
FRÉDÉRIC MISTRAL 1830-1914

by Barbara Barclay Carter

THERE always has been something magical about Provence. The skein of its history stretches back so far that Mistral could say with truth,

We are the heirs of immortal Greece,
We are thy children, Orpheus, god-like man,
For we are thy sons, O courtly Provence,
And our capital
Is Marseilles who watches the dolphins leap in
the sea.

Even the sculpture of the Middle Ages, indeed, reveals at times a strangely Hellenic inspiration. Rome left a more tangible legacy; amphitheatres and triumphal arches and great aqueducts like the famous Pont du Gard. Feudal days scattered the hills with castles, where lovesick troubadours sang for ladies with flower-like names. Arles, with its famous cemetery, holiest of all burial places, was once capital of a kingdom. Golden Avignon, where Petrarch sighed for Laura, seems still exultant with the splendor of papal days. One day, say the Provençaux, the Pope will return to Avignon, and then the millennium will begin, for in the traditions of the people dim memories of history are interwoven with the gold of legend—a people at once exuberant and grave, gay and melancholy, sceptical and believing, who in the last century found their supreme singer.

Frédéric Mistral was born at Maillane, a little village in a rich plain, looking southward to the blue crests of the Alpilles, sheltered on the north by long dark rows of

cypresses from the onrush of the great wind of which the poet so appropriately bore the name. His father, Maître François, a yeoman farmer, who had fought in the wars of the Revolution and who owned broad acres of cornland and pasture, olive and vine, was fifty-five and a widower when among the gleaners in his field he saw a beautiful girl, hanging timidly behind the rest.—

“*Mignonne*, what is your name?”

“I am the daughter of Etienne Poulinet, the Mayor of Maillane,” she told him. “My name is Delaïde.”

“What? The Mayor’s daughter a gleaner?”

“Master, we are a large family, six girls and two boys. And our father, though he has enough to go on with, when we ask him for new clothes, tells us, ‘My children, if you want finery, you must earn it.’”

Six months after this meeting, which, as the poet their son points out in his *Souvenirs*, recalls the ancient scene of Ruth and Boaz, Maître François had asked Delaïde’s hand in marriage.

It was in this atmosphere of antique simplicity that Mistral passed his childhood, having for companions the laborers, the harvesters, the shepherds; a life that was itself poetry, with its rhythmic procession of ploughing and sowing, shearing and hay-making, harvest and vintage and olive-gathering. At Christmas he would go with his father to fetch the Yule Log, which was carried in with traditional ceremony and

song. At Epiphany he ran with the other children at dusk along the road of Arles, till "the bell-tower of Maillane vanished behind the tall black spear-points of the cypresses, the country stretched vast and bare into the distance", and the sunset flamed purple and gold like a crown. Then "The Kings!" the children cried. "See their crowns, see their mantles, and banners, and the horsemen and camels following!" His mother would regale him with songs and tales of how the Three Mariés with Martha and Lazarus and Sara, the gypsies' patron, came in a mysterious ship to Marseilles, of fairy-guarded treasure beneath the Roman ruins, of the ghosts and pixies that sported in the deserted castle, once the proud seat of the Counts of Baux who claimed descent from the Magi. "Not only with the milk of her breast did she feed me," he would write thereafter in his *Souvenirs*, "but with the honey of traditions and of God." In the same book he speaks of his father, "the last of the patriarchs of Provence, custodian of tradition and custom", who kept open table for all comers, and in the winter evenings would read the Gospels to his household, gathered round the great hearth. He was over eighty when he died.

"My friends," he said, "I am going now, and I thank God for all I owe to Him, my long life and my labour, which has been blessed."

Then he asked me, Frédéric, what is the weather?"

"It is raining, father."

"Good weather for the seed."

Just such a death as his son had by then already described in his poem, "The Death of the Reaper":

My kinsmen, friends, my star would have it so,
Or maybe that the Master, the one above us all,
Seeing the corn was ripe, would harvest it.

Ah then! In God's hands be it! I go my way
quietly,

Then when you carry the corn, children, upon
the cart,

Carry your chief away upon the sheaves. . . .

Maître François had read but two books besides the Gospels: *Don Quixote* and *The Imitation of Christ*, but in his wisdom he willed that his son should become an educated man. Providence must have directed his choice of schools, the little school of Frigoulet, where the children ran wild over the thyme-covered hills, and where the good master cared so little for pecuniary reward that at last he was forced to tell them "I have nothing more for you to eat. You must go home"—the school at Avignon, where the bourgeois boys jeered at Mistral's Provençal speech, but where he made the friendship of Roumanille, the young professor who had himself published Provençal verse, and whose example and encouragement caused him to cry, "Here is the dawn my soul awaited". When at last, Licentiate in Law, he returned from the University of Aix, and his father told him, "I have done my part. It is for you to choose the way that suits you. I leave you free", that way lay clear before him.

"I was then twenty-one. My foot on the threshold of the paternal farm, my eyes turned to the Alpilles, to myself and of myself I formed the resolve: firstly, to renew, to revive the racial sentiment in Provence, disappearing before the false and anti-natural education of all the schools; secondly, to promote that resurrection by restoring the natural and historic language of the country, against which the schools wage a war to the death; thirdly, to bring back the vogue of Provençal by the influx and flame of divine poetry." Meanwhile, under his father's guidance, he took over the direction of the farm.

Not in France alone, but all over Europe, as the progress of democracy and the widening circle of education brought the people into the orbit of national and literary life, two tides were meeting: on the one hand increasing uniformity and centralization, with the advance of the dominant language into regions that had hitherto held fast to a speech and custom of their own; on the other, the development of nationalist and

regionalist movements seeking to preserve the traditional variant as a precious heritage, symbol of a fruitful diversity. "A language," Mistral would declare in the full maturity of his thought, "is an immense monument to which every family has carted its stone, where every city has built its pedestal, whereat a whole race has labored with body and soul through hundreds and thousands of years. A language in a word is . . . the most holy instrument of civilization and the speaking testament of society living or dead." In Norway and Flanders, in Wales and Ireland and Brittany, in Catalonia, and the southern provinces of France, the same battle was waging; languages that had long forgotten their ancient title of nobility were being born anew. Everywhere this was the poets' doing.

"It was written in Heaven," says Mistral, "that one flowery Sunday, May 21st, 1854, in full springtime of life and of the year, seven poets arranged to meet at the castle of Font Ségugné." These seven, chief among them Mistral, Roumanille, and Aubanel, founded then the famous *Félibrige*, of which the name comes from an old poem in which the Virgin Mary in the Temple was greeted by "the seven *félibres* of the Law"—though what exactly "*félibre*" signified no one knows. A gay fraternity dedicated to the "Gay Science" of the Troubadours, and to the revival of the spirit of old Provence, their special object was the labor necessary to transform a spoken dialect, differing from parish to parish, into a literary language, purged of corrupt forms, uniform in spelling, and adequate in vocabulary—to effect in short for Provençal what Dante effected for the formless Italian of his day. To propagate their ideas they started then the publication of their *Provençal Almanach*, in which several of Alphonse Daudet's most famous *Lettres de mon Moulin* would make their first appearance—a true farmers' almanac, in which tale and poem alternated with recommendations agricultural, domestic, astrological (the *Félibres* had a weakness for astrology; for all Provence the

Provençal Nostradamus was a revered authority, and but for the opposition of both mayor and curé Mistral would most appropriately have received his name). To gain the material which made of the *Almanach* a mine of Provençal lore and custom, they would journey continually over the length and breadth of Provence, gleaning all-but-forgotten terms from shepherds and fishermen, witch-wives and herbalists, joining in the popular pilgrimages, stirring up the people to old songs, old tales, sleeping on occasion in barns, more than once arrested as vagrants, everywhere gathering up fragments of vanishing tradition and the older uncorrupted speech. After twenty years Mistral would garner the results of their labors in his *Trésor*, a great dictionary, etymological, technical, biographical, proverbial, historical—an encyclopædia of the whole South, of which Gaston Paris would write that "it is one of the most magnificent gifts the love of a language and of a country has ever made to science".

Meanwhile Mistral had been working on his Provençal epic, *Mireille*, which was finally printed on Aubanel's press at Avignon in 1859. The stars were propitious. The passing of the great Romantics, the collapse of their utopian dreams with the downfall of the Second Republic, had been followed by a period of disillusionment in which Mistral's voice seemed a voice from the Golden Age. The lingering influence of Rousseau still bore fruit in a vogue for worker poets, peasant poets, an Arcadian aspiration towards the sanity of the soil. Lamartine, old now, writing for a living, had himself dreamed of a peasant epic, and it was he who now announced with generous joy, "A great epic poet is born". At the same time a revival of classicism had begun, which could not but favor a poet who had found his vocation when as a boy he "recognized in Virgil and Homer living pictures of the labors, ideas, and customs of the Maillane country".

It is these living pictures that make the

greatness of *Mireille*. The story is a simple one. Mireille, in the freshness of her fifteen years, loves Vincent, a penniless boy who mends the baskets on her father's farm; before her father's anger she flees in anguish, over the blazing wilderness of the Crau to implore the intercession of the Three Maries in their salt-marsh sanctuary, and dies there of sunstroke and exhaustion, before her eyes a vision of the Saints coming to fetch her in their mysterious ship, though the weeping company who have pursued her see only "the white line joining the sky to the bitter waters, the sun about to sink in the reddening sea". The whole spirit of the land is there, and the labors of the land, the gathering of the mulberry leaves for the silk worms, when the trees are full of laughing, singing girls, swarming "like the yellow bees that rob the honey from the rosemary of the stony plains", the return of the great flocks from their Alpine pasturage; the hush of the starry night when the shepherds are already milking the ewes, their white dogs beside them asleep upon the thyme—Mireille flees past them like a spirit; the reapers advancing in a line of battle on the tawny wheat, the varied company of the haymakers, the ploughmen plodding behind their sleek mules, all are there, described in swift, vivid stanzas of richly woven rhythms and chiming rhymes:

The plain of Crau lay mute and still,
 Into the distance stretching till
 It lost itself in sea, the sea in the blue air.
 And swans, and lustrous water-game,
 Flamingoes with their wings of flame,
 Over the stagnant waters came,
 Seeking the lingering gleams of daylight there.

No translation can render the magic of the original, with its delicate diminutives and sonorous diphthongs, and that close, evocative union between word and object that is found only in languages not yet full-blown and still bound up with what Thomas Macdonagh in his *Literature in Ireland* calls the common furniture of life. (A quality that

places it outside schools, and finds a resonance in the modern striving to attain things in their essences.)

Turned into opera by Gounod, translated into every language, the success of *Mireille* was immense and immediate. Seven years later came *Calendal*, a tapestry of scene and legend and history, revealing yet other aspects of the face of Provence, the wild solitudes of the mountains, the precipices where the wild bees nest, the vivacious life of the little towns, the labors and pageantry of the men of the sea. More fantastic, inspired more directly by the troubadours, it tells of how Calendal, a fisher lad, by Herculean feats won the love of the fairy lady Esterelle, setting her free from the bandit Count who had wedded her by force and guile—in part an allegory, for Esterelle is Provence herself, and Calendal, the young *félibrige*, her deliverer. Partly in consequence it had no great success North of the Loire; many mistook Mistral's passionate regionalism for a desire for separation and resented his proud reminder that "only in 1448" Provence annexed itself to France, "not as an accessory to an accessory, but as a principal to a principal"; his indignant outbursts against the French who by the Albigensian Crusade had quenched the fine civilization of the troubadour Courts ("O Flowers, you came too soon! Nation in flower, the sword cut short your blossoming. . ."), and his threats to defend his "golden speech" with red bullets (much as Dante declared that those who objected to the literary use of Italian should be answered not with reasons, but with a knife!).

For a moment—we are in 1867—Mistral seems to have dreamed of a political coup, in coöperation with his friend the Catalan autonomist Victor Balaguer. For a moment only. But on the plane of ideas the federal resurrection of his province was the "Cause" to which he dedicated his whole life. The France against which he rebelled was a France before the symbol of materialism and irreligion, that France for whom he pleaded

in 1870 in his magnificent "Penitential Psalm":

Lord, at last Thine anger sends its thunders on our heads, and in the night our galleon strikes its prow upon the rocks. . . .

Lord we had left the austerity of the old laws and ways.

Lord, leaving behind us Thy Sacraments and commandments, brutally we sought to believe only in interest and progress. . . .

Lord, we have blown upon Thy Bible with the wind of false knowledge, and raising ourselves up like the poplars, miserable wretches, we have declared ourselves gods. . . .

In the name of the brave men fallen . . . of the mothers . . . of the women who wet their sheets with tears . . . of the poor, of the strong, of the dead who died for country, for duty, and for faith,

Disarm Thy justice.

A deep social and political vision inspires his whole action. If he would teach his people their past, it is because "the trees the deepest-rooted rise most tall". In place of the dead uniformity of the centralized State he would have the organic unity of harmonized diversity. He saw how "unitarism leads to despotism", the single head being a perpetual invitation to the tyrant. He saw the danger of a proletariat without roots and, fighting to make the provinces living entities, he was fighting for that reinforcement of local ties which alone could prevent the depopulation of the countryside, the attraction of the great urban centres, fighting always in defence of simpler and saner tradition. "If we would restore our poor fatherland," he declared in 1875, "let us restore what produces patriots: religion, tradition, national memory, the ancient speech; city by city, province by province, let us compete in zeal, labor, and honor, to honor diversely the name of France."

Ten years later the same organic, dynamic principle, in its wider implications, led him to an almost prophetic view of the international community to come. "It is my conviction that the *Félibrige* bears in itself the

solution of the great political and social questions agitating humanity—the federation of peoples, a Latin confederation, the renaissance of the provinces in free and natural fraternity." Adding, no less aptly, that "before devoting ourselves openly to this supreme task, we must await the outbreak of the formidable war . . . between Germanism and Latinity".

Meanwhile he had published his collected poems in *Lis Isclos d'Or* (*The Golden Isles*), in which pieces of grave beauty and vigorous *sirventes* alternate with chanting ballads that have the authentic note of those mellowed by the centuries. Then in 1884 came *Nerto*, a gay legend of papal Avignon in Ariosto's vein; like *Mireille*, it was crowned by the Académie Française. Then *La Reine Jeanne*, a lyrical drama of Queen Joan of Provence. Then, in 1897, a last great masterpiece, *The Poem of the Rhône*.

"*O tems di viei, tems gai, tems di simples-so. . .*" It is of the vanished Rhône of his childhood he would write, swarming with life and traffic, when the men of Condrieu passed proudly in their fleets of barges. In the steadily-flowing unrhymed verse the whole journey grows visible—the start from Lyons in the white morning mist, which gradually lifts, revealing the steaming valley and green hills; the town of Vienne, with the gray-blue teeth of Mont Pilatus against the sky; the naked boys leaping beside the wharf of Condrieu, where women have assembled to greet their husbands as they pass; the changing light, the deepening sun, the water still blue with the turquoises gathered in Geneva's lake, on which the white tented barges seem a flight of swans. Down they go, taking on passengers at Valence—a company of Venetian ladies—loading twenty sacks of violets at Ancône, on under the Pont Saint-Espirit, the gate of the South, to where olives and pomegranates grow in the widening valley and the air is hot and sweet with myrtle and lavender, past Avignon with its clustering towers, and on to the clamorous Beau-

caire fair, their goal. Then back again, with forty horses tugging against the stream. Interwoven is a fairy tale of a young prince seeking the mystic Rhône flower, and l'Anglore, the little fisher girl, who sees in him the Drac, the spirit of the river, who has filled her dreams. After the final disaster they are seen no more, for a steamboat, the first steamboat on the river, crashes into the fleet. And the boatmen trudge away, saying only, "He is dead of us all, today, the mighty Rhône."

Today all that is dead, silent, and vast . . .
Of all that busy life, all that remains
Is the worn tracing and the furrowed line
The fretting cable cut upon the stone.

There is a vein of stoical melancholy in *The Poem of the Rhône* which shows itself—though tempered with moods as gay and exuberant as any of his youth—in Mistral's last poems, *Les Olivades*, published in 1912 in his eighty-second year:

I, before the rising deluge,
Anti-Christian, mad, world-wide,
I have cabined my faith, which stands unconquerable,
To save it from the scourge, the shame,
Up in the watch-tower of a Provençal castle.
My faith is but a dream, that I know well,
But the dream has seemed to me of beaten gold. . . .
It seemed to me a rock, whence I, her lover bore,
Away in my two arms, the Sleeping Beauty. . . .

In the clear-sightedness of age, Platonic-wise, outward events seem to him of less account than vision and ideal, "the life of the living . . . beside the myth, is but reflected light", even his "Cause" the vesture of an archetypal reality:

Enough. For me upon the sea of story,
You were for me, O Provence, a pure symbol,
A mirage of victory and of glory,

Which in the shadow of the centuries transitory,
Revealed us a lightning glimpse of the Beautiful.

With serene expectation, the expectation of the farmer used to watching the weather, knowing the permanence underlying change, he looked to the future—"If not today, why then tomorrow"—with the triumphant assertion, "The Builders are dead, but the temple is builded".

The fame of the *Félibrige* had spread over the world, and now a new generation of ardent youth clustered round him. Awarded half the Nobel Prize in 1905, he used it to form his Arlesian Museum, to keep before the eyes of the people the smallest details of their tradition—costume, crockery, furniture, history. In 1875 he had founded the Floral Games—the counterpart of the Welsh Eisteddfod—at first for Provence and Catalonia only (always there was close fellowship between *Félibres* and Catalans, both memorous of how they shared a common past, when the Count of Barcelona had sailed up the Rhône to wed Doucinella of Arles); then extended to all the South; then to all the Latin world, "The Empire of the Sun" (in 1885 the prize poem was written by a Rumanian). Each time they were celebrated with increasing splendor. In 1909, when Mistral's monument was unveiled at Arles, twenty thousand people assembled, crying in delirious hyperbole "Mistral! You are our King! You are our God!" In 1913 M. Poincaré, as President of the Republic, opened the Floral Games at Aix; in his presence Mistral appealed anew, surely with reason, for "that regionalism in which France will renew her youth".

A year later, he was dead. On his tomb in Maillane there is no name, only the seven-pointed star of the *Félibres*, and the epitaph that sums up his life: *Non nobis Domine, sed nomine tuo et Provinciæ nostræ sit gloria.*

THE CONTEMPORARY GHOST

by Edith Ronald Mirrielees

READERS who contrast the short stories published in any set of English or American magazines during the early decades of the twentieth century with those published in the nineteenth century can hardly fail to observe in them one striking phenomenon. That is the phenomenon of the story's increased and changed use of the supernatural.

In the nineteenth century, of course, as in every century preceding it, the supernatural held an important place, but in dealing with it nineteenth-century writers had, in general, two habits sharply at variance with present ones. One of these was the habit of substituting the semblance of ghostliness for the actuality; the other the exaltation of man at the expense of ghost. As most present-day readers were brought up on nineteenth-century stories—Hawthorne's, for example, and Poe's—and have made the change to Machen and Blackwood and the rest without conscious analysis, it is worth while to look a little at each of these habits, partly for its own sake but still more for the curious implications involved in its abandonment.

Both Hawthorne and Poe (using the two as representatives of their age) write stories packed with supernatural feeling. With both, supernatural happening is of the rarest. Choosing almost at random among the better known of Poe's stories—"The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Berenice" or "Premature Burial"—the reader finds any one of the

three clammy with ghostly sensation, and yet, in all three together, no incident but refers itself straight back to so-called natural causes. Drugs, insanity, delirium, nightmare—these are the demoniac powers that drive the characters. And each of these is a power conceived in man's act and brought to birth in his own brain.

In Hawthorne's stories the driving forces are, indeed, different from those used by Poe, but the reluctance to infringe upon extramundane territory is the same. Time after time Hawthorne lays his hand upon the curtain which hides an unseen world—and snatches the hand hastily away again, protesting that the curtain has not parted. In "The Minister's Black Veil" a dead girl stirs and shivers beneath the hero's gaze—but only a discredited witness is permitted to record the happening. Esther Dudley's childish guests see stately figures moving in the halls of the empty manor house—but none but children see the figures and they report the marvel doubtfully. Other examples might be quoted in numbers from either source. With a zeal worthy of the first great era of the natural sciences, these two, creators, each in his own fashion, of the "new shudder" for their generation, are intent on assigning to that shudder a natural origin.

Now and then, however, the undeniable supernatural does slip inside their pages. When it does, with either of them, it comes always in one established relationship. It