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## **A Great Amnesia: On Eastern Spirituality in the Work of Gabriela Mistral**

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Philosophical nostalgia can look toward the past, in the belief that some better or more authentic alternative exists, with ideals that have been lost or neglected but to which return might be possible. This is the lost innocence of the mystic poets and primitive painters, who longed for an unspecified Arcadia that drew its imagery from the “before” rather than the “yet to come”. Yet precisely what sacredness or mythical version is being remembered with such wistfulness? The answer is not evident; indeed, this kind of nostalgia often remains vague, its blurred focus forming part of its attraction as an alternative to the overly sharp reality of the present.

Like many complex sentiments, however, philosophical nostalgia can take multiple forms. It can, for instance, look toward a different cultural tradition in the present. This is the case of Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, for whom a lost version of authenticity was to be found in the “Orient”, the word Mistral used to refer to Far Eastern culture, particularly India. For her, South America was culturally linked to Europe, but its true genesis was in the culture of the Orient, the mother it had forgotten. In her essay “A Few Words on Sri Aurobindo”, published in the *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, №9 on 15 August 1950 as part of the 78th birthday celebrations for Sri Aurobindo, Mistral wrote that “Europe has become the victim of a great amnesia. To have forgotten one’s Mother is perhaps the greatest amnesia and the Orient is the mother of Europe in every sense, for it is to the Orient that European culture owes its birth and sustenance.” (Mistral, 141)

Mistral felt a particularly great spiritual admiration for the guru Sri Aurobindo. In her essay she writes that “the discovery of Sri Aurobindo came to me late and in a mutilated form. On the shop counter of a French book-stall I unexpectedly came across a copy of ‘The Mother’ and found myself in contact with one of those pieces which are so intense and beautiful that they captivate at once, even though they are mere fragments of something far greater. I sought for more by the unknown author and I was told of ‘The Synthesis of Yoga’. Unfortunately I did not find then his central work ‘The Life Divine’ and I have remained until today thirsting for it.” (Mistral, 140)

Mistral’s first contact with Aurobindo’s work was thus this short essay “The Mother”, in which the Mother is equated with a divine conscious force, and “a total and sincere surrender” is called for. The book concludes with these words: “The Mother’s power and not any human

endeavour and *tapasya* [ed. note: spiritual efforts to reach self-realization, lit. generation of heat and energy] can alone rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Life divine and the immortal's Ananda." (Aurobindo, 41) Mistral picks up this metaphor of the Mother in her essay and extends it to the defense of an idea of "Spiritual Unity" that includes Buddhism and other "more profound Oriental creeds", which she sees as having preceded Christianity—that is, which she believes served as mother to it (Mistral, 141). Mistral does not seem too concerned with Aurobindo's particular variety of spiritualism, which is, let it be noted, not Buddhism. The fact that it is an Oriental creed is enough.

There are several troubling assumptions in Mistral's essay. One is precisely this idea that religions of the Orient mothered those of the West. For Mistral, Buddhism was "surely the forerunner of Christianity and the prologue to the 'Great Event'"—which might be assumed to be the resurrection of Christ (Mistral, 141). This assertion cannot be borne out historically, and the idea that Eastern religions are primarily important due to their role in paving the way for Christianity rather than as beliefs in themselves points back to Mistral's own prioritizing of Christianity. Mistral makes a more interesting argument when she insists that a spiritual perspective is preferable to economic or political ways of viewing the world. This may result in romanticism, but is less dangerous than what she views as Chilean shortsightedness: "Even in Greek mythology Mercury-Commerce followed rather than preceded Apollo, the enchanter of man," she notes (Mistral, 141). Further down the page Mistral elaborates:

*The devotees of Asia have always striven to encompass in their faith the entire human race. Nothing is cut off or excluded by frightening chasms. There is no attempt to evaluate nations by economic standards. The same cannot be said of our own preachers whose sphere is usually bounded by their own coastlines or by the white-washed marker stones of frontiers whose origin is political and therefore false. . (Mistral, 141)*

Mistral's argument here is that origins must therefore be not political but spiritual to be genuine. They have to come from what the common people believe, not the power games up top.

It's clear from Mistral's essay that she is primarily attracted to mysticism, which she refers to as "the great zone of fire" (Mistral, 142). Yet she insists that even mysticism be clearly expressed, as she claims it is in Sri Aurobindo. (This reader is not convinced that Aurobindo's writing is as transparent as Mistral makes it out to be, but that is another discussion.) "We have before us a prose which approximates that of the great Eckhart, German classicist and fountain-head of European mysticism," she writes (Mistral, 142). Elsewhere she lauds the fact that Aurobindo is a theologian and scholar, and has been "enlightened" (Mistral, 142). Aurobindo's prose style is largely a result of his English education—he studied at King's College at the University of Cambridge—and in this sense his style is arguably more "European" than "Oriental". It is curious that Mistral praises this quality in particular, even going so far as to equate Aurobindo to a German mystic, rather than reading him on his own Indian terms.

Whether or not Mistral's premises are ones that the reader agrees with, here is a case of one intelligent mind coming into contact with another, considering what it has to say with curiosity and openness, and the result is inherently interesting. Mistral's interest in Aurobindo continued a mystical adventure already begun with other authors, and in the Indian guru's work she found a key. Eventually Mistral would go on to recommend Aurobindo for the Nobel Prize, as part of a greater movement to do so along with writers such as Aldous Huxley and Pearl S. Buck. Aurobindo remained special to Mistral's personal development. She is quoted as saying that: "In the midst of personal sorrow, Aurobindo brought me to religion. It may sound quaint that a non-Christian should have opened the way to my religious consecration, but Aurobindo did.... Every people must have an Aurobindo, a man far above the people and yet identified with the aspiration of the people (...) My debt to India is very great and is due in part to Aurobindo." (Roy, vi)

Despite having won the Nobel Prize in Literature herself, Mistral's philosophical explorations contain many directions for further study. Although some of her poems have been translated into English (by Ursula K. Le Guin, among others) there is no big biography in this language about her and her context, as there is for Neruda. Even within Chile, Mistral was studied from a very particular angle for a long time, as she was held up by the Pinochet government as a mother figure,

schoolteacher and ideal woman. Only in the past few years, with new archives opening and increased interest by both academics and the wider public, has a younger generation of Chileans begun to open up her work to more complex interpretations.

One of the most interesting and ignored aspects of Mistral's context, which remains open to further investigation, is her deep interest in Eastern thought, particularly that of India. From Sri Aurobindo to Rabindranath Tagore to less famous Indian mystics, she read and commented on the spiritual tradition of that part of the world, and applied what she learned to Chile. Mistral's poems consider motherhood from a variety of angles, at times unexpected; her readings of Aurobindo and other Eastern authors may have similarly read the world in terms of origin and progeny, and interpreted the idea of "mother" in equally surprising ways. The question of what kind of a mother Sri Aurobindo was defending, and how this mapped onto Mistral's idea of motherhood, is an open question. Along with the possible philosophical amnesia of South America toward the Orient, a philosophical amnesia has occurred with respect to the work of Mistral herself; in this case, remembering would consist of developing the latent and surprising connections in the work of a writer who by so many paths sought synthesis.

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