

## FRÉDÉRIC MISTRAL, PROVENÇAL POET AND FRIEND OF THE ROMANIANS

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**Abstract.** *Frédéric Mistral (1830-1914) was a significant poet and scholar from France in the mid-nineteenth century. Born in southern France, he fought all of his life for the cultural rights for local people, safeguarding the language and culture of Provence. He was also a promoter of the unity of the European nations with Latin origins, fighting for their close collaboration, integrating Romania in this project. In our study we try to present summarily the work of this remarkable poet who was also a great friend of Romanians.*

**Keywords:** *felibri, Provençal, Romanians, poets.*

On September 8, 1830 Etienne Joseph-Frédéric Mistral, the only child of spouses Frédéric Mistral and Adelaide Poulinet, sees daylight for the first time. The place of his birth is the village *Maillane*, located halfway between Avignon and Arles, in Provence, southern France. The future poet will spend his childhood on his parents' farm called *Mas du Juge*. The memory of his happy childhood homeland will mark him for life. "*Maillane* is beautiful, it is wonderful, I will never forget *Maillane*," he exclaimed at the very beginning of his memoirs, quoting a song from site.<sup>1</sup> His first book was a natural history, children discover with delight the plants and insects described in the manual. The first feat which he recalls is when he was 4 or 5 years old, he fell into a pit filled with water (that reached to his throat) while trying to pick flowers from the garden. History repeats itself when chasing a butterfly.<sup>2</sup> Mistral's memories are full of such occurrences in which he had a cheerful, fun childhood and reminds us of another writer, but from Romania, who had a happy childhood: Ion Creangă. Regarding the work of the two writers, we can not make a comparison, because Mistral is a poet, and Creangă an excellent storyteller. However, common things can be found in their

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<sup>1</sup> Mistral, 1915, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Mistral, 1915, 17.

childhoods. Both writers spent their early years in the countryside, with fairytale landscapes, a place that will always be blessed in their memory. The Provençal poet, and the Romanian storyteller will be inspired in all their work from the local folklore; transposing on paper legends, songs, and local proverbs. Creangă's writings are full of regionalisms and archaisms while Mistral wrote in the local dialect and bringing it to the public attention and entering it into French literature.

In 1838 Frédéric Mistral starts elementary school as a schoolboy at the school of Donat professor installed in the abbey *Saint Michel de Frigolet*, which was two leagues from his native village. One year later he continued his studies at boarding school *Millet* in Avignon. He is brought by his uncle Bénoni, a younger brother of his mother. The same uncle leads the adolescent to the theater in Avignon, through viewed tracks are several popular theater plays fashionable then.<sup>3</sup>

Avignon feels like a slightly hostile new environment, and he begins expressing nostalgia for his homeland. In his family, his mother is the one who has initiated in the mysteries of the Provençal dialect in him. Mistral will remain in that school until 1845 when they moved to another educational institution in Avignon, boarding school Dupuy. Here, the teenager will meet Joseph Roumanille, "a young teacher with a black goatee," who will encourage the poetic inclinations and the passion for the Provençal dialect. Just a year before, Mistral had sent a letter with several poems in Provençal to Jasmin, a famous local poet, but he did not give an answer to the teenager. In 1847 Mistral gets his bachelor's degree at Nîmes then returns home. After that, he writes elated to Roumanille at August 18, 1847: "I took the bachelor's degree! Farewell algebra, mathematics, the Middle Ages! I make the tour of the city Nîmes for joy. The Avignon does not compare with him."<sup>4</sup>

During the Revolution from 1848 he sent lyrics (in French) to the republican newspapers from Avignon and at the same time, wrote his first important work (in Provençal,) a pastoral poem in four chants *Li Meissoun* ("The Harvest.") After this, he sent a letter to Roumanille on March 10, 1848, with the formula "Freedom! Equality! Fraternity!" and *Vive la République!*<sup>5</sup> Enthused by the proclamation of the Republic he started to scream: "Vive Marianne!" and dancing *Carmagnola*, to the indignation of the royalists from Maillane and his father, but then expresses horror for the crimes committed during the revolution. By May

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<sup>3</sup> Mistral, 1915, 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> Correspondance Mistral-Roumanille, 1981, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Correspondance Mistral-Roumanille, 1981, 12.

13 he had already changed his attitude and critiqued in another letter sent to Roumanille the excesses committed by revolutionaries and especially the leaders. He goes on to accuse that there are some "false prophets, full of lies, pride and vanity." He will however continue to defend the Republican correspondences he had with Roumanille (who is a convinced monarchist) until in the summer of 1850. In another missive, sent from Maillane at March 12, 1852 he says that he quit politics and sacrificed to the art, especially to the god Pan.<sup>6</sup> About those troubled times, over the years, he will remember: "The days from June, with their crimes, their massacres, they have a frightened nation. Moderates were withdrawn, fanatics were hardened much more, and over my youthful dreams of a Platonic republic seated fog."<sup>7</sup>

In the same revolutionary year, he is attending the University of *Aix en Provence* where follows the courses of Faculty of Law. Here he will get to know Anselme Mathieu, a young poet with an open nature and cheerful, who would later be one of the founding members of the movement *felibri*. In 1851 several of Mistral's poems appear edited in an anthology by Saint-René Taillandier and a year later he receives a Degree in Law and return to Maillane. Back home, he starts to develop *Mirèio*, a poem, elaborating that summer three chants. While working on *Mirèio news* comes "like a bombshell" of the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon in December 1851. Mistral is outraged by this political movement that "violates the oaths made before the law and then will destroy all my illusions about federalism that could sprout in the French Republic" as he later says in his *Memoirs*. In August 1852 he participated at the Congress of the Provençal Poets at *Arles*, where he was quarreling with Roumanille, due to divergences over the Provençal orthography. This dispute will be long and will be very present in correspondences between the two poets. The dispute began in a letter sent by Mistral on March 24, 1851 from *Aix-en-Provence* and continues even in 1853, when Mistral had sent a letter to Roumanille (March 15, 1853,) which explains in detail his opinions on spelling and grammar and again on May 23 and June 11. Mistral gave him advice, made suggestions, and corrected him.

A year later, in 1853, the two friends reconciles, during another Congress of Provençal Poets, held this time in *Aix-en-Provence*. On May 24, 1854, a beautiful Sunday day (the day of the Saint Estela, will be the patron of young provençal poets,) Mistral founded the movement *Felibrige* (or poets *felibri*) designed to protect, promote and preserve

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<sup>6</sup> Correspondance Mistral-Roumanille, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Mistral, 1915, 114.

cultural and linguistic heritage of southern France and especially the Provençal language. He, along with six friends, founded the group at Castle Font Ségugne, nearby, Avignon. The name *Felibrige* was designated at Mistral's proposal, the association and the work that it was intended to accomplish, and received the name of *felibri* poets. Mistral will devote all of his life to that goal, trying through movement and his work to regain the cultural rights of the *langue d'oc* speakers from France. *Felibre* etymology (*felibru*) is highly controversial. The word, probably comes from the Vulgar Latin, from *fellibris* (nurseling,) being used as a metaphor. *Felibri* is one who is inspired by the muses, the artist. What is certain, the word was discovered by Mistral in an old Provençal song from his village, *Maillane*. As the researcher Maria Platon observed, the word, in any case, lends itself to numerous puns: *foi-libre, faire libre, faire des livres*etc.<sup>8</sup> The seven poets who founded the movement were: Frédéric Mistral, Joseph Roumanille, Théodore Aubanel, Anselme Mathieu, Paul Giéra, Alphonse Tavan and Jean Brunet. All were good friends, and later, some of them even became in-laws. All were Provençal, which explains the insistence of the movement, at least in its early period, for this region from southern France. Among the seven poets two are separated from the rest, Frédéric Mistral and Joseph Roumanille. Mistral will be the unofficial leader of the movement from the beginning, but it will eventually be formalized. Joseph Roumanille (1818–1891) was Mistral's teacher in high school in Avignon where the two became friends. In 1862 the group formally adopted the first *Statutes* of the movement and the meetings began to turn into more than serious friendly agape.

The aim of the movement was to preserve the Provençal language, defend, love and worship. In the Statutes of the movement the obligations of its members was clearly listed, to defend the language, the specifics and the freedom of Provence. The movement is organized into 7 sections: science, history, painting, music, a section for society's friends and two sections of *gaie-science* (the science of joy, of living life, borrowed from the troubadours.) Also, they made the decision to edit a magazine, *L'Armana Provençau* ("The Provençal Almanac") that will have a long life (1855-1920.) The first issue of the magazine will appear in November 1855. The magazine opened with the song of felibres written by Frédéric Mistral, who will publish multiple times in the magazine, under various pseudonyms (*Felibre dou Mas, Bello-Visto* and *Gui de Mount-Pavon*.) *Armana Provençauit* was initially printed in 1854

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<sup>8</sup> Platon, 1980, 50.

with a starting run of 500 copies, and the magazine having 112 pages. Two years later it was printed in 10.000 copies.<sup>9</sup>

In the first years of his activity, the association is pretty shy. It will gradually expand in Languedoc and Gascogne gaining some upsurge during 1864-1865. The one who will succeed to become well known in France will be Frédéric Mistral. He retired in his native village, after his father's death in 1855, and will work for 3 years on the epic poem *Mirèio*. He had started to write it in 1851. It is, perhaps, his best creation. The opera is a true epos of Provence. The heroine, a young peasant girl in love with a basket maker, symbolizes the entire south. Alongside his tribulations of *Mirèio* he described the lands of Provence, the people, places, fauna, flora, and made subtle incursions and trenchant into French history in the southern provinces. Mistral documented for his poem information he received from Siboul, a woodcutter from Montfrin, that gives details about the navigation on the river Ron, about streams, lagoons, river islands, vegetation and its flora. Another local man, Xavier, it gives the names of plants and grasses in Provençal.<sup>10</sup>

In 1855 a writer with Provençal origins (he was born in *Vaucluse*) Adolphe Dumas (1805-1861) is commissioned by the minister of National Education at that time, Hyppolyte Fortoul (1811-1856, and he was born in the south, at *Digne*, in Auvergne) to go in Provence and to collect folklore in the area. The next year, Dumas meets Mistral at Maillane where he reads (in Provençal) fragments from the poem *Mirèio* on which he's still working. Dumas is excited. In 1858 Mistral finished writing the poem and, at the suggestion of Louis Legré, goes to Paris to let his friends know in the Capital. In advance, he revises the text, and at the suggestion of Jean Reboul, translates it into French. In Paris, Mistral meets with Adolphe Dumas who makes a presentation flattering the poet and his work in an open letter published on August 26, 1856, in the old and the influential daily *Gazette de France*. Note that, at that time, Adolphe Dumas was the secretary of the great poet Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869.) By means of Adolphe Dumas, Mistral's work manuscripts reaches Lamartine in 1858. Lamartine is one of the leaders of the romanticism a well known personality and appreciated at the time. He read the entire poem (which has 12 chants) in one night and was enthused immediately by the creation of the "Bard from Maillane" presented by Adolphe Dumas "the new Virgiliu from the Provence." Lamartine published laudatory articles in the newspapers from Paris and

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<sup>9</sup> Roche, 1954, XVIII.

<sup>10</sup> Mistral, 1915, 139.

Mistral met him. In a letter from September 2, 1858 addressed to Roumanille, the poet from Maillane reveals how the meeting with Lamartine went, when he was read the poem *Mirèio*. The meeting was attended by Jean Reboul and Adolphe Dumas, then came a granddaughter of Lamartine and the Countess Peyronnet (an English woman) with two daughters. After the partial reading of the poem, Lamartine questioned Mistral at length about his native village, the life he leads in Provence and other things. At the end, Lamartine says to Mistral that is indispensable that they print their work.<sup>11</sup>

The praises of Lamartine at Frédéric Mistral's address did not cease: "its simple appearance, modest and pleasant, he had nothing from haughty of that tension of the traits or from that superiority of sight which characterize, often, these men, more vain than genius, we named folk poets... A perfect decency, a perfect instinct for moderation in all circumstances which gives, both shepherds and kings, dignity and distinction in behavior and conversation, dominating his whole being..."<sup>12</sup> As for Mistral's work, deeply impressed, Lamartine ends downright dithyrambic: "O, poet from Maillane, you're the aloe of the Provence... your poetic soul perfume Avignon, Marseille, Toulon, Hyères and, soon, the entire France..."<sup>13</sup>

On February 2, 1859 Mistral's book appears in Avignon at the printer Séguin. His friend Joseph Roumanille took care of the editing. The first printout from *Mirèio* is sent to Lamartine. He then sends a letter to Jean Reboul in which he compares on Mistral with Homer.<sup>14</sup>

The book is a success and the author is celebrated with great pomp at Nîmes and Marseille where he reads fragments from the poem. At Marseille he reads Chant I from poem in front of 2.000 people. The newspapers from Paris joins the chorus of eulogies—with the southern press and soon the book will be published in many foreign languages: German, English, Italian, Spanish etc.

Also in 1859 Mistral goes back to Paris and meets with Lamartine. In 1846 he also publishes a monthly so called *Course familiar of literature* in the form of *Conversations*. Lamartine says to Mistral that to consecrate the fortieth conversation, about 115 printed pages, published in April 1859, the poem *Mirèio* will be featured, as well as its

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<sup>11</sup> *Correspondance Mistral-Roumanille*, 1981, 202.

<sup>12</sup> Platon, 1980, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Platon, 1980, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Mistral, 1915, 217-218.

author. Also, Barbey D'Aurevilly wrote two enthusiastic articles at Mistral's address in the newspaper *La Pays*.

In 1861 he was enshrined for his success, the French Academy awarded him the prize for literature for the poem *Mirèio*. Also this year, Mistral write *I Trubaire Catalan* ("The Catalan Troubadour") a poem that is dedicated to counterparts from across the Pyrenees in which it proposes to collaborate on "revival and flowering of a branch of our language."<sup>15</sup> It is a first step towards meeting and collaboration between the two movements, Provençal and Catalan. A year later, Mistral begin work on *Lou Tresor dou Félibrige* ("The treasure of the Félibrige") a huge dictionary of Provençal language, which he will toil with for 15 years. The dictionary will begin to be printed in 1878 and editing it will last until 1886. In the end, he will have two volumes with over 1.100 pages and it will appear in Paris and Aix-en-Provence.

In 1867 there is an important event for Frédéric Mistral and the whole movement from Provenve, *Calendau* an epic poem, is published by Mistral at Avignon. The poem has 12 chants, like *Mirèio*, and Mistral worked on it for 7 years. The poem itself has sparked great reactions, but the preface, written by Mistral, produced a storm. In this preface, Mistral makes frequent references to the history of France and Provence and issues opinions that were perceived by many as hostile to the French state, lamenting the way in which the South was annexed. Through the voice of Mistral, the provençals wanted to obtain from the regime of Napoleon III (and after its fall in 1870, from the government of the Third French Republic) a status of cultural and economic autonomy for the provinces of *langue d'oc*, working towards a federalist type project, like the Swiss cantons or the federal states in the United States of America. Paradoxically somewhat, Mistral, however, refused ever to play any political role or have political claims, always limiting his demands to cultural and economic rights, always complaining that their ideas are distorted and that he is unjustly accused of separatism and even anti-national attitude.<sup>16</sup> His claims were primarily for linguistic rights, advocating for the reinstatement of rights for the Occitan language, represented by its Provençal dialect. "Who has the language, holds the key that unlocked the chains that keep him handcuffed"<sup>17</sup> said Mistral. In 1873 Mistral wanted to create a confederation of people with Latin origins. With the help of the Catalan federalists they will gain a foothold

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<sup>15</sup> Mistral, 1915, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Roche, 1954, XLII.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

at the south of the Pyrenees. He will then return to Italy. One of his friends and collaborators, an important personality in Provence, poet and historian, Léon de Berluc-Perussis (1836-1902,) takes the initiative to celebrate at Avignon 500 years from the birth of the great Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374.) This celebration will take place next summer, in 1874, and will be a great success. In 1875, after the celebrations dedicated to Petrarca, L*Société des langues romanes* ("The Society of the romanic languages") which was part of the movement of *felibri*, organized another event in Montpellier named the Congress of Poetry, Prose, and Philology to which cultural personalities from France, Italy and Spain were invited. At the end of the contest they announced the establishment of a prize which will be awarded at the next edition of the competition. Mistral announces that it will occur in 1878, in Montpellier.

At the poetry contest in 1878, the first prize will be won by the Romanian poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890) for the poetry *Cântecul gînteii latine*. Although the Romanian poet could not come personally to Montpellier because of the the war of independence in Romania, that event marked the beginning of a real friendship between the poets from the movement of *Félibrige* and Romanian cultural personalities.

In addition to Alecsandri, Mistral will maintain close correspondence with personalities like Mihail Obedenaru (1839-1885,) distinguished Romanian diplomat, who was present at Montpellier, V.A. Urechia (1834-1901) minister of Education and famous scholars. In 1882, Vasile Alecsandri succeeds in coming to southern France to meet with Mistral, thus reinforcing a beautiful friendship.

In 1890, Mistral published the tragedy in 5 acts *La Rèino Jano* ("The Queen Joanna") which has Queen Joanna I of Naples (1326-1382) as a protagonist, who was Countess of Provence, leaving beautiful memories to the provençals. Mistral paints in lyrics the turbulent life of this woman who has been married 4 times and represented an important piece on the political map of Western Europe in the second half of the 14th century. Also this year, Mistral receives the award *Jean Reynaud* for the paper *Lou Tresor dou Felibrige*. ("The treasure of the Félibrige."). The *felibres* from Montpellier are invited by the Romanian diplomat George Moroianu (1870-1945) for a conference about "The sufferings and aspirations of the Romanians from Transylvania" for the present of the difficult situation of the Romanians in Transylvania, severely persecuted by the Hungarian authorities.



To give a greater amplitude to their movement, Mistral and his companions will contact the nationalist movements from Catalonia, Italy and Romania, with the desire to make a common front of the Latin peoples against the danger of the pangermanism ideology promoted by the German authorities. There will be speeches, congresses, and conferences where the occitans conducted by Mistral will fight for the rights of oppressed peoples and for the unity of the Latin nations. For these ideals he will fight his entire life, these aspirations mirroring his entire poetical work as well the extensive correspondence, waged with various personalities of the time, both French and foreign.

Even if, ultimately, he will fail in his fight; Frédéric Mistral (the provençals will not receive the required rights and the union of the Latin nations will not be achieved) the *Felibrige* divides and collapse due to numerous internal tensions, the incontestable poetic merits and talent will be recognized, both in France and internationally. Thereby, his works (*Mirèio*, *Nerte*, *The poem of the Ron*) are awarded by the French Academy and the poet is invited to be part of this prestigious forum and in 1904 he will receive the Nobel Prize for literature. The motivation of the jury that awarded the prize is as follows: "as a recognition of his originality full of freshness and inspiration of true poetic creation, which reflect faithfully the views of his country and the authentic soul of his people and also, as a recognition of his significant activity as a Provençal philologist."<sup>18</sup>

The old bard, the fighter for the cultural independence of the Provence, the man who fought a lifetime for the revival, the language, the literature and the traditions of the southern France and the unity of the Latin nations, this great friend of the Romania, died on March 25, 1914, following the flu, at his birthplace of Maillane. In 1930, when celebrating the centenary of his birth the French authorities organized sumptuous celebrations in the honor of the Provence poet. At these celebrations a Romanian delegation headed by Nichifor Crainic and Pamfil Șeicaru were in attendance. Romanians brought their tribute to this great poet and friend of the Romanians who was Frédéric Mistral. The Mistral's poetic works were translated, largely, in Romanian, and his great achievements (the poems *Mirèio*, *The Poem of the Ron*, *The Queen Joanna*, *Calendau*) are accessible for the Romanian reader.

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<sup>18</sup> Ulici, 1983, 21.

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