

*Original Paper*

# The Creation of a French Catalan Identity through the Landscape of the Roussillon: The Writings of Josep Pla and Jean Amade

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URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v2n4p269>**Abstract**

*The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the Roussillon at a crossroads: to the north were the social and financial opportunities that came from adopting French, the language of the aristocracy and the elite (Berjoan, 2009, pp. 121-122), to south was the shining example of Barcelona, now living its *Renaixença* period, where Catalan arts and culture were gaining the attention on a world stage. In Perpignan, and in neighboring communities, the intellectual classes of the Roussillon were weighing their options. Catalan was widely spoken in this area of France, but few could write it. In fact, the efforts by the French government to unify the nation under one language had resulted in the devaluing of Catalan among its speakers. A lack of grammatical and orthographical norms in French Catalonia had also led native speakers to become confused about the language they spoke (Berjoan, 2009, p. 122). Was it Catalan? Were they?*

**Keywords***landscape, identity, Catalan***1. Introduction**

When France incorporated the Roussillon in the 17th century, Catalan not French was the language spoken in the area and there was little linguistic difference on either side of the border (Camps, 1986, p. 11). Two centuries later, however, French was the dominant language, used exclusively for written communication and formal address, while Catalan was relegated to spoken language predominantly in the home (Font, 2008, p. 95). Around 1880 an active renaissance of Catalan language and culture begins in the Roussillon (Camps, 1986, p. 28). We begin to see grammars and dictionaries published in

the Roussillon to scaffold the existing Catalan language and to encourage its use in written form. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Catalan author of the Roussillon Jean Amade began asserting that the resuscitation of Catalan use in Roussillon would require more than just an increase in language use, but a re-imagining of the French-Catalan identity. Amade looks to affirm the value of his language and literature by unifying it with Spanish Catalonia. In 1906 Jean Amade brings together prominent activists in Catalan language and culture to form the *Société d'Etudes Catalanes*, a society which included prominent Catalan advocates from both France and Spain (Camps, 1986, pp. 170-171). The Barcelona newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* reported in 1907 on the creation of the *Revue Catalane*, the organ of the *Société d'Etudes Catalanes*, stating that the creation of the journal constituted a work of Catalan patriotism as it served to propagate the literary, artistic and scientific accomplishments of the Catalan territory (“Una revista catalana a Perpinyá”). Amade contributed regularly to the *Revue Catalane*, and through his work with the *Société* became recognized as a notable Catalan author in Spain as well as France. The first issue of the *Revue Catalane* implores French Catalan poets to use the Barcelona standards for Catalan, in order to resemble and be accepted by Catalonia as much as possible. The sentiment is to dissociate Gallicisms from Roussillon literature, in order to closer align with Spanish Catalan standards and gain Spanish support. Adhering strictly to Catalan forms south of the border would make both sides feel they spoke the same language, but in order to support Catalan culture in Roussillon, they needed to identify as the same nation. After 300 hundred years of political separation, language was not enough to gain the support of Spanish Catalonia. Roussillon authors had to show they were part of the Catalan nation, and the best way to do this was to show their identity was born from the same traditional territory. A dialogue began to emerge across the Pyrenees, with authors from one side of the political division dedicating their works to one another and inviting both French and Spanish Catalans to participate in a common literature based on a common lived experience. Landscape became the communal backdrop that all Catalans, no matter which area or nation they belonged to, could tie their identity to and celebrate in unison.

## 2. The Roussillon Landscape at the Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

During the romantic period we see authors like Laborde, Stendhal and Sand describe Catalonia, for the first time, in a positive way. Tourism in Catalonia also increased during this period due to the romantic interest in the harsh countryside as a symbol of Catalan cultural identity (Garay & Cànoves, 2011, pp. 657-658). Second-home ownership in the region boomed, with Northern Europeans buying up traditional properties, renovating them and removing traditional vegetation and trees like the cypress and vines in favor of fruiting and flowering plants (Perramond, 2010, p. 200). Pla describes areas untouched by tourism as “intact” while those with important tourist trade are “infected” (1965, p. 182). He deplores the Roussillon abandoning of farmhouses, which he describes as “l’arquitectura rural tradicional de la nostra àrea lingüística”, the traditional rural architecture of our linguistic area (1965, p.

182).

In this way Catalan identity in the Roussillon was under threat from the north both in terms of linguistic traditions but also in the traditional landscape. In order to preserve their culture, French Catalans had to stop the eradication of the Catalan identity in Roussillon, in part through the preservation of the landscape to which their identity was intrinsically linked, a landscape which linked them more closely with Catalonia than with France. The harsh terrain, the olives, cypress, the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean, were symbols of a nation that grew up amongst them. French and Spanish sides of the border had a “collective inheritance of the natural environment” (Aitchison, Macleod, & Shaw, 2000, p. 100). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, authors like Pla and Amade use common landscape components as emblems of Catalan identity. Amade represents the French perspective while Pla lends Spanish support to the creation of Catalan emblems in the forms of Canigou, the cypress, and the vines.

### 3. Landscape and Identity in the Roussillon

Romantic authors were in search of awe inspiring landscapes, ones that invoked the feeling of the sublime. Beautiful scenery was not enough to inspire the poets of this period, rather than seeking out pleasant backdrops like alpine meadows; poets were seeking out the locus horribilis, the darker side of landscape (Hoghton, 2012, p. 72). Terrifying peaks of mountains, the withered and gnarled vines, grey and black olive trees and the rugged coastlines of Catalonia become ripe for the romantic vision of beauty. The key task for the Roussillon was to extend the notion of Catalan territory north of the Spanish border. The interest in the rugged Catalan landscape needed to include Roussillon in order for the renewal of Catalan language and culture to flourish in France as it had been doing in Spain for the better part of a hundred years. Certain landscape traits were already well linked to Catalan identity: “seny” in particular, level headed pragmatism which distinguished the Catalans from the rest of Spain. To Catalans “seny” distinguishes the pragmatic and industrious Catalan people from the hot tempered Spanish (Badosa, 1994, p. 468).

In order to revive the value of Catalan in the Roussillon, authors like Amade would clearly link the landscape of their territory to the greater Catalan identity. In his book *Origines et premieres manifestations de la renaissance litteraire en Catalogne*, Amade makes the connection between the territory and it's people: “étudier cette terre... c'est déjà connaître en grande partie le peuple même qui l'habite” to study this land is to already understand in large part the people who inhabit it (1924, p. 39). Pla, a prized Catalan author from Spain describes the key catalan characteristic “seny” he sees in the landscape of the Roussillon: It is clear that the characteristic being described by Pla is that of seny, the pragmatic and practical aspect of the Catalan.

Pla and Amade discuss common landscape components in their works, clearly supporting the protection of these elements as central to the protection of the Catalan culture as a whole. With authors on both sides of the political divide speaking in unison, both French and Spanish Catalans begin to value the

Roussillon as part of their nation and see its sites as their traditional heritage.

### 3.1 Mountains

During the Romantic period attitudes towards mountains changed, as the sublime was not to be found in pleasant valleys and alpine meadows but rather in bare and rugged mountain peaks. This greater aesthetic value was partly due to the striking and imposing nature of these summits but also because they were seen as being physically closer to God (Towner, 1996, p. 142). The romantics were also weary of the bustle of mainstream tours and tourist sites, and found the mountain solitude more propitious to self-discovery (Feifer, 1985, p. 149). Canigou represented the sublime and also a Catalan demi-god, and we see travelers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century travel to climb it, “je contemplai longtemps à travers ma fenêtre une montagne prodigieusement haute, dont la cime semblait perdue dans les profondeurs du ciel: ses larges et grandioses silhouettes étaient admirablement éclairées par l’astre des nuits. Je me trouvais en face du mont Canigou...” I pondered at length this majestic mountain from my window, the summit lost in the clouds. It’s imposing outline illuminated by the stars. I found myself standing before the great Canigou (Leclercq, 1888, p. 187)

The publication of Canigó in 1886 influenced many poets from northern Catalonia, and Verdaguer’s dedication in particular of this work to the “Catalans de França” was the call to unity for the Catalan community. In 1887 the French poet Pere Talrich responds by dedicating his *Recorts del Rosselló* to Verdaguer from a “Catala de França” (Font, 2008, p. 97). Inspired by Verdaguer, authors from France and Spanish Catalonia place Canigou firmly on the map of Catalan identity, a sacred site that links rather than divides the people on either side. Amade reiterates this idea of connection rather than division: “Ces Pyrénées méditerranéennes, loin d’être un mur infranchissable, établissent-elles, au contraire, comme liens naturels entre les races des deux versants” these Mediterranean Pyrenees, far from being a barrier, actually establish a common natural link between the people on either side (Amade, 1924, p. 28). It is the harshness of the terrain that have produced a defining characteristic in the people who have had to adapt to it (Amade, 1924, p. 31) another clear example of landscape illustrating *seny*. Further illustration of *seny* can be found in Amade’s description of the Roussillon coastline where the mountains meet the sea, he says the people of this land are like its children who inherit traits from either parent: the sea gives suppleness of thought and the mountains hardiness and endurance (Amade, 1924, p. 33). These qualities can be seen in how the Catalan people have altered their landscape in the way they have cultivated the mountain sides or terraced the earth as it falls into the sea (Amade, 1924, p. 34). The Catalan spirit of determination and pragmatism is both born from the landscape and visible in the imprint the Catalan people have made in their landscape.

Josep Pla’s description of French Catalonia connects its people to their territory and suggests that the Catalan identity adheres to the landscape that helped to create it (Culleton, 2006, p. 186). To Pla, the Roussillon is a land occupied by the Catalan people on whom they have acted out centuries of conflict, social rhythms and rites (Culleton, 2006, p. 188). For Pla, Canigou is also a source of life for the arid

value below it “Si el Canigó no fos una font inacabable d’aigua, els notaris del país no tindrien pas tant de pes. En els països assolellats, l’aigua és la condició de la riquesa de la terra” if Canigou hadn’t provided water to this region, the rivers would not hold as many fish. In sunny climates, water is essential to life (Pla, 1965, p. 182).

Upon arriving in Perpignan on his tour of Roussillon, Pla describes his experience of first seeing Canigou: “Al matí, quan obro la finestra de l’habitació de l’hotel on solc parar, a Perpinyà, se m’apareix el Canigó amb tota la seva enorme i fascinadora bellesa ... quan a Perpinyà se m’apareix, si el dia és clar, el Canigó, quedo sorprès i fascinat i em fa venir ganes de viure” that morning when I opened my hotel window in Perpignan I saw before me Canigou in all its imposing and fascinating splendor. On a clear day, when I can see Canigou from Perpignan, I find myself drawn to see this mountain up close (Pla, 1965, p. 192).

### 3.2 Vines

La vinya és, de tots els conreus humans, el que parta la intel·ligència, el seny dels homes més visiblement marcats (Pla, 1965, p. 175).

The vine is, of all our crops, the one that represents the human intelligence we call seny the best (Pla, 1965, p. 175).

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Languedoc was immersed in a political uprising centered on the viticulture economy of the region. The Grande Révolte of 1907 saw hundreds of thousands of wine producers and laborers take to the streets of Montpellier, Perpignan, Narbonne and Beziers to protest deteriorating wages and increasing joblessness in a region for which the wine trade was the primary economy (Jones & Clark, 2000, p. 337). This revolt created a new inter-class identity in the Languedoc, where diverse echelons of society were united by a common traditional economy surrounding the vines as well as a common language (Smith & Hawkey, 2015, pp. 310-317). Amade makes reference to the situation, recommending that the wine producers replace their vines with almond trees:

Un préfet conseillait, certain jour, à nos braves vigneronns en détresse de *planter des amandiers*. L’ironie était par trop amère, vu les circonstances; mais, en principe, le conseil ne paraissait pas mauvais... Il nous faut cet arbre, en tout cas, non seulement pour ses fruits...il nous le faut pour réjouir notre vue et nous redonner confiance (Amade, 1935, pp. 29-30).

Recently a prefect suggested to our brave winemakers in distress that they plant almond trees instead. This is a bitter pill to swallow given the circumstances but, in principle, is not bad advice...we need the almond tree, not only for its fruit... but also to liven up our landscape and give us confidence in the beauty of our land (Amade, 1935, pp. 29-30).

The Languedoc’s calendar, folklore and traditions are closely linked to viticulture and the seasons of the vines (Jones & Clark, 2000, p. 337) which are at the heart of its economy. Amade would see the vines replaced with almond trees, he says, to enliven the landscape and give confidence to its people. Josep Pla sees the vines in this area as the best representation of “seny” (Badosa, 1994, p. 17). For Pla,

the pervasive vines in Roussillon are an indication that the Catalan temperament has marked this landscape.

“Cada cep és una construcció de l’enginy, de la tenacitat, de la fidelitat. Sembla una força continguda per tal de produir quelcom de rar i de delicat. Una vinya no produeix mai una sensació d’abundància ni de facilitat” (Pla, 1965, p. 175).

Every branch is a construction of ingenuity, tenacity, fidelity. It seems a restrained power to produce something rare and delicate. A vine doesn’t give you a feeling of abundance or ease (Pla, 1965, p. 175). Pla clearly is torn by the beautification suggested by Amade, commenting on how the landscape of the Roussillon has been transformed in recent years, with the insertion of fruit trees among the vines. Pla feels this has significantly altered the feeling from one of maturity from withered and hardened vines to one of adolescence with young flowering trees that will soon produce great amounts of fruit (1965, p. 176). He expresses his skepticism at the benefit of this change on the overall landscape of the Roussillon.

Although Pla finds the vines of the Roussillon to be an emblem of Catalan identity in the region, he laments the impact the monoculture in this region has had on the landscape; in particular he blames the large scale French agriculture for the eradication of the masies or traditional Catalan farmhouses:

“La masia responia a una minúscula autarquia familiar molt completa... Quan en el sistema econòmic rural vuitcentista francès el Rosselló esdevingué un país monogràfic, basat exclusivament en el cultiu de la vinya, el règim de la petita autarquia familiar s’esvaí i l’economia del sistema fou arrasada totalment”. (Pla, 1965, p. 183)

The farmhouse was perfectly suited to the small self-sufficient family run properties in this area...when the 20<sup>th</sup> century French agricultural system was adopted in Roussillon it became a monoculture based solely on wine production and so the system of traditional family farms was abandoned and along with it the small farmhouses that went with it (Pla, 1965, p. 183).

To Pla, this is a major failing of the Roussillon landscape in terms of its Catalanity, because the Catalan landscape is based in small family run farms rather than large wine-producing domains with the chateau at its heart. To Pla, this reduces the Catalan imprint on the landscape, so although some viticulture is necessary for Languedoc to be seen as Catalan, it cannot eclipse the traditional farming of other cultures in the area.

### 3.3 Cypress

Associated with funerals and tombs since classical times (A dictionary of literary symbols), the cypress occupies an important place in the cultural landscape of the Mediterranean and therefore that of both the Catalan landscape and that of the Roussillon. The nature of the cypress influences this association with death in Mediterranean cultures: its evergreen nature evokes the eternal, its dark and flame like stature conjure images of sentinels protecting the tombs and its lack of large foliage allows it to move with the Mediterranean breezes in silence and isolation from one another (Hoghton, 2012, p. 72).

In the romantic period the cypress came to represent the sublime. Their gloomy appearance and connotations of solitude and darkness made them a favorite of authors of this period including Georges Sand and DH Laurence. Both Pla and Amade discuss the central role the cypress plays in the Catalan culture, and how powerful a presence in the landscape of the Roussillon.

“Qui dira jamais les services que nous rendent les cyprès? Aux puissances malfaisantes portées par les vents leurs formes souples et opulentes offrent une infranchissable barrière... Ce sont les divinités favorables de l’horta catalane”.

We can’t say enough about the services the cypress renders us. They offer an impenetrable barrier to ill omens and ill winds... they are the protective guardians of every catalan garden (Amade, 1935, p. 30).

Amade is clear that the cypress seen across the Roussillon plays a role in the protection of these gardens, which he qualifies as Catalan, protecting the produce from unfavorable winds. Pla congratulates the Roussillon on the magnificent lines of cypress that defend its Catalan territory (1965, p. 179) but prefers to refer back to the essential Catalan characteristic of *seny*, that he sees in the cypress of the Roussillon: “un xiprer isolat, o una vorada de xiprers arrastellats... us semblarà trobar-vos, mirant aquesta terra, enmig d’un paradís d’ordre” a lone cypress or a neat row of them demonstrate perfectly a paradise of order (1965, p. 175). For Pla, the cypress represents the dominance of order and pragmatism (*seny*) over the landscape of the area and is emblematic of the Catalan identity associated with the landscape of the Roussillon.

#### 4. Discussion

The revitalisation of Catalan Identity in the Roussillon is a varied story that plays out on a myriad of levels: increasing language use, reviving customs and reinstating festivals and fetes, among others. This study focuses solely on a small facet of the revival that is the use of landscape in the support of the Catalan identity in the Roussillon.

Roussillon was part of the Catalan counties since their inception but the annexation to France would profoundly impact the culture of this area. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Roussillonais were eager to rebuild the Catalan heritage they had lost, and looked to Spanish Catalonia and its flourishing *Renaixença* movement, for support. Spurred by an increase in foreign residents and their impact on local traditions in the early 20th century the Roussillon would either choose to protect the Catalan identity in the area or lose it forever. This paper examines the use of landscape by key Spanish and French Catalan authors in this period to create a link between the cultures of northern and southern Catalonia.

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