called her the "spiritual ambassadress of Spanish America." She took children seriously and wrote poems for and about them; she also wrote about children and other underprivileged people with fierce political topicality. She grieved at being barren, was fascinated by

motherhood, achieved it by adoption, wrote about it often, and was almost mortally wounded by the death of her son. Evidently a person of great kindness, who made deep, long friendships, she seems to have found her true home only in an absolute internal solitude. She left Chile at twenty-four and never lived there again and wrote about it all her life. Her passions and self-contradictions are like those of her native landscape—immense, volcanic, absolute.

What she was above all was a poet, self-taught, almost wholly self-made, who worked constantly, tirelessly, all her life, at her craft.

Poetry is likely to suffer an eclipse after the poet's death. Men survive it much more often than women. Not only the sentimental caricaturing of Mistral but also the bright fame of Pablo Neruda may have deepened the shadow on her. To those who see art as a competition and greatness as a masculine preserve, Mistral might well appear as a threat to Neruda, not least because he learned so much from her. In fact their differences and likenesses are fascinating. His flamboyance, her sobriety; his enthusiastic party politics, her fierce independence . . . Their backgrounds in village poverty, their cosmopolitan lives, their large, generous egos, even their voices as they read their poetry, with that soft Chilean whine . . . Neither diminishes the other. They are two of the great twentieth-century poets. The beautiful "land on the edge of the world" that produced them both should take pride in them both.

I hope this translation will help bring Mistral back to North American eyes, but also I long to see Mistral's books republished with the attention they deserve from scholars of her own language, her unpublished works made available, and her stature and her true selfhood recognised again in her own country and everywhere poetry is read.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION, SELECTION,
AND ORDER OF THE POEMS

I have had no formal Spanish classes and cannot speak or write the language. I learned to read it first by immodestly

reading my own books in translation, then Borges with a dictionary. Since Diana Bellessi was translating some of my poems, I got more dictionaries and translated some of hers (and we made a book of them). And I have learned a great deal in the years I have worked on this translation. In many ways I still do not know Spanish, but I think I know Mistral.

A Chilean-born friend, Rita Kosok, helped me puzzle through my first efforts to put some of the poems into English. After the University of New Mexico Press offered to publish the work, I had the great good fortune to be put in touch with Aleida Rodríguez, a poet herself, totally bilingual, infinitely careful in her reading and editing, endlessly supportive. That the long and hard delight of working with Mistral should lead me to the joy of working with such an editor—what luck!

Of the translation itself I can only say that I have not tried to reproduce meter, only to suggest the rhythm of the originals, and that if rhyme came without forcing, I happily let it come, and otherwise let it go. I tried to keep the sense, to honor the music, and to make the poem be a poem in English, not in translatese. This is, of course, impossible.

But then, translation is impossible. Having said that I will also say that I reject Robert Frost's dictum about a poem being what is lost in translation. He never tried it and was merely pontificating. I suspect that a poem is what is not lost in translation. Or how and why would we read Sophocles, the *Mahabharata*, *Beowulf*?

Mistral published about four hundred poems; this book contains a hundred and sixty-four of them.

My selection was almost completely subjective. I worked on those that I could translate and abandoned those I couldn't. Personal taste and prejudice certainly led me to some and away from others, but the act of translation is so mysterious to me that I'm unable to explain the process of finding the translatables and the untranslatables. Love and language lead where they will.

I did exert some willpower. Wanting to show as much as I could of Mistral's breadth and variety, I consciously chose

many of the dark, difficult poems of the two late books, especially *Winepress*, and also made a special effort on a few poems that I felt little natural sympathy with, especially in *Desolation*.

That first book is probably not the best introduction to Mistral for most twenty-first-century readers. There are fine things in it, but she found a larger, truer voice in her next book, *Tenderness*, and many of her most ravishingly pure lyrics are there; while *Clearcut* and *Winepress*, the deepest and richest of her books, or the mystical accuracies of the *Poem of Chile*, might be most likely to attract a contemporary reader of poetry.

Yet to rearrange the poems in subjective or topical order would be to lose the deepening participation in the poet's life and thought that simple chronology gives.

So the six parts of this book are in order of publication: selections from *Desolation*, *Tenderness*, *Clearcut*, and *Winepress*; selections from the posthumous *Poem of Chile*; and a few uncollected poems. Within the books published in her lifetime, the poems are in the order she gave them, with the headings under which she grouped them.

I have written an introductory note to each of these sections. A schematic chronology of the events of Mistral's life is at the end of the book.

To the reader who wants to discover the poet, I suggest starting out unmethodically, opening the book at one page and another, to get a sense of where in this unfamiliar poetic landscape, with its valleys and high peaks, its springs and burning deserts, one might begin to feel at home.

—Ursula K.

Winepress

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Winepress was published in 1954 in Santiago de Chile, the only one of Mistral's books that she saw printed first in her native land.

The title was foreshadowed in a poem in *Desolation*:

*¡Y en el ancho lagar de la muerte
aun no quieres mi pecho exprimir!*

And in death's wide winepress
still you will not trample out my breast!

Heart's wine, heart's blood: in this early poem it is God who will not come press the wine from the ripened grapes. By the time she wrote *Winepress*, the vintner had come.

Very soon after *Clearcut* was published, war broke out; Europe was in agony. Mistral had come back to the Americas. From 1940 to 1945 she lived in Brazil, where she served as consul in Petropolis. In 1942 a dear friend there, Stefan Zweig, killed himself. The next year her adopted son Juan Miguel, "Yin-Yin," who had lived and traveled with her since his infancy, committed suicide. He was seventeen. It was a cruelly unnecessary enactment of adolescent shame and despair. She was with him as he died in pain. That night was with her the rest of her life.

In 1945 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first after the hiatus of the war, and the first ever given to a Latin American. As the Swedes inscrutably continued to refuse

to honor Borges, she shares her South American laurels only with Neruda and García Márquez.

She came to the United States in the late forties and built a house in Santa Barbara, but despite episodes of severe ill health she soon was off again, first to Mexico, then to Italy, then back to the United States in 1953. In 1954, the year *Winepress* was published, she made a festive final visit to Chile, with a brief stay in her Valley. She was living on Long Island with her friend Doris Dana when she was diagnosed with cancer. She died in February 1957.

The book opens with *Crazy Women*, a series of dramatic portraits, most if not all of them in fact self-portraits in different lights, costumes, disguises. They are not so much about madness as about grief, guilt, pain, and poetry. Esther de Cáceres said that Mistral lets us study "the conscience of anguish." The music of earlier years is replaced by a dense, heavy, sculptural line. In my mind's eye the imagery of these poems often has the hallucinatory, lurid strangeness of Goya. Trying to translate them I thought many times of Shakespeare's image, "following darkness like a dream."

The book, written over sixteen years, is not chronologically structured. After the massive first section it is richly various. Mistral had won through to the broad strength of age. There is obscurity and suffering, there is also ease, humor, and great generosity in these poems. She re-uses headings from earlier books: *Nature*, *Trickeries*. Poppies blaze in the California sunlight, ocotillo in Arizona, a great stone in Brazil. Puppies are born; the sea dies, withdrawing "like a shawl gathered together." Is it herself she's teasing in "Lady Poison"? There are poems about the war, about refugees, the haunting "Footprint." The section of *Mourning* for her son's death moves from the somber exaltation of "Anniversary," where—once only—she can call Miguel by his name, to the anguish of "A Word," in which she cannot speak at all, lest women going down to the river find her word: "it'll twist into

their hair / and wither poor dry thickets up in fire."
There are vivid poems about things—doors, farm tools.
And always trees. Blissful palm trees. She called her son a
pine tree. And a mystical tree grows at the end of her book:

and I'm dead and don't know it,
singing under my tree.