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GABRIELA MISTRAL, "WOMAN DIVINE"

Walter Bara

TO STUDENTS of contemporary Spanish-American literature, the recent award of the Nobel Prize to Gabriela Mistral came as no great surprise. It is well known among them that this honor had been suggested as far back as 1923, when a South American critic, after comparing her to Selma Lagerlöf, prophesied that the prize would eventually be given her. More recently, in 1940, an active campaign was conducted throughout the Western Hemisphere by Chileans and other Spanish-speaking peoples to bring their "divine daughter" before the attention of the Stockholm Academy, with the contention that they would rather see her with a crown in life than a statue after death.

To the majority of United States readers, on the other hand, the name of La Mistral, if not entirely unknown, has little significance. The extent to which her writings have been made available in English is very limited; for this reason it has been virtually impossible for those unfamiliar with the Spanish language to cultivate her acquaintance. For this reason, these notes are considered to be of possible introductory interest. No attempt other than empirical has been intended in the appraisal of her poetry, which, of course, merits profound, detailed study.

She was born in the barren Elqui Valley of northern Chile in the small town of Vicuña on April 6, 1889, of the union of Petronila Alcayaga and Jerónimo Godoy Villaneuva, and was christened Lucila. Her father, a student of the humanities and her first teacher, was a "modest artist with literary ambitions; and in his compositions, which he never published, is revealed a sad, sick spirit."

Early in childhood, Lucila revealed those qualities of character which she precociously summarized while still in her teens: "I am

modest to the point of humility, and proud to the point of arrogance." This is an attitude which she has retained with devout sincerity to this very day. While still a child, she showed signs of genius, writing her first verses at the age of ten, and having her poetry published when she was eighteen.

In 1910, Gabriela Mistral began her teaching career. Her first position was in a Normal School in Santiago. She distinguished herself in this beloved profession of *maestra normal*, and her greatness as an educator is no less significant than her fame as a poetess. Shortly after this initial teaching experience in Santiago, she spent two years in the frigid, forbidding region of Punta Arenas as instructor in geography and Spanish. (It was during this period that "Desolación" was written.) Subsequently, she was transferred to Temurco, famous in history as the final domicile of the quasi-extirpated Araucanians.

By the end of a dozen years, her fame as a teacher extended beyond the continent of South America so that in 1922, she was asked by José Vasconcelos, then Mexican Minister of Education, to come and reorganize the educational system of Mexico. Gabriela accepted with pleasure, delighted at the prospect of meeting Vasconcelos, whom she admired as a writer, as well as other Mexican men of letters whom she knew vicariously through correspondence. The newspaper *El Mercurio* took advantage of her departure for the North by commissioning her as a foreign correspondent.

Gabriela Mistral lived a full life in Mexico. During her sojourn there she was active in educational reforms; wrote poetry; composed songs for children; sent contributions to numerous journals and papers in Spanish America and Europe. In 1924, her anthology *Lecturas para Mujeres*, designed for "the teaching of the language," was published in an edition impressively totaling 20,000 copies, exclusive of the Madrid printing. It was a volume of some 450 pages, consisting of prose and poetry selections of Gabriela Mistral and other American, European, and Asiatic writers.

She was literally adored by the youth of Mexico and one of the most moving experiences in her life was the sight of some 5,000 Mexican children singing her *rondas*, in parade before her as she looked on from a hilltop. Schools were named after her in Mexico as well as in El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, and Ecuador.

In 1926, she was appointed secretary to the League of Nations' Institute of Intellectual Co-operation. Two years later she represented

Chile and Ecuador at the Congress of the International University Federation in Madrid. High honors have been accorded her from leading universities in the Latin-American republics, many of which have adopted her for their "favorite daughter." She also possesses the distinction of being Chile's first woman consul, having filled posts in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Brazil; currently, she is representing her country in an official capacity in the United States.

The euphonious name of Gabriela Mistral came to the public's attention for the first time in 1914. The originator of this pseudonym was at that time awarded a prize for the now famous "Sonetos de la Muerte" in a literary contest sponsored by the Chilean Society of Artists and Writers in Santiago. Before that night of December 22, she had been merely Señorita Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga, an unassuming, retiring school teacher; since that date, Gabriela Mistral has attained universal renown as a "woman divine," author of some of the most beautiful lyric poetry ever written in the Spanish tongue.

The inspiration for these prize-winning sonnets was the suicide five years previously of a man whom Gabriela had loved with youthful passion. Grief for him pervades much of her later poetry as well, notably "A la Virgen de la Colina," "Interrogaciones," and the popular "El Ruego," in which she writes:

Thou knowest, Lord, with what flaming boldness,
my word invokes Thy help for strangers.
I come now to plead for one who was mine,
my cup of freshness, honeycomb of my mouth. . . .

Thou answerest harshly that he is unworthy of entreaty
who did not anoint with prayer his fevered lips,
who went away that evening without waiting for Thy sign,
his temples shattered like fragile goblets.

Although she had been the most widely read poet in Chile as a result of the inclusion of her poems in Chilean school texts, and although her poetry had been translated into French, English, Swedish, Italian, and German, it was in the United States that her first volume of collected verse was published. This collection, containing much previously unpublished material and pieces that had before then appeared in widely scattered newspapers and magazines, was entitled *Desolación*. It was made available in 1922, carrying the imprint of the Instituto de las Españas of New York City.

The editors of this anthology had successfully accomplished an admittedly difficult task, since the author, oblivious to mundane fame, had never attempted to keep a systematic file of her publications; she had even on several former occasions discouraged commercial firms from publishing her collected works. To date, three subsequent editions of *Desolación* have been brought out; these include the supposedly fraudulent one of Argentina and the two of the distinguished Chilean house of Nascimento. Of the latter two, the one published in 1926 is the definitive volume, having been edited and officially approved by the author herself. The four divisions of this book provide an insight into the poetess' preoccupations—"Vida," "La Escuela," "Dolor" (containing the "Sonetos de la Muerte"), and "Naturaleza" (which includes the title poem).

In 1924, *Ternura: Canciones de Niños*, was published in Madrid. Excerpts from this book and *Desolación* make up *Nubes Blancas*, a clandestine volume printed in Barcelona. Selections from these two are also included in a Barcelonian anthology of lyric verse whose prologue by Manuel de Montoliu contains a short criticism of Gabriela Mistral, one of the finest that have yet been written.

The only other book bearing the name of Gabriela Mistral on its title-page is *Tala*. A collection of accomplished maturity, it was published in Buenos Aires less than ten years ago. The poems in this volume are grouped into sections titled appropriately: "Muerte de mi Madre," "Alucinación," "Historias de Loca," "Materias," "América," "Saudade," "La Ola Muerta," "Criaturas," "Canciones de Cuna," "La Cuenta-Mundo," "Albricias," and "Recados." Several of these are accompanied by explanatory notations.

In 1945, Escasa-Calpe Argentina issued a volume entitled *Ternura*, which they assert is the "first popular edition especially authorized by the author" for the pocket-size series *Colección Austral*. It is a representative selection of *rondas*, *canciones de cuna*, *jugarretas*, *cuentos*, and other verse forms contained in the aforementioned anthologies.

Although her name had been hallowed by *Desolación*, this second collection, perhaps, gives a better indication of the true genius of La Mistral. For a certainty, the aesthetic agility revealed for the first time at the *Juego Florales* in 1914 had not been affected by the passage of time. *Tala* is a complement to *Desolación*, and the two form a single, prolonged chant: the latter of dissolute love and unrestrained sorrow, frustration of the maternal longing, and a profound awareness of God's

creatures, especially children, all children in the world; and *Tala* of more of the same, a "renovación del camino aspero y enjuto," the medulla of the "divine woman's" bleeding heart.

Gabriela Mistral is intensely romantic. Through the poems in these companion volumes, the reader is made cognizant of her deep affinity to nature, whose decisive and triumphant force she has portrayed so effectively. She admits that she has often fallen asleep while counting the stars, and that she has found "tongues in trees and books in running brooks." The sentiment of religion is also a powerful element in her writings, a sentiment which is not absolutely mystic if by mysticism we mean strictly that special state of the soul resulting from an individual's direct communion with his Creator.

"I believe in my heart," Gabriela wrote in "Credo," and the heart is undoubtedly the quintessence of her entire body of poetry; she is the creator of some of the most beautiful love poems ever written. Akin to this love complex is her feeling for death which, despite its admitted cruelty and anguish, she indulges frequently. Her profound interest in social problems, the cause of the children and mothers of the poorer classes to which she has devoted so much of her life, as well as her personal maternal yearnings which were sublimated by her absorption with academic pursuits, also provide much material for her verses.

Equally significant in her poetry is the influence of the Scriptures. "My masters in the art of living," she once wrote, are "the Bible, Dante, Tagore and the Russians." A devout Catholic, she has expressed her belief that "with its profound social sense [Christianity] can save the nations." And in her philosophic contemplation of the Absolute, she shows her constant awareness of the two Pascalian infinitudes, the one of the infinitely Great, and the other of the infinitely Small, and understands from the accumulated spiritual experience of her life that both are united in God and God alone. Since she is rebelliously human, however, there have been moments of bitterness in her life when she has reproached this God for her unhappiness and emotional anguish.

Although her title to immortality is in her poetry, Gabriela Mistral has also written in prose. These prose pieces of hers are all extremely brief and abound in the lyric wealth and melancholy tone that characterize her poems, as the following selection from the "Motivos del Barro" well illustrates:

Many years hence, when I am a little heap of silent dust, play with me.
With the earth of my heart and my bones!

If a mason gathers me up, he will make me into a brick, and I shall remain fast forever in a wall; and I hate quiet niches. If they make me a brick in a prison, I shall grow red with shame when I hear a man sob, and if I am a brick in a school, I shall still suffer, because I cannot sing with you in the early mornings. I would rather be the dust with which you play on the country roads. Clasp me, for I have been yours; unmake me for I made you; trample upon me, because I did not give you the whole of my beauty and the whole of my truth! Or only sing and run above me, so that I may kiss your beloved feet.

When you hold me in your hands, recite some beautiful verse, and I shall rustle with delight between your fingers. I shall rise up to look at you, seeking among you the eyes, the hair of those whom I taught.

And when you make any image out of me, break it every moment for every moment the children broke me, with tenderness and grief.

An unusual bit of prose, also, is her "Decálogo del Artista," in which are set forth the principles that have guided her art for a period of over thirty years:

1. Thou shalt love beauty which is the shadow of God on the Universe.
2. There is no atheistic art. Although thou may not love the Creator, thou will assert it creating in His image.
3. Thou shalt not mete beauty as fodder for the senses, but as the natural food of the soul.
4. It will not be a pretext for luxury or vanity, but a divine office.
5. Thou shalt not seek it in the market places nor carry thy work to them, because Beauty is a virgin and the one which is in the market place is not She.
6. It shall rise from thy heart to thy song and shall probably purify thee first.
7. Thy beauty shall always be named mercy and shall console the hearts of men.
8. Thou shalt produce thy work as a son is produced; stopping the blood of thy heart.
9. Beauty shall not be for thee a soporific opium, but rather a noble wine which shall incite thee to action for if thou ceaseest to be man or woman, thou ceaseest to be an artist.
10. Thou shalt dispose of all creation modestly, because it was inferior to thy dream, and inferior to that marvelous dream of God which is Nature.

In conclusion, a few words on the literary and biographical studies of Gabriela Mistral may be of some interest. The first book completely devoted to her life and works was written by a Mexican, Virgilio Figueroa. Entitled *La Divina Gabriela*, it is of doubtful critical value,

and its highly exaggerated statements caused the subject to voice a public protest against what she termed her biographer's *elogio desmedido*. The only other volume completely concerned with her is *Estudios sobre Gabriela Mistral*, by the well-known Chilean critic, Raul Silva Castro. Señor Silva Castro's appraisal is negative, wholly refusing to recognize the writer's marvelous artistic sincerity or her profound moral and social sense; highly censorious and destructive, it appears to be guided more by temperament than reason. The most intelligent criticism of the Nobel Prize winner to date is an essay published in a teachers' journal.¹ And several articles by the prominent Chilean critic who signs himself "Alone," show a keener insight into the art of Gabriela than any other interpretation yet published. An excellent study, together with several well-translated poems, is also contained in G. Dundas Craig's *Modernist Trends in Spanish American Poetry*.

In the American textbook field, Professors Federico de Onis and Henry A. Holmes have contributed significantly towards immortalization of the "divine one." *Spanish America in Song and Story*, the work by Professor Holmes, in which several pages are devoted to Gabriela Mistral, incidentally has a prologue written by the poetess. This volume, by the way, is undoubtedly the best school anthology of Spanish-American letters that has yet been published; it is a great pioneering work and has remained, since its publication in 1932, the only available comprehensive study of the representative writers of Hispanic America from the time of the Conquest through the 1920's.

As for translations in English, La Mistral's poems have been published off and on for many years in little-known journals with very limited circulation, as well as in several insignificant anthologies. The collection of Alice Stone Blackwell has the greatest number of selections, but these translations, made by amateurs, are often quite inferior, being devoid of the spirit, inspiration, and nuances of feeling that only a true poet can sense and convey into written language. Fortunately, plans are now under way to introduce Gabriela Mistral properly to the general English-reading public, and it is hoped that the honors have been entrusted to competent hands. "Ojalá!" the Spanish Americans are saying.

¹ *Revista Hispanica-Moderna*, January, 1937.