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Book Review: Gabriela Mistral: The Audacious Traveler

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Gabriela Mistral: The Audacious Traveler. Marjorie Agosín, ed. 2003. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press. 304 pp. (+ Index). \$26.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Dolores Lehr, PhD¹

While not as well known in the United States, Gabriela Mistral is well known throughout Latin America—especially in her native Chile where there is rarely a town or city without a street, school, or government building named after her. Born in 1889 as Lucila Godoy Alcayaga to a poor family in the northern Equi Valley, she started her career there as a teacher at age 15 in a rural elementary school and continued teaching throughout other parts of Chile until she was in her thirties. While a teacher, she also began her career as a poet, writing under the name of “Gabriela Mistral” in honor of the two poets she idolized— Gabriele D’Annunzio and Frederic Mistral. As Gabriela Mistral, she won the prestigious national poetry prize in 1914, which helped to establish her reputation as an important Chilean writer. However, it was not until 1922 that she published *Desolación*, her first volume of poetry. In that same year she left Chile to travel to Mexico at the invitation of the Mexican government to help with educational reform.

After living and working in Mexico for two years, Mistral traveled abroad and then returned briefly to Chile to join its diplomatic service where she served as a consul in several countries including Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Brazil. While known for her work as a diplomat and educational reformer, Mistral was most recognized as a poet. Consequently, in 1945 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and became the first Latin American author and the only Latin American woman ever to receive it. After accepting this award, Mistral continued to write poetry and continued to represent her country until 1957 when, as the Chilean representative to the UN, she died from cancer in New York.

In the years that immediately followed her death, Mistral’s work became a popular subject for translation and criticism, especially in Latin American countries, but only to a limited extent in the United States. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in her, judging from the number of English translations of her poetry and letters as well as the number of books and critical essays that have appeared in English in the last few years about her.

Marjorie Agosín’s *Gabriela Mistral: The Audacious Traveler* is one of these recent books. A collection of sixteen essays with an introduction by Agosín, a Chilean poet herself and a major contributor to Mistral scholarship, this anthology gives a varied and well-rounded portrait of a very complex individual. As described by Agosín and these sixteen writers, we see Mistral as the maternal traditionalist who wrote about the plight of poor children and also as the rebel who lauded Augusto Sandino and condemned the United States for intervening in Nicaragua. We see her as a devout Catholic poet, but one whose poetry also shows the strong influence of Jewish tradition and history. These essays show Mistral as a teacher in Chile, an educator in Mexico, and a diplomat in Brazil.

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In this anthology, two essays focus almost solely on her poetry. One by Eugenia Muñoz looks at Mistral's image of "the beloved" in three sonnets entitled "Soneto de la muerte." Another essay by Ivonne Gordon Vailakis analyzes Mistral's relationship with contemporary literary movements and views her as attempting "to alter conventional perceptions of *women*" and "challenge the dominant social constructs," as demonstrated in "The Mother-Child" and "Little Red Riding Hood" from *Ternura*, Mistral's second collection of poems (117).

The other essays in Agosín's collection focus on her writings as intertwined with other aspects of her life. Patricia Varas' essay on Mistral's prose, for example, examines three articles that Mistral wrote for *El Mercurio* to explain her opposition to the U.S.'s interference in Nicaraguan politics. While Emma Sepúlveda, in her essay on Mistral's political commentaries, repeats some of Varas' information, she provides additional details and a more personal account. In it, Sepúlveda recalls growing up in Chile and, as a young girl, having to memorize Mistral's poems in elementary school and then later, as a university student, studying Mistral and discovering a different image of the writer. There Sepúlveda read for the first time essays, newspaper articles, and speeches that Mistral wrote, and realized that "Mistral was more than the illustrious daughter of Equi who wrote poetry about children" (251).

In addition to examining Mistral's political views, essays in Agosín's collection examine her travels as they appear in her poetry. For example, Santiago Daydi-Tolson's "Gabriela Mistral's Chilean Journey" looks at Mistral's *Poema de Chile*, the volume of her poetry that was published after her death, as portraying her imaginary journey from the North to the South of her native country. In another essay on geography, Marie-Lise Gazarian-Gautier also includes a discussion of Mistral's long poem on Chile but looks, as well, at other places where Mistral lived and which she later described in her writings.

Other essays focus on different facets of Mistral's reputation and work. Elizabeth Horan's "Posthumous Portraits of Gabriela Mistral" shows how portraits of Mistral on postage stamps and coins as well as in the public murals that appeared after her death reflected both the dominant and differing political climates in Chile. Also related to Mistral's reputation is Randall Couch's discussion of the difficulties in translating her poems, which he attributes to her lack of popularity in English-speaking countries in contrast to her fame in the Spanish-speaking world where she is considered a canonical writer. As Couch explains, Mistral's style is unique, and "her syntax can be direct or so strained as to be almost impossible to parse," which makes her poetry "as distinctive to the ear in Spanish as Dickinson or Hopkins in English, and like them she was long seen as a magnificent oddity" (181).

An essay by Patricia Rubio on Mistral's personal correspondence shows us a woman who enjoyed gossiping and was sensitive to slights, especially from the upper-class and the Chilean intelligentsia. The letters reveal a woman who criticized educational and social programs that emphasized theory over practice and show Mistral to be both independent and yet quite vulnerable, often worried about her health and financial security.

Overall, these sixteen essays provide a wonderful introduction to a very complex and, at times, contradictory woman whom Marjorie Agosín in her "Introduction" terms "one of the most monumental figures of the Americas" and describes as "a visionary artist who transcended time and place. . . . a perpetual and audacious traveler" (xxiii).

Agosín writes that in this volume, she tried to “bring us closer to both the complexity of her [Mistral’s] work and the passions of her life.” Indeed, after reading these varied and informative essays, one would agree that Agosín has succeeded. Her anthology gives the reader a picture of Gabriela Mistral as a very complex person whose passionate nature permeated her social and political concerns as well as her poetry.