

The revival movement of “Poésies Provençales” and the formation of Provence Identity in the 19th century

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1. Introduction

In 19th century France, Félibrige was founded at the beginning of the Second Empire as a group to revive the linguistic culture of Provence. However, even prior to the formation of Le Félibrige, poets in Provence held meetings and formed a movement to revive Provence. In particular, the spelling of Provençal language and literature was becoming a central issue. In actuality, there were similar discussions between Mistral and Roumanille, who were responsible for the creation of Le Félibrige, and it is believed that the regionalism and regional consciousness that existed in each of them were at the heart of their disputes over spelling. In this paper, we consider the creation of Félibrige based on their regional consciousness, and examine the process of how Félibrige, having been created with such a consciousness, at the same time fomented a regional consciousness in later poets from Provence.

2. The Founding of Félibrige

Félibrige was born out of meetings between poets who gathered to restore the language of southern France. It began in 1854, at the start of the Second Empire, and it can be understood as a literary revival movement centered on Frédéric Mistral. However, the group's bylaws and member's rolls were actually created in 1862, when, for the first time, the group was organized into an academic organization, with a chairman who was known as a caprie and a membership of intellectuals knowledgeable of Provençal history and culture, as well as several priests. These members assembled from throughout the region of Provence, and from a small group of enthusiasts, it grew into a well-organized association. Mistral drafted the group's bylaws in 1862, and served as its chairman until 1883.

Mistral was certainly a central figure, though it is reasonable to think that Félibrige was formed around Roumanille at the time of its founding in 1854. As central figures during its foundation, Mistral and Roumanille engaged in disputes from the very beginning, as we shall note hereafter, and a certain kind of discord grew between them. If anything, Félibrige was founded upon overcoming the disputes, although this was not realized until Mistral drew closer to Roumanille.

At the same time, the purpose in founding the group was not only the revival of the language, poetry, and literary arts of Provence. There was also dissatisfaction and awareness regarding the circumstantial crisis of Provence that Mistral and Roumanille felt. Other Provençal intellectuals (such as Raybaud) also experienced this dissatisfaction and consciousness, and this was tied to the increasing regional consciousness of those in Provence. Later, such consciousness brought about the issue of spelling we shall discuss below. Félibrige was founded against that backdrop.

3. Spelling of the Provençal language

At the time of the founding of Le Félibrige, consistency was not necessarily present in the written language that was used everyday in Provence. Even so, consciousness of spelling as an issue grew more prominent in the early 19th century and is thought to be a reflection of France's situation—the policy of French language unification—at the time. Mistral and Roumanille had inherited the Provençal language, including the issue of spelling, and they viewed the inroads of the French language—Gallicism on the one hand and public education on the other—as harmful to the

culture and language of Provence. At the root of their motivation was a passionate love for the language and culture of the Provence region; that is to say, they had a regional consciousness that may be called “Provence identity.” The two discussed extensively about reviving the traditional poetry and culture of southern France based on this regional consciousness, and Roumanille, in particular, called this the “Provence Renaissance.”

The issue of spelling in the Provençal language caused various disputes, as shall be discussed hereafter. These disputes were also inherited by Mistral and Roumanille, as a difference in opinion around the notation of classical Provençal poetry. However, this was not merely an argument over spelling, but the result of differences in the identity of Provence that each respected. Put differently, the regional consciousness of Provence that each held created the dispute over spelling, and victory in the conflict condensed into the founding of Félibrige. Accordingly, the founding provides an insight into the culmination of their Provence identity with the language of Provence as a backdrop.

Besides that, the regional consciousness of this pair described above is a reflection of the social circumstances of Provence at the time. In 1841, the worker-poet Bellot had already attempted to bring together the poets of southern France in Marseille. In response to this literary movement, Mistral declared, “this is an accomplishment in a time of devotion to a single culture.” However, this attempt ended up dividing people of the Marseille and Avignon regions. Behind this split was the argument over spelling.

This inter-regional conflict was significantly related to the founding of Félibrige. On August 29, 1852, Roumanille, along with Aix-Marseilles poet Gau, assembled the first Congress d’Arles, held jointly with the Aix-Marseilles and Avignon factions in Arles. It is important to note that Roumanille was taking the initiative, and assembled five others—Aubanel, Giéra, Mathieu, Roumanille, and Mistral—who attempted to found Félibrige. This meeting was cordial, although there were arguments over spelling at the second Congress d’Aix held in Avignon on August 21, 1853. However, each of the arguments had incompatibilities with the others, and in the end the meeting ended in a split. Later, the feud between the Aix-Marseilles and Avignon became decisive, and any subsequent meeting was never organized.

4. The Start of Spelling in Félibrige: The Argument Between Mistral and Roumanille

Arguments over spelling were evident since 1841. On the one hand, there was the etymological spelling propounded by Simone Jude-Onora, and on the other an opposing phonetic spelling argued for by Raybaud. Since the 16th century, Provence had seen a growing number of poets who used phonetic spelling. However, at the start of the 19th century, there was an increasingly strong argument that phonetic spelling was not harmonious for Provence overall, since pronunciations varied by area. In particular, many started claiming that the etymological spelling was appropriate for the use of specialized terminology. In these circumstances, Raybaud complained that spelling which favored etymology was normative and esoteric.

This dispute also made a major contribution to the founding of Félibrige. Before being employed at a higher secondary school in Avignon in 1845, Roumanille taught at a small boarding school in Nyons, which was at the forefront of Provence poets. It was there that he met Dupuis and Raybaud, who had already been teaching other Provençal poets. Through this encounter, Roumanille found opportunities to argue about the causes for making the French language obligatory, and this served to strengthen his own thinking about Provence. As a result, Roumanille took up the torch for the phonetic spelling of Raybaud, essentially becoming his disciple.

The phonetic spelling inherited by Roumanille was in conflict with the arguments of Mistral. In arguing for etymological spelling, Mistral declared, “it is more logical and simpler for those who are familiar with the Provençal

language.” He demanded for “unity, to the extent possible both logically and etymologically, in order to make the language of Provence easier to understand.” He criticized phonetic notation by stating that it was like a “second tower of Babel”¹). In response, Roumanille emphasized such phonological expressions as the unique characteristics and features of the Provençal language, the harmony of calm tones, and the refinement and elegance of words more than academic notation.

The rift between Mistral and Roumanille grew wider, especially with Roumanille’s alterations made to his spelling method in a collection of poetry, “*Li Provençalo*,” that he published. Roumanille rewrote poetry in this collection phonetically, to which Casmir Bousquet of the Aix-Marseilles faction rebutted in December 1852 in the royalist newspaper *Gazette du Midi*. To strike back at Bousquet’s rebuttal, Roumanille asked Mistral for support, as he not only hailed from the Avignon area but also was his student previously. However, Mistral turned this request down in a letter to Roumanille. Mistral replied, “this is such a large mistake. It will hasten the decline and extinction of language”²). Further, he argued, “I wish not only to be understood by a few people living on the outskirts of Arles but also by everyone in southern France”³). This argument, or rather the spirit of resistance, of Mistral’s regarding spelling was sufficient to cause a collection of poetry to be rewritten in the Aix-Marseilles faction’s method of spelling after the Avignon poetry meetings.

5. The Regional Consciousness of Mistral and Roumanille

This antagonism between Mistral and Roumanille can be viewed as a conflict between “scholarship” and “tradition” (experiential tradition). The “scholarship” referred to here is the perspective that emphasizes an awareness of resisting French through spelling based on Latin and linguistics. In addition, “tradition” implies perspective that emphasizes an awareness of maintaining and increasing words (pronunciation) used in various regions.

Roumanille was aware of the poetic tradition of the troubadours that was inherited by Dante, a poet in medieval Italy. In particular, he strived to maintain the bountiful words (the abundance of pronunciations and expressions) of each region and argued for phonetic spelling. He overflows with an affection for Provence that honors regional traditions and the language and culture of each area. This regional consciousness of Roumanille can be thought of as having been strengthened and created by the arguments of Raybaud in the area of Nyons that was discussed previously. However, Mistral took issue with the obstruction of regional languages that came with the promotion (or incursion) of the French language in education. Therefore, he strived for the establishment of spelling for the Provençal language in a form that is clearly superior to the French language—the creation and unification of Provençal spelling. In this we can decipher Mistral’s desire and aspirations for a revival or rethinking of the mother tongue and lifestyles that spring from experiences in one’s native land.

Why was *Félibrige* founded around Mistral and Roumanille in 1854? An answer can be found in the changes of Mistral’s thinking pattern. Mistral shifted his assertions on spelling after 1854, and drew closer to the phonetic spelling emphasized by Roumanille. One reason for this was his respect for Roumanille, who can be thought of as a former teacher, and it is believed that the Roumanille’s increasing regional consciousness also had something to do with the change. In other words, this is viewed as a strong expression of belonging to his hometown of Maillane and the Avignon area, which he discussed with Roumanille in the Provençal language during his time as a student. Eventually, Mistral prioritized his affection for Avignon and Provence more than his arguments on etymological spelling. At its heart is the importance of his own strong regional consciousness, a Provence identity.

In this manner, and as of 1854, *Félibrige* had overcome issues of spelling, and its foundation under Mistral and

Roumanille was centered on Provence Renaissance thinking of Roumanille in particular. However, the regional consciousness that maximizes respect for Mistral's Provence did in fact have a major impact on the later direction of Félibrige's development, and reflected the federalism conceived by Roumanille after 1866.

6. Conclusion

Editing of Provence language dictionaries and establishing spelling provide assessments of the early period after the founding of Félibrige. The arguments over spelling described above can be positioned as initial arguments in creating dictionaries and spelling methods. In particular, spelling is known as "Mistralienne" due to Mistral organization of it after the founding of Félibrige. Later, it was organized as a group, and, as it developed, the poets who were members spelled their poems in true Mistralienne in their annual journal. These activities were responsible for the Provence revival movement, which initially were generated in the regional consciousness of Roumanille and Mistral. Such activities, later, pushed Provençal people to promote regional consciousness, and in that sense the regional consciousness of Mistral and Roumanille can be said to be that of Provence.

Further themes from this study are as follows. It is thought that the circumstances of Provence at the time surrounding the unity of the French language was behind this pair's fostering and establishing of regional identity, though what was the relationship with their disillusionment in politics and their dissatisfaction with how regional educational institutions had developed due to public education? Conversely, from an academic perspective, what was their relationship with the Central Academy and various universities? Answers to these questions will likely further clarify the regional consciousness of Mistral, Roumanille, and the people of Provence, and will portray the historical *raison d'être* of Félibrige.

References

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Notes

- 1) The original version of the three citations are as follows:
 - C'est plus rationnel et plus facile à comprendre pour ceux qui n'ont pas l'habitude du provençal.
 - Conformons-nous, autant qu'il est possible, à la logique et à l'étymologie afin d'être compréhensibles.
 - Si tous nos troubadours écrivaient leur composition d'après le dialecte de leur village, ce serait Babel.(Mistral's letter to Roumanille, December 21, 1850; *Correspondance*, pp.(895)-(896))
- 2) ... grave erreur en ce que leur système tend à hâter la corruption et la disparition de la lunge, ...
(Mistral's letter to Roumanille, July 14, 1853; *Correspondance*, pp.(964)-(965))
- 3) J'ai beau chercher, je trouve que je ne perds rien à ma réforme, pas même l'euphonie, et j'ai l'avantage de parler dans une langue comprise par ce moyen dans tout le midi, au lieu de l'être seulement par quelques amateurs de l'arrondissement d'Arles.
(Mistral's letter to Roumanille August 13, 1853; *Correspondance*, p.(972)).