

GABRIELA MISTRAL'S «SONNETS TO RUTH»: THE CONSOLATION OF PASSION

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Gabriela Mistral's poetry has long been celebrated as expressing themes of the alienation and self-sacrifice of modern woman, alone in a man's world. While her entire literary production has received well-deserved praise for its themes of human dignity and the desolation of contemporary life, Mistral's early works are achievements of a mature stylist. Her attention to the nuances of language and her discipline in matters of poetic form characterize the sonnets of her first published collection, *Desolation* (1922). This study will focus on her trio of sonnets commemorating the biblical matriarch Ruth. Here, Mistral demonstrates her poetic virtuosity in her treatment of the universal themes of alienation, suffering, and the search for human dignity. She manipulates the structure of the sonnet to highlight the polarities of pleasure/pain and alienation/communion in a strikingly modern way. An examination of her painstaking organization of these works will demonstrate that Mistral's early poetry reveals her interest in perfecting her technique, which is the mark of her late work.

In her early poetry, Gabriela Mistral chose the disciplined vehicle of the sonnet to express the fundamental polarities of her work, that is, her sense of desolation matched by the search for consolation. A love tragically lost is the theme of her much-prized trio, «Sonetos de la muerte» (Sonnets of Death), which launched her career as a writer. The opening composition of her first published work is a sonnet which describes Rodin's statue, «The Thinker». This poem's theme of the deterioration of the flesh, very common in sonnets of the seventeenth century, is reminiscent of Sor Juana's sonnet «Este que ves, engaño colorido . . .» («This Colored Deception that You See . . .») and Góngora's sonnet that inspired Sor Juana.

RODIN'S «THE THINKER»(1)

*With his chin fallen on his rough hand,
The Thinker remembers that he is flesh from the grave,
fatal flesh, naked before destiny,
flesh which hates death, and he trembled with beauty.*

*And he trembled with love, all his ardent Spring,
and now, in Autumn, he is submerged in truth and sadness.
The «Die we must» passes over his brow,
in all his keen-edged bronze, when night begins.*

*And in anguish, his muscles split in suffering.
The furrows of his flesh fill with terrors.
The flesh splits like the leaf of Autumn, on this strong man*

*whom it summons in bronze . . . And there is no tree twisted
by the sun on the plain, nor lion with wounded flank
as terrified as this man who meditates on death.*

(PC, p. 3)

Mistral contrasts the static, external view of the Thinker's massive physique in the first quatrain with the anguished, spiritual reaction of the Thinker as he contemplates his mortality in the second. The tercets carry out the process of dynamic decomposition as cracks and wrinkles open wide his body and the Thinker's flesh slowly dissolves. Mistral carefully segments the sonnet into its principal parts in order to bring out the essential contrasts and thematic oppositions of her work.

The quatrains represent the personal, moral, and spiritual problem of the Thinker, while the tercets feature the physical aspects of a universal degeneration of life. Other contrasts and oppositions between the quatrains and tercets pertain to the Thinker's state of mind as revealed in his facial expressions in the quatrains in contrast to the physical ravages carried out by his mortality in the tercets. Here, Mistral carries out a logically ordered experiment in which Cause and Effect are sharply delineated in the opening and closing stanzas of the sonnet.

The same thoroughgoing care and attention to form are present in other sonnets of *Desolación*. But, unlike the sense of universal fatality of «The Thinker . . .», her later sonnets explore

the opposition of desolation and a corresponding search for consolation, a duality which is evident from an examination of the titles of these works. «La mujer estéril» («The Sterile Woman») laments the misfortune of the sterile woman, while «La mujer fuerte» («The Strong Woman») is dedicated to the indomitable spirit of the working woman. «El niño solo» («The Lonely Child») is an anecdotal poem that reveals the charity of a childless woman who tries to suckle a crying infant. Here, the technical mastery of Gabriela Mistral outlines the subject of alienation and communion.

THE LONELY CHILD

*As I had heard a sob, I paused on the hill
and I approached the door of the house on the road.
A child with sweet eyes looked at me from his bed
and an immense tenderness intoxicated me like wine!*

*His mother was late, bent over in the field;
The child, upon awakening, sought her rosy nipple
and broke out crying . . . I held him against my breast,
and a lullabye welled up within me, trembling . . .*

*Through the open window the moon looked down on us.
The child now was sleeping, and the song bathed,
like another radiance, my enriched breast . . .*

*And when the woman, tremulous, opened the door,
she must have seen such certain bliss on my face
that she left the infant in my arms asleep!*

(PC, p. 17)

Two charitable events form the basis of this sonnet as the narrator lulls the distraught infant to sleep in the second quatrain, and the child's mother watches on contentedly in the second tercet. The first quatrain introduces the theme of alienation of both the narrator and infant, and forecasts the communion of kindred spirits which takes place in the first tercet. In a sense, the opening stanza of the poem constitutes the statement of a problem for which the remaining stanzas offer various solutions. The dissonance of the baby's weeping corresponds to the distance

between mother and child, as well as the distance between the narrator and the infant. The physical distance is reduced as the narrator takes the baby in her arms in the second quatrain. Her act of charity transforms the dissonance into harmony as she sings a lullaby which envelops the infant in the wondrous, almost amniotic essence of love. The narrator's gift to the child enriches her as well. Not only has she received the warmth and well-being of the once lonely infant, but the narrator also senses the universal harmony of love which bathes all three of the main characters, the child, the narrator, and the mother who gazes calmly at the end.

As is evident from the early sonnets of Gabriela Mistral, a central aspect of her work written during these «passionate, tumultuous, sensuous years»(2) is the interplay of pleasure and pain woven together in *Desolation*. In several poems of this collection her tragic sense of life figures prominently alongside an exuberant worship of the almost divine state of motherhood and the exaltation of the teaching profession. In the divergence of her themes, especially the opposition between love and pain, Mistral demonstrates the complexities of her life. She identifies with the ineffable sufferings of Job at the same time that she foresees deliverance by Christ from life's travail. The poet laments the desolation and vulnerability of children and women and then seeks immediate respite and consolation from pain aided by her faith in the Judaeo-Christian verities. That such indomitable optimism exists in her works attests to the intensity of her passion for life.(3) But, alongside the thematic purposes which the pleasure/pain duality serves, Mistral exploits the contradiction for technical and structural reasons. She uses the feelings of love and pain as a device to organize the poetic materials of her work. As we have seen in her sonnets above, Mistral is aware of the interrelationship of the stanzas. The thematic oppositions juxtaposed in individual portions of her poems make her sonnets conceptual and visual artifacts Mistral goes to the heart of poetry as «performance» as John Ciardi has defined it.(4) An excellent illustration of her control and juxtaposition of the themes of pain and desolation contrasted with the consoling power of love appears in her three sonnets to Ruth published in *Desolation*.

The Book of Ruth is ideally suited to the poet's aesthetic goals because the four compact chapters of the Bible story continuously oscillate between desolation and a search for human

dignity and love. This constant discord and balance of concepts provides a melodic base for the three sonnets of Gabriela Mistral. Furthermore, the «performance» of the love/pain duality is juxtaposed in the contrapuntal manner of the other sonnets of the collection, as noted above. An examination of this narrative provides the reader with a point of departure for a discussion of Mistral's selection of themes and characters in her poetry. Her adaptation of the biblical material, moreover, shows her inherent sensitivity to patterns of narrative form which she appropriates in the sonnets. Finally, through the comparison of Mistral's narrative sources and her poetic adaptation, several conclusions regarding the modern treatment of an ancient theme will emerge.

Alienation and the hope of communion characterize the first chapter of the biblical account. Naomi and Elimelech escape from famine in Judah to Moab in search of food and prosperity. Elimelech dies and later Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women. Years later, when Naomi's sons die, the three widows face life as outcasts, dispossessed and uprooted. When Naomi decides to return home, only Ruth dares to face the uncertain future with her.

Hungry and in need of shelter, Naomi and Ruth return home in the second chapter. They realize that deliverance from their isolation depends upon the charity of Boaz, a relative of Elimelech. Naomi leads Ruth to Boaz's barley fields and here their desperately sought consolation arrives as Boaz encourages Ruth to glean the grain which his reapers have left behind in the field.

In the third chapter, the physical hunger they had suffered is now juxtaposed to a desire for social acceptance. The harvest season promises to satisfy both of these needs. Naomi suggests that Ruth lie down at night with Boaz on the threshing floor. «He will tell you what to do» are Naomi's instructions to her daughter-in-law on how to let nature take its course. But Boaz, an honorable man, decides to share his bed with the Moabite woman, and he does not make love to her that night. He must first live up to the letter of Hebraic law regarding levirate marriages, by which the closest male relative must marry his deceased kinsman's wife. Boaz's dutiful decision sets the stage for the final chapter of the biblical tale. The story ends with an unsuccessful search for a willing next of kin and the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

At the end of the Book of Ruth, Boaz closes the circle of solitude and consolation which revolve around the biblical nar-

rative. As he takes Ruth for his levirate bride, his charity guarantees that Naomi and Ruth will be accepted in Judah once again, and he puts an end to their wandering and quest for fruition. The series of misfortunes which began in Judah and extended to Moab now ends in Bethlehem with the family unit restored and renewed.

The chronicle of Ruth's coming into Judah found a receptive audience in Gabriela Mistral for a variety of reasons. In the story of the outcast Moabite woman, Mistral was able to channel her deep sense of identity with the Jewish people which appears throughout her work.(6) Furthermore, she saw in the story of Ruth an example of religious eclecticism and brotherhood which she herself practised in her daily life. From this simple act of Boaz, his virtue of charity, stem the generations of Hebrews who comprise the house of David, prophesied to be the lineage of Jesus.

But notwithstanding the *judaísmo mental* («mental Jewishness») Gabriela Mistral displayed in her life and works, the structure of the biblical narrative as well as its substance provide a key to the composition of the sonnets to Ruth. The ebb and flow of motifs of desolation and solidarity, alienation and communion, central to the Bible story, provide the principal organizational feature of Mistral's poetic trio. The main action of each chapter is charged with an undercurrent of suffering counterbalanced by the promise of relief, as shown in the scheme below:

THE BOOK OF RUTH

CHAPTER	1	2	3	4
EVENTS	DEPARTURE AND RETURN	HARVEST	PHYSICAL ENCOUNTER	COMMUNION
OPPOSING THEMES:				
SUFFERING	PHYSICAL HUNGER SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS DEATH	THIRST SOLITUDE	EXHAUSTION COLD	DESOLATION DEGENERATION OF FAMILY
PROMISE OF RELIEF	FOOD COMMUNITY LIFE	WATER FRIENDSHIP	SLEEP WARMTH	MARRIAGE RESTORATION OF FAMILY

In the poetic retelling of the Bible story, the duality of suffering and the promise of relief forms the basis of the poet's selection of materials, that is, her choice of characters, situations, and diction. As we might expect, given the highly controlled poetic form of the sonnet, the historical and legalistic aspects of the narrative are lost as Mistral strives for a dramatic performance of the conflict between love and pain.

In her sonnets to Ruth, Gabriela Mistral focuses upon the magnetic attraction between the biblical lovers, and depicts this relationship in a vivid series of natural images. Not present in any of these compositions is Naomi, who functioned as the stimulus of the biblical action. The story Mistral tells begins with Ruth as she gleanes grain in Boaz's plentiful fields. She meets Boaz, the consolation for her solitude, and in the last sonnet comes to his bed on the threshing floor. The poet compresses the time during which the romance flowers, using a single day and night in order to heighten the dramatic tension in this play of contrasts. In short, Mistral streamlines the story in order to focus upon the main characters and to magnify the impact of their love in natural imagery. She does this so that the conflict between love and pain, at the heart of the biblical narrative, is forever before the reader of her sonnets.(7)

Each of the sonnets exploits the juxtaposition of desolation and consolation in a unique way. Mistral balances human suffering, poetically portrayed as a basic human need such as thirst or fatigue, against a corresponding form of relief or deliverance, as in the biblical text. She carefully segments the human needs and their corresponding solutions into quartets and tercets, thus dividing the sonnets' octaves and sestets in two, as in the first sonnet below. In this and the other two poems, rich visual imagery articulates the themes of love and despair with the result that the sensual possibilities of this compelling love leap up from the printed page.

RUTH

I

*Ruth the Moabitess goes to glean in the fields,
although she doesn't have even a wretched bit of land.
She thinks that God is the owner of the prairies*

and that she gleans on a divine estate.

*The Chaldean sun slashes into her shoulders
and terribly bathes her stooped back:
her light cheek burns with fever,
and fatigue exhausts her side.*

*Boaz has sat down in the abundant pile of grain.
The wheat field is an infinite wave,
from the mountain to where he rests,*

*whose abundance has concealed the road . . .
And within the wave of gold Ruth the Moabite
comes, gleaned, to meet her destiny.*

(PC, p. 12)

The first sonnet sets forth the problem of Ruth's solitude and suffering beneath the blazing Chaldean sun. As she gleans in Boaz's field, her tender cheek burns with fever. The harsh light and heat wound her like a sharp knife. The tercets foreshadow the supreme relief in store for Ruth. Boaz's abundant lands promise release for the dispossessed Moabite woman. Unifying the work is the metaphor of water. In successive images, as a wave first and then golden, the mass of land seen in terms of water promises to quench Ruth's physical and emotional thirst. The plenitude of land and water will provide comfort from the midday heat as well as dissolve the parched terrain of Ruth's loneliness. In this way, Gabriela Mistral sets in motion the grand themes of the biblical narrative. Thirst, a metaphor of physical and social emptiness, is confronted by its opposite, water, the nourishment and sustenance for all of nature. Mistral's association of water and land further assures that fruition and plenty, in the image of grain, will form the staff of life and consolation in the future.

The second poem of the trilogy depicts the plenty of nature's bountiful harvest, Ruth's eventual reward for her loyalty and suffering, with the octave describing Boaz's first view of Ruth and the sestet capturing Ruth's reactions to their meeting. Here also the symmetry and balance which characterized the first sonnet prevail in the structure of the work.

II

*Boaz looked at Ruth and at his harvesters.
He said, «Let her gather undisturbed» . . .
And the gleaners smiled,
seeing the absorbed glance of the old man . . .*

*His beard was two paths of flowers,
his eyes sweetness, his countenance, repose;
his voice resounded over the hills
but it could lull an infant to sleep . . .*

*Ruth looked at him from his feet to his brow
and she lowered her satiated eyes,
as one who drinks in an immense current . . .*

*Upon returning to the village, the young men
that she met saw her trembling.
But in her dream Boaz was her husband.*

(PC, p. 13)

The fertility inherent in water imagery continues in the first quartet as Boaz is absorbed in his view of Ruth. Mistral then characterizes Boaz's personality in terms of a confluence of conflicting qualities. His beard resembles paths of flowers. His gaze is gentle and sweet, so much so that he is capable of lulling an infant to sleep. These elements of tenderness appear in immediate contrast to Boaz's brute strength. He can, at the same time, use his gentle voice to bellow over the hills past the horizon. Mistral underscores the patriarch's physical strength alongside his spiritual serenity, and thus makes Boaz a fitting complement to Ruth who must endure the physical and emotional hardship which grows out of her loyalty and love.

As Ruth casts her gaze upon Boaz, water imagery reasserts the basic sensuality of their relationship. Her eyes are satiated by the sight of Boaz, as though she had drunk from an immense current. Mistral demonstrates her tight control of her materials by reiterating the second theme of the sonnet, Boaz's physical strength, in the second tercet as well. Upon Ruth's return home, other members of her camp notice that she is trembling: Boaz's

presence remains with Ruth long after he is out of sight. Boaz maintains a spiritual hold over Ruth in the final line of the sonnet as Ruth dreams that he is her husband.

The themes of desolation and consolation reappear in the third sonnet in which Gabriela Mistral utilizes the same contrapuntal structure of the preceding poems. Here, the longing for fruition takes a new form as Boaz prays to the stars for offspring at the same time recalling that Jehovah promised Abraham more children than stars in the heavens.

III

*And that night the patriarch in his field
contemplating with desire the throbbing stars,
recalled what Jehovah had promised Abraham:
more offspring than the stars he gave to the heavens.*

*And he sighed for his barren bed,
he prayed crying, and made room on his pillow
for the woman who, as the dew falls,
would come to him in the silent night.*

*Ruth saw in the stars the weeping eyes
of Boaz calling her, and shaken,
she left her bed, and hastened through the field . . .*

*The just man slept, all was peaceful and beautiful,
Ruth, silent as a stalk of harvested grain,
placed her head on Boaz's chest.*

(PC, pp. 13-14)

The sky and stars throb in sympathy with Boaz, and they visually communicate his longing to Ruth. As in the earlier compositions, Boaz's strength of character controls the physical atmosphere of the work and, in the manner of sympathetic magic, draws Ruth to his side in the last tercet.

Unifying this sonnet and establishing links with the others, interlocking metaphors of water and grain provide the conclusion to the trio. In the first quatrain, Boaz implores the heavens from his fields. In the second, he makes room for his beloved Ruth on his pillow, thus anticipating respite from his yearning. In the

final stanza of the poem Ruth arrives, silent as a stalk of harvested grain, to partake of the peace and beauty of Boaz's bed. The metaphor of grain functions here as a form of communion as well as domesticity. Its presence announces the lovers' physical and spiritual union, the just reward for the solitary protagonists of the sonnets. In a wider sense, Mistral alludes to a greater reward that recognizes the personal sacrifice of Ruth's selfless devotion to Naomi, and Boaz's charity to the widows. Finally, the leitmotif of water serves to unify the sonnets. In the finale of this trio, Ruth comes to Boaz as inexorably as the dew drops to the earth at night. In this metaphor, the poet refines and condenses the water imagery of the previous compositions, the infinite waves of golden grain, the satiated stares between the lovers, into a single image of a pristine liquid, the drop of dew. Here is captured the innocence of the Moabite woman, the wholeness of her natural union with Boaz, and the beneficence of their relationship to follow.

Gabriela Mistral's sonnets to Ruth retell the Old Testament story of loyalty and self-sacrifice for the virtues of the good life in a strikingly new way. While the traditional theme of life's renewal through the regeneration of the family is present, the austerity of the original treatment is gone. Now the poet offers the reader an aesthetic celebration of life. By means of water imagery and the associations which love in the fields evoke, these sonnets express openly erotic solutions to universal emotional needs. The poet focuses tightly on the binary oppositions which charge the biblical atmosphere: man/woman; thirst/water; tenderness/strength; solitude/communion. In so doing, Mistral discovers the essence of Boaz's and Ruth's union, thus avoiding the distraction of alluding to levirate marriage, a contract by which a woman, in this case Ruth, may be bought and sold just as a plow or a field of grain.

Instead, Gabriela Mistral examines the physical relationship between the two principal characters. She masterfully balances these opposite forces throughout the course of the poetic trio, and highlights them as they come into contact with each other and with their natural environment. Mistral's use of juxtaposition of contrasts leads to several kinds of readings, at once traditional and innovative. The three sonnets to Ruth outline, in chronological fashion the climax of the biblical narrative. However, the interest in form which Mistral displays in her vision portrays this event as a

process in which the problem of desolation is gradually resolved by the communion of lovers. Mistral carefully manipulates the stanzas of her sonnets to outline this process as in the scheme below:

SONNET:	I	II	III
	PROBLEM:	FORESHADOWING OF SOLUTION:	
FIRST QUATRAIN	HUNGER DESOLATION	GLEANING ACCEPTANCE	FERTILITY COMMUNION
SECOND QUATRAIN	THREAT OF DEATH	BOAZ AS PROTECTOR	GESTURE OF RESCUE: INVI- TATION TO BOAZ'S BED
	SOLUTION OF PROBLEM:		
FIRST TERCET	ABUNDANCE OF BOAZ'S GRAIN	BOAZ SATIATES RUTH'S GAZE	BOAZ'S TEARS ATTRACT RUTH
SECOND TERCET	RUTH WADES INTO GRAIN	RUTH TREMBLES FROM PHYSICAL ENCOUNTER	HARVEST, COM- MUNION, CON- SOLATION ARE COMPLETED: RUTH JOINS BOAZ.

Thus, in addition to the vertical reading of the poems, the reader has full access to the process of consolation by means of a horizontal reading of parallel stanzas of all three sonnets. Mistral's control of the biblical themes of love and pain is expressed in the opposition of poetic motifs in successive poems. By the end of the third sonnet, reiterating appearances of water and grain bear witness to the sensual resolution of Ruth's problem of desolation. By transforming the lovers' powerful emotions and instincts into natural metaphors, Gabriela Mistral reaffirms her own (and Judaeo-Christian) beliefs which support friendship, charity, and marriage as antidotes to desolation. In the story of Ruth and Boaz, Mistral traces these paths to personal fulfillment firmly in her three sonnets. These paths converge on the course to universal consolation in both ancient and modern times.

NOTES

1. The following and subsequent references to Mistral's work pertain to this edition of her poetry: *Poesías completas*, ed., Margaret Bates (Madrid: Aguilar, 1968). Hereafter, page references appear after the abbreviation PC following the texts of my translations.

2. Fernando Alegría. «In the True Language of a Woman,» *Saturday Review*, July 17, 1971, p. 26. (Review of Doris Dana, ed., *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971].)

3. Several critics have acknowledged the theme of duality in Mistral's work, especially in the early stages of her poetry. Fernando Alegría, *Genio y figura de Gabriela Mistral* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1966), reflects upon the broad range of her often contradictory emotions which appear in *Desolación*. «Apasionada y violenta, tristemente tierna, rebelde en su devoción cristiana, pudo considerarse una mujer extraña . . . Enaltecida, golpeada en medio de emociones contradictorias, abre su ser ante el mundo y vuelca a manos llenas su tesoro. Descubre el amor en un lecho de sangre y se afirma, tambaleante, en la Cruz del Calvario. He aquí los dos ejes de su poesía: el amor carnal derrotado y el amor a Cristo que la redime» (pp. 96-7) («Passionate and violent, sadly tender, rebellious in her Christian dedication, she grew to be considered a strange woman . . . Praised, beaten in the midst of contradictory emotions, she opens up her being before the world, her hands overflowing with personal treasures. She discovers love in a bed of blood and she steadies herself, reeling, on the Cross of Calvary. These are the two axes of her poetry: all-consuming carnal love and the love of Christ which redeems her»). Margot Arce de Vázquez, *Gabriela Mistral: The Poet and Her Work*, trans., Helene Masslo Anderson (New York: New York University Press, 1964), presents a similar view of the poet's fusion of opposite

emotions during the composition of *Desolación*. «Passion, strength, the strange mixture of tenderness and harshness, of delicacy and coarseness, give this voice a unique accent. Her works exercise an irresistible aftertaste of blood» (pp. 24-5); «But let not the contradiction deceive us: one must seek the true root of this lyricism in the polarity pleasure-pain, maternity-sterility, hope-desolation, life-death that lends its tautness and heartbreak to the style, that contracts and swells the phrase, that anoints the words now with blood, now with honey» (p. 28).

4. The notion of «performance» or the reading of a work of poetry is inseparable from the «meaning» of the work, according to John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?*, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 4. «For 'What does the poem mean?' is too often a self-destroying approach for poetry. A more useful way of asking the question is 'How does a poem mean?' Why does it build itself into a form out of images, ideas, rhythms? How do these elements become the meaning? As Yeats wrote: 'O body swayed to music, o brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?' What the poem is, inseparable from its own performance of itself. The dance is in the dancer and the dancer is in the dance.»

5. So great was Mistral's interest in this traditional verse form that approximately one fourth of the poems in *Desolación* are sonnets. These, as well as the various other strophic forms in the volume, clearly show that Gabriela Mistral, in the discipline with which she handled traditional metres, and her freedom with other forms, was already a capable and mature poet at an early age. Still, despite the high level of expertise she achieved in her early poetry, Mistral never again cultivated the sonnet with as much vigor as in *Desolación*. Of the more than twenty sonnets included in her *Poesías completas*, all but two come from her first published collection.

6. The Old Testament sources of Gabriela Mistral's work are the subject of various studies. Alegría (see note 3, above) states, «Se cree ver, entonces, la raíz del Viejo Testamento en estos cantos hechos de leche y miel. Los crepúsculos mantienen en el aire el viejo polvo ocre de Judea. La piedra, el cuero y la noche estrellada acogen ahora a los amantes y en la caricia del espasmo hay tanta sensualidad como misticismo. Gabriela Mistral siente despertar en ella un intenso amor a la raza judía, amor que, a veces, es preocupación, y a veces, risueño capricho» (pp. 95-6) («One can see, then, the root of the Old Testament in these songs of milk and honey. The twilight scenes raise up the ancient ochre dust of Judea. The stone, goat-skin and starry night offer shelter now to the lovers and in the embrace of love there is as much sensuality as mysticism. Gabriela Mistral feels an intense love of the Jewish race awaken within her, a love which, at times is a preoccupation, and at others, a pleasant caprice»). See also Margaret Bates' introduction to *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral: A Bilingual Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. xxv. «The Bible had a profound influence on Gabriela; its strong flavor permeates her poetry. We would expect it to be mentioned first in the list of favorite books of the poet who feels she was born in Israel -- the Israel of the Psalms, of the rivers of burning lava that sings in her soul, or the gentle Israel hidden in the heart of the Moabitess Ruth.» But despite Mistral's numerous poems with Jewish themes, such as «Al pueblo hebreo» («To the Hebrew People») and «Emigrada judía» [«The Immigrant Jew»], and her

claim to Hebraic ancestry in «Nocturno de la derrota» («Nocturne of Defeat») «Yo nací de una carne tajada/ en el seco riñón de Israel,/ Macabea que da Macabeos,/ miel de avispa que pasa a hidromiel» (PC, p. 387) («I was born of a flesh cut from the dry kidney of Israel,/ a Maccabee who brings forth Maccabees,/ wasp's honey that turns to mead»), Carlos Hamilton concludes that Mistral's ties to Judaism are slight. In his «Raíces bíblicas de la poesía de Gabriela Mistral», *Cuadernos americanos*, 20 (1961), 201-10, Hamilton notes that Old and New Testaments inspired Mistral's work, but in contradictory ways. «Cuando hablo de 'raíces bíblicas' de la poesía de Gabriela Mistral, pienso en varios aspectos de su obra poética: temas y alusiones a la Biblia; *estilo* bíblico e *inspiración* religiosa. La Biblia de Gabriela es la Biblia cristiana, toda: Antiguo Testamento para sus gritos de dolor, y Nuevo Testamento en sus tonos proféticos terribles, y también en trozos de emoción suave como el Libro de Ruth; Evangelios para cantar a los niños, los hijos de su alma, y para acercarse a la paz que le da Cristo . . . Para Gabriela . . . la Biblia no es sólo el más fuerte y el más hermoso de los libros: es el libro de Dios para la vida» (p. 202) («When I speak of 'biblical roots' of Gabriela Mistral's poetry, I am thinking about various aspects of her poetic production: *Themes* and allusions to the Bible; *biblical style* and religious *inspiration*. Gabriela's Bible is the Christian Bible, in its entirety: Old Testament for her cries of pain, and New Testament, The Gospels, for her songs of tenderness; Old Testament in her terrible, prophetic tones, and also in the bits of delicate emotion as in the Book of Ruth; the Gospels to sing to children, the children of her spirit, and to draw near to the peace that Christ gives her . . . For Gabriela . . . the Bible isn't only the strongest and most beautiful of books: it is God's book for life»).

7. The following are Mistral's sonnets commemorating Ruth in the original Spanish.

~RUTH~

I

*Ruth moabita a espigar va a las eras,
aunque no tiene ni un campo mezquino.
Piensa que es Dios dueño de las praderas
y que ella espiga en un predio divino.*

*El sol caldeo su espalda acuchilla,
baña terrible su dorso inclinado;
arde de fiebre su leve mejilla,
y la fatiga le rinde el costado.*

*Booz se ha sentado en la parva abundosa.
El trigal es una onda infinita.
desde la sierra hasta donde él reposa,*

*que la abundancia ha cegado el camino . . .
Y en la onda de oro la Ruth moabita
viene espigando, a encontrar su destino.*

2

*Booz miró a Ruth, y a los recolectores
dijo: «Dejad que recoja confiada . . .»
Y sonrieron los espigadores,
viendo del viejo la absorta mirada . . .*

*Eran sus barbas dos sendas de flores,
su ojo dulzura, reposo el semblante;
su voz pasaba de alcor en alcores,
pero podía dormir a un infante . . .*

*Ruth lo miró de la planta a la frente,
y fue sus ojos saciados bajando,
como el que bebe en inmensa corriente . . .*

*Al regresar a la aldea, los mozos
que ella encontró la miraron temblando.
Pero en su sueño Booz fue su esposo . . .*

3

*Y aquella noche el patriarca en la era
viendo los astros que laten de anhelo,
recordó aquello que a Abraham prometiera
Jehová: más hijos que estrellas dio al cielo.*

*Y suspiró por su lecho baldío,
rezó llorando, e hizo sitio en la almohada
para la que, como baja el rocío,
hacia él vendría en la noche callada.*

*Ruth vio en los astros los ojos con llanto
de Booz llamándola, y estremecida,
dejó su lecho, y se fue por el campo . . .*

*Dormía el justo, hecho paz y belleza.
Ruth, más callada que espiga vencida,
puso en el pecho de Booz su cabeza.*

(Desolación, 1922)