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MEDIEVALISM IN A MINORITY LANGUAGE: Frédéric Mistral's Wish-Fulfillment Provençal Past

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Frédéric Mistral is the only figure in the Felibrige to have devoted a significant portion of his *œuvre* to the Middle Ages. This essay offers a new reading of his two works situated in the Middle Ages – the romance *Nerto* (1884), and the drama *La Rèino Jano* (*Queen Joanna*) (1890). It argues that as a belated Romantic, Mistral repudiates the evils of modernity. His medievalism reflects and gives voice to his own political vision whereby the contemporary situation is displaced into a wish-fulfillment fourteenth century, in which France is conspicuous by its absence.

In the twentieth century the Occitan movement repudiated the sentimental, Romantic folk heritage of the past. The writers – in verse and in prose – undertook to engage in European modernity by creating in terms of European modernism. The renewal meant replacing nostalgia for the rural, traditional past by literature grounded in the present, and also thrusting away the nineteenth-century models – Frédéric Mistral and the Felibrige movement of which he was the leader – in favor of older, more authentic forebears. Partaking of a structure I find inherent in French literary history since the Middle Ages, the strong sons of modernism (in Bloomian terminology) threw off the fathers in order to align themselves with more worthy (and more distant) grandfathers from the past.[1]

The search for cultural roots and cultural identity in the past, in history – for worthy grandfathers – led to the Middle Ages. The moderns found in the

Middle Ages a treasure of rich cultural flowering, specifically the poetry of the troubadours, which put the south of France on the map, so to speak, a time when, throughout western Europe, writers looked to the Occitan regions for inspiration. They also created their own cultural myth: that, prior to the French conquest, the south was more politically alive, the people more fulfilled, the courts more genteel, the women better treated, and decision-making more democratic than was to be the case when culture and politics were decided upon in Paris.

Consequently, most of the great moderns situated some of their works in the Middle Ages or incorporated medieval themes and motifs in their writing. Jean-Claude Forêt even wrote one-third of his first novel, *La Pèira d'asard* (*The Stone of Chance*), in medieval Occitan.[2]

It is recognized today that the nineteenth-century Occitan literature, especially the literature of the Felibrige, is richer, more complex, more introspective and self-conscious, than would be the case had it been only an offshoot of Romanticism and a celebration of rural folklore. Théodore Aubanel, in his poetry and in his plays, is strikingly and disturbingly "modern"; he waged a life-long struggle to express his vision, often opposed and censored by the ecclesiastical authorities in Avignon. Also complex and ambiguous are the works of the leader of the renascence, Frédéric Mistral.[3]

With the exception of Félix Gras, Mistral is the only figure in the Felibrige to have devoted a significant portion of his *œuvre* to the Middle Ages. We know that Mistral was fascinated by the Middle Ages, that he read widely in the troubadours, in part to find material for his monumental dictionary, *Lou Tresor dóu Felibrige* (*The Treasure of the Felibrige*), and that he corresponded regularly with the two leading academic scholars in medieval literature, Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer. In his biography of Mistral, Claude Mauron argues that, from 1870 to 1880, the poet felt burned out after the failure of his second epic, *Calendau*, and that inspiration and creativity returned only with the composition of the first of two works situated in the Middle Ages – *Nerto* (1884), which was then followed by *La Rèino Jano* (*Queen Joanna*) (1890).

Nerto is a novella, in my opinion a genuine romance, of some 3996 lines, in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, the standard form for medieval romance in French and in Occitan.[4] Here is a plot summary: Old Baron Pons confesses to his daughter, Nerto, that, to pay off gambling debts thirteen years previously, he sold her soul to Satan. It is now time to redeem the pledge. Nerto takes a secret

tunnel from Château-Renard to the palace at Avignon, where Pope Benedict XIII is besieged by the French. Nerto helps Benedict to escape through the tunnel. People rally to the pope; these include King Louis II, Count of Provence, and his fiancée Yolande of Aragon. Nerto joins the cavalcade to Arles; on the road Roudrigo, the pope's nephew, pays court to her. The wedding is celebrated at the church of Saint-Trophime. Following the pope's counsel, Nerto becomes a novice in the Abbey of Saint-Césaire, committed to a life of prayer. At midnight Roudrigo breaks in with his band of odious, death-dealing Catalans, who seize and rape the nuns. Roudrigo seizes Nerto. In the ensuing mêlée, she wanders off to a chapel, tended by an aged hermit. Saint Gabriel orders the hermit to send Nerto away. She is attracted by the lights of a demonic palace, constructed by Satan for Roudrigo, where Nerto is to be corrupted and damned. However, at Nerto's urging, Roudrigo repents and, when Satan advances, makes the sign of the cross with his sword. The palace and everyone around it disappear in a thunder clap, the only remains being a stone statue of a nun in prayer. Nerto and Roudrigo are united in heaven.

The medievalist message is clear. The narrative is located in the heart of Mistral's homeland at the very beginning of the fifteenth century, a time when Provence was an independent duchy not ruled by a king whose capital was Paris and when the popes dwelt in Avignon. Because of the papal presence, Avignon could be imagined as one of the great cities of the world, a locus of teeming life and splendor:

> La vilo, pleno coume un iòu,
> Poudié dire: *unguibus et rostro*
> E davans tóuti faire mostro
> D'aquéu prejit de soun eigloun
> Que tèn li clau dins soun oungloun.
>
> Li Levantés ié traficavon;
> Li cardinau ié cavaucavon,
> Drapa de pourpro; li roumiéu
> De sant Antóni o Bartoumiéu
> Cantavon ferme pèr carriero;
> De braguetin, d'aventuriero,
> De fraire de touto coulour,
> D'escoumenja qu'emé doulour
> Se tabassavon la peitrino,
> De gènt de guerro e de marino

Que se batien au cabaret,
Èro un embroi, un chafaret
Coume n'i'a ges en ges de rode!-

La ville, pleine comme un œuf,
Pouvait dire: *unguibus et rostro*
Et devant tous faire parade
De ce brocard de son aiglon
Qui tient les clefs entre ses serres.

Les Levantins y trafiquaient;
Les cardinaux y chevauchaient,
Drapés de pourpre; les pèlerins
De saint Antoine ou de saint Barthélemy
Chantaient par les rues à tue-tête;
De bateleurs, d'aventurières,
De moines de toute couleur,
D'excommuniés qui avec componction
Se frappaient la poitrine,
De gens de guerre et de marine
Qui se battaient au cabaret,
C'était un fouillis, un brouhaha,
Comme il n'en est en aucun lieu. (80-3)

The bridal procession from Château-Renard to Arles offers a comparable portrait of festivity and joy:

Tóuti countènt, à la frescado
Parton en longo cavaucado,
Courron davans li troumpetoun,
Sounant *la bello Margoutoun*.
Li roussignòu canton l'aubado,
E de pertout li flour crebado,
Pèr lou campèstre verdoulènt,
Jiton un baume redoulènt.
Li gounfaloun, li bandeireto,
En l'èr floutejon à l'aureto;
I ple de sedo trefoulis
Sus founs d'azur la flourdalis;
E li coulour aragouneso,
L'or e lou sang, la ventoureso
Li fai vouga dins lou soulèu.

Et tous, joyeux, à la fraîcheur,
En longues cavalcades ils partent.
Les trompettes courent devant,
Sonnant “la belle Margoton”.
Les rossignols chantent l'aubade,
Et de partout les fleurs écloses,
Par les champs verdoyants,
Jettent leur arome embaumé.
Les gonfalons, les banderoles
Flottent dans les airs à la brise;
Dans les plis de la soie frissonne
La fleur de lis en champ d'azur;
Et les couleurs aragonaises,
Le sang et l'or, au gré du vent
Ondoient dans le soleil. (142-5)

We hear that Provence serves as a center of the Latin world, a bridge between Spain, France, and Italy. King Louis II swears to respect the ancient liberties of Arles:

Lou Rèi diguè: — Que Diéu vous crèisse!
Nous es de bon de recounèisse
A vosto grand coumunauta
Tóuti si vièii liberta,
Prerougativo e privilege:
Emai tenèn pèr sacrilege,
Pèr maufatan e sènso ounour
Quau que n'en brèque la plenour. —

Le Roi dit: “Que Dieu vous accroisse!
Il nous plaît de reconnaître
A votre grande communauté
Tous ses vieux privilèges,
Toutes ses libertés et ses prérogatives;
Et nous tenons pour sacrilège,
Pour criminel et pour honni
Quiconque porte atteinte à leur intégrité.” (178-9)

Yet even here people are aware that the great days of the troubadours are long gone.

This overt, propagandistic use of the Middle Ages speaks directly to Mistral's concerns in the nineteenth century, at a time in his life when his politics veered to the Right and he became a sentimental monarchist, and a more pious Catholic than he had been in the past (Lafont, 226-233). It is no coincidence that, in the poem, the French besiege and conquer Avignon, just as, as Mistral sees it, the anti-Catholic French Republic wages war on, and keeps down the Church and the language of Provence, denying to the ancient province its liberties. Mistral creates an idealized, fictionalized, mythical world in the past, an art of nostalgia in a text containing already nostalgia for its idealized past.

Pons and Roudrigo offering, respectively, Nerto's and Roudrigo's own souls to the devil in exchange for what they most desire, recalls, of course, Goethe's *Faust*, a book which Mistral is known to have read (Casanova, 342), and also Rutebeuf's *Miracle de Théophile*, which tells of the medieval Faust-figure. *Nerto* is a Christian romance, located in an historical period deemed to be especially Christian – the supposed Age of Faith. It is this very Catholic faith which causes Robert Lafont to proclaim that *Nerto* "n'est qu'une fantaisie, un délassement [...] une fable religieuse sans envol […] et c'est pourquoi l'œuvre est médiocre, et devient froide" (77).

I disagree. I believe that *Nerto* is a superbly written, and superbly crafted, romance, a powerful work of art. Magnificent Christian literature could, in the Middle Ages, take the form of romance. Examples are *Le conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, *Gregorius* and *Der arme Heinrich* by Hartmann von Aue, and *La queste del saint Graal*. This said, Mistral's tale adheres more closely to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Gothic romance than to medieval French gothic. It is this Romantic aspect in a writer who claimed to be so very Classical, this powerfully medieval Romanticism, which helps shape *Nerto* in its literary essence.

In the medieval romances, those of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors, the most prevalent narrative structure centers on the adventures of a hero, adventures in a Celtic Otherworld, a series of adventures according to which the hero moves about, from place to place, committing feats of prowess, leading to a narrative summit where he becomes worthy to wed the princess and to conquer or inherit a kingdom. Mistral feminizes the pattern: Nerto moves about the countryside, not seeking adventures but seeking to escape the most terrible one of all – confrontation with Satan. Escaping from entrapment by the devil has her seeking refuge in a number of places and from a number of people. The places

are, for the most part, superb structures in stone, monuments to the beauty and glory of medieval Provence. Starting from Château-Renard, she moves to the palace of the popes in Avignon, back to Château-Renard, on to Saint-Trophime in Arles, then to the Abbey of Saint-Césaire, and, finally, by way of the little chapel, to the demonic palace built for Roudrigo. All of them prove to be prisons in stone and not places of refuge; from all of them Nerto flees, finding her union with the beloved and her place of glory in heaven, after her life is ended.

If the buildings in stone prove to be inadequate refuges for the damsel in distress, it is because, phenomenologically, they are manifestations of what Gaston Bachelard calls the hard earth of the will, masculine symbols of power and aggressive masculinity. In addition, they are associated with father-figures who will not or cannot help the maiden. Pons and Satan himself are fierce, evil paternal figures through whom Nerto suffers, and by whom she is martyred. A more benevolent surrogate father is the pope; however, he is, in terms of the narrative, impotent. Forced to abandon Avignon, having to accept assistance from Nerto, he can offer only the ascetic life of a nun, and he cannot prevent her abduction from the convent. The hermit at the chapel, who can offer nothing except his prayers, at Gabriel's command thrusts her away. Nerto finds no gallant knight, no Erec, Lancelot, Yvain, Perceval, or Galahad to come to her rescue. He who does come is Roudrigo the devil's disciple, a lecherous wolf. In his own words:

> Mouns Roudrigo,
> Tau que lou loup dins la garrigo,
> Intro en cridant: — Paro lou loup!
>
> Mons Rodrigue,
> Tel que le loup dans le pacage,
> Entre en criant: “Gare le loup!” (258-9)

From a Freudian perspective, the super ego elements in Nerto's psyche are either hostile or impotent. She stands helpless in face of the id, sexuality personified by a beast, a wolf, famous for his rage and his acts of cruelty. Fear of being devoured is one displacement of the fear of being raped. Roudrigo's men leap at the chance to rape the prettiest nuns in the convent. With Nerto in his power, should she resist, Roudrigo would do the same. Yet would she resist? Nerto is in the process of becoming a woman, she is attracted to Roudrigo, she

regrets with passion the loss of her lovely hair, severed upon entry into the convent:

> Adiéu, printèms! Adiéu, courouno
> Que iéu trenave en foulejant,
> Adiéu, ourguei de mi sege an!
> Flouteto d'or, floto poulido,
> Entre que l'aubo èro espelido,
> Vous penchinave em'afecioun
> Coume uno garbo de raioun!
> Ah! leissas-me, que li poutoune,
> E que la Vierge me perdoune!
> Bèl agnelin coupa trop lèu,
> Lusiras plus au bon soulèu,
> E li floureto de la colo
> Floucaran plus ta sedo folo!
> Ai! plus jamai lou ventoulet
> Boulegara tis anelet!
>
> Adieu, printemps! Adieu, couronne
> Que je tressais en folâtrant,
> Adieu, orgueil de mes seize ans!
> Chères boucles d'or, boucles jolies,
> Dès que l'aurore était éclose,
> Je vous peignais avec amour
> Comme une gerbe de rayons!
> Ah! laissez-moi les couvrir de baisers,
> Et que la Vierge me pardonne!
> Belle toison d'agneau trop tôt coupée,
> Tu ne brilleras plus au bon soleil,
> Et les petites fleurs de la montagne
> Ne diapreront plus ta folle soie!
> Hélas! la brise plus jamais
> N'agitera tes annelures! (240-1)

Yes, she loves Roudrigo, and he loves her. Doomed by any number of factors, like Tristan and Iseut, like so many lovers in the tradition of *fin' amor*, they are finally united in death, united only in death – in the inevitable bond of Eros and Thanatos. In ancient myth the myrtil is the flower of love and death.

Given the fact that the union occurs in heaven, with both the devil-pursued nun and the beast redeemed in joy, perhaps a Jungian reading can also

add to our comprehension of Mistral's paradoxically rich and complex text. As the adolescent girl grows into a woman, she has to integrate the animus, the masculine aspect of her self, projected onto a threatening external being. There can be no help from the father-figures, evil or impotent, and none from a potential love-object and father-figure, King Louis, who is wedded to another. Yet Nerto triumphs. She triumphs as a woman, integrating the threatening animus through faith and love, not feats in arms. She tames the Byronic hero, the *beau ténébreux*, and redeems him and their love, creating a perfect spiritual bond in heaven. When all the stone refuges fail, she finds her true home. As a symbol of Nerto's love and her redemption, when the satanic palace is wiped out, there remains the statue of a nun in prayer. It serves to commemorate Nerto's story and, as a work of art, is an aesthetic tribute to, and representation of, the girl; consequently it serves also as a *mise en abyme* which reflects the problematic of Nerto's story, a work of art figuring Nerto contained within the larger work of art which is the *Nerto* by Frédéric Mistral.

La Rèino Jano, published in 1890, is a quite different work – a costume drama, a historical play set in the mid 1340s and centered on Queen Joanna I of Naples.[5] The plot: Jano suffers from an unhappy marriage to Prince Andriéu of Hungary; and her coterie, made up of Neapolitans and Provençals, are at odds with Andriéu's Hungarian followers. Andriéu is murdered. Jano leaves for Provence, in order to be exonerated by the pope in Avignon. Pope Clement VI indeed declares Jano to be innocent of the crime, and the most flagrant formentor of discord on the Hungarian side, Frai Roubert, is slain.

With an enormous cast of characters, and utter disregard for the three unities, Mistral's text follows in the wake of French Romantic tragedy, seen at its best in plays by Victor Hugo. Mistral can also be shown partaking of an up-to-date current of Neoromanticism in the late nineteenth century, for he precedes by a decade the extraordinary success in Paris of another Provençal dramatist, who wrote in French – Edmond Rostand, whose *Cyrano* remains a popular favorite even today.

Mistral was no Rostand. *La Rèino Jano* has been condemned by the vast majority of scholars. Émile-G. Léonard quotes Marcel Coulon: “c'est une erreur de Mistral, la seule qu'il ait commise” (43). In his own words, “les dialogues [...] sont souvent faibles et gauches […] Toute la pièce nous montrerait de ces chants amoebés, de ces transitions manquées et de ces ripostes de marionnettes” (149-150). Claude Mauron observes: “En vérité, l'oeuvre présente bien des

imperfections" (289). Lafont and Anatole, alluding to Queen Joanna, state: "Malheurusement le drame qu'il [Mistral] lui a consacré (1890) est très médiocre"(II, 612). And Charles Rostaing, after quoting Jules Lemaître's mordant quip that *La Rèino Jano* is "une tragédie en chansons," himself comments that "Il y a hésitation constante […] entre l'aspect littéraire et l'aspect propagandiste"(59-60).

As I see it, the scholars are too gentle with the play, too careful not to denigrate the Master. In my opinion, *La Rèino Jano* is a dreadful piece of work, with all but no redeeming features whatsoever.

First of all, Mistral, a supremely great lyric and epic poet, had no talent for the stage. Hence, Léonard's judgement on the weak and gauche dialogues, the absence of transitions (from one speech to another and from one scene to another), and the thrust and parry in dialogue of marionettes. I should add the eternal repetition of eternal set speeches by Jano, in particular, of the same set ideas, the same clichés. As a result, characters are dead or, if you prefer, one-dimensional stereotypes. The unique exception is Andriéu, who, younger than Jano, loves her and suffers from what he perceives to be her coldness toward him in the council chamber and, it is implied, in bed. Finally, we can observe the absence of action in the plot: In Act III, Andriéu is assassinated; in Act V, Jano is declared innocent. For all intents and purposes, that is all.

The medievalism itself can be considered a second factor in determining the play's failure. From beginning to end, *La Rèino Jano* is a hymn to medieval Provence. The play begins with Aufan the troubadour and Jano delivering artificial speeches exalting Provence. Jano declares again and again her love for Provence and its people, ever supreme in her heart, this, in spite of the fact that she had not yet been there:

> parlo-me 'n pau, aro, de ma Prouvènço,
> Aquéu païs de Diéu, de cant e de jouvènço,
> Qu'es lou plus fin jouièu de ma courouno d'or
> E qu'ai pancaro vist, pauro! Lou rèi a tort
> De me ié pas mena . . . Lèu-lèu, la vole vèire!
>
> parle-moi donc, maintenant, de ma Provence,
> ce pays de ce promission, de poésie et de jeunesse,
> qui est le plus fin joyau de ma couronne d'or
> et que je n'ai pas encore vue, hélas! Le roi a tort
> de ne pas m'y conduire . . . Vite, vite, je veux la voir! (24-5)

In acts IV and V occurs something like a mystical marriage between the queen, her province, and her subjects, during her visit to the pope for exoneration. Historically, in the course of her long reign, Joanna of Naples visited Provence only once, for six months, sold Avignon to the papacy, exploited the province, and left an Italian vice-roy in her stead. The historical Joanna was, by general consent, cruel and promiscuous. Three of her four husbands died under suspicious circumstances. Yet, because, in Mistral's hands, Jano becomes a lover of, and a symbol for, the old Provence, in his hands she can do no wrong. Innocent of Andriéu's murder, innocent of any wrongdoing, she can only proclaim again and again her innocence, and her vision of life: the sun, joy, youth, pleasure, and poetry – Mistral's dream of Provence displaced onto the Middle Ages and a medieval queen. The author even claims that his characters, in real life, would naturally have spoken Provençal, which is patently absurd. Except for the troubadour, they would have spoken Italian with perhaps a bit of French. Mistral's dream – of a quasi-independent Provence, flourishing under a benevolent monarchy and church, with the pope in Avignon – is thrust upon the reader/spectator with a heavy hand. It stifles the rest of the play and renders it unplayable.

A number of writers in a number of European countries, under the influence of Romanticism, sought to exalt the historical past of the nation, and also its vernacular language. Such was the case in Romania, Hungary, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and, within France, the French regional languages including Occitan. For Mistral the project was to help the people of Provence to become aware of and to appreciate their history and, thereby, to instill in them a sense of identity, and to encourage them in their use of Provençal and in the renewal of the language. All this meant, demanded, a turning to the past and, in Mistral's case in the 1880s, a turning to the Middle Ages. Philippe Gardy interprets in general terms the Felibrige use of intertextuality: "À la fois source et résurgence, elle entraîne avec elle les debris abandonnés par les siècles sur les marges de l'histoire linguistique et littéraire française pour les reformuler et les intégrer dans un projet destiné à leur conférer un surplus de valeur"(Gardy, 12).

Gardy is right to consider Occitan intertextuality always with regard to the majority, dominant French presence. Such is true for Mistral, in a paradoxical manner, given that his medievalism reflects and gives voice to his own political

vision whereby the contemporary situation is displaced into a wish-fulfillment Middle Ages. What we saw to be the case with *Nerto* is also true for *La Rèino Jano*. In the wish-fulfillment fourteenth century, except for the siege of Avignon in *Nerto*, France is conspicuous by its absence. This trace of absence is most revealing. It testifies to Mistral's nightmare of his own age, when France and the French – with their Republic and their secularism – are everywhere. As a belated Romantic, Mistral repudiates the evils of modernity. In his case as in so many others, his Romanticism is his medievalism, and his medievalism is Romantic to the core.[6] The belatedness is a blessing in disguise, which enables him to create a unique personal vision of history, life, and art, grounded in his own time and inseparable from it. We must not forget, however, that Romanticism, medievalism, and belatedness do not ensure greatness. *Nerto* is a genuine aesthetic masterpiece; *La Rèino Jano* is not.

Notes :

1. See Bloom. For the French, Calin 1987, 168-72.
2. For an expanded treatment of this material, see Calin 1995-1996, 2000 and 2010.
3. Among the important, full-length studies on Mistral, see Lafont, Caluwé, Rostaing, Charles Mauron, Claude Mauron, Casanova; also Garavini.
4. Mistral, *Nerto, texte provençal-français*, ed. Pierre Rollet. I shall quote from the text in Occitan, citing also Mistral's own translation into French. On *Nerto*, see Teissier.
5. As with *Nerto*, I shall quote from the Occitan and from Mistral's French translation. On this text, see Léonard.
6. On Mistral as a Romantic, see Garavini, Kirsch.

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