

The Poetics of Writing the Self: Pierre Sentat's Verse

Vera Mark

Volume 15, numéro 1, 1993

Poésie populaire
Folk Poetry

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082540ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082540ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Mark, V. (1993). The Poetics of Writing the Self: Pierre Sentat's Verse. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 71–88. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082540ar>

Résumé de l'article

L'analyse des vers français et gascons composés par un cordonnier-poète du Sud-Ouest de la France démontre que la poésie locale s'intéresse plus particulièrement aux représentations du soi, de l'histoire et de la politique. Le cordonnier en question a purgé une peine de prison pour avoir été jugé pour faits de collaboration pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale. Par conséquent, dans sa vieillesse, il a écrit des vers dans lesquels il présente des images positives du soi narré — le sien et celui des autres — dans le but de se réintégrer dans la société locale. L'approche employée lie l'analyse formelle du processus de capitalisation dans certains poèmes avec leurs significations psychosociales plus larges pour mieux comprendre la représentation de soi.

THE POETICS OF WRITING THE SELF: PIERRE SENTAT'S VERSE

Vera MARK*

French Department
Pennsylvania State University

Local poetry in France, also known as dialect poetry, patois poetry, or *poésie de circonstance*, has received little scholarly attention.¹ This neglect is due in part to the hegemonic role of classical French literature, which has tended to overshadow non-canonical literary forms. Local poetry's relative invisibility also derives from its mode of composition — for highly selected networks — and from its mode of distribution — to family members and close associates, often through unpublished media. Yet it is a vital cultural expression through which the ethnographer can, for example, construct social networks and communities, assess regional language competence and maintenance, and determine ideological dimensions of regional and national politics.² Finally, the highly personalized nature of local poetry involves a heightened attention to representation of self. This essay will focus on the latter dimension in the French and Gascon verse of an unpublished local poet, Pierre Sentat (1894-1984), a shoe vendor and cobbler from a small town in southwestern France.

Mr. Sentat's poems are of particular interest, not so much for their documentary value concerning maintenance of Gascon, the regional language, but, rather, for the ideologies, personal and political, which led to their compo-

* The research on which this article was based was supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies of Penn State University. Joan E. Gross, Kristin Koptiuch, Janet Roesler, and Kay Turner provided helpful comments on an earlier version of the present article. I would also like to thank Barbara Bullock for her close reading of the linguistic analysis and Pauline Greenhill for her editorial assistance.

1. The most sustained attention to this literary form has been given by social historians in their studies of 19th century French worker poets' verse (Newman 1975; Sewell 1980; Rancière 1983; Reddy 1986). All of these scholars note the ambivalences of the trope of work within popular verse, and the complex reception of this literary form, particularly among the bourgeois patrons such as Georges Sand who sponsored it.
2. See Greenhill (1989: 16-17) about the topicality of folk poetry in general and Ontario folk poetry in particular. In a related genre, in speaking about the interest of 19th century workers' autobiographical prose accounts, historian Michelle Perrot observes a multiplicity of possible readings of this form of popular writing. Thus private life in *milieux populaires*, relationships of family and gender, religious and political representations; and cultural practice — specifically in their relation to reading and writing — all may be analyzed through this type of document (1986: 300).

sition and are covertly inscribed in the texts. The grandchild of Spanish immigrants, the French-born Mr. Sentat fought in World War One. The son and grandson of army officers, he identified with the political right. During World War Two, as a mature adult, he moved to the far right in his political allegiances. Accused and tried for collaboration, he served a two and a half year prison sentence after the war, from 1945-1947. Upon his return to his home community after his release from prison, he met with almost universal ostracism. He spent the last 37 years of his life in isolation, working in the back *atelier* that adjoined his shoe shop, repairing shoes and leather goods for those customers who gradually returned to patronize his family business. In between repair jobs, Mr. Sentat would jot down poems on scraps of paper from old shoe company brochures or on envelopes from utility company bills. He engaged in this writing with special intensity in the final decade of his life, from 1974-1984, as a means of coming to terms with his problematic political past.

The cobbler's poetic repertoire, numbering some 200 texts, is about equally divided between French and Gascon, and consists of double-rhymed verse poems, typically 30 to 50 lines in length, extending to several hundred in some cases.³ What follows is a formal analysis of selected rhetorical features of Mr. Sentat's poetry, in order to show how they were manipulated for social ends, namely, to rewrite the author back into a social world. The majority of the verses cited are excerpted from Mr. Sentat's Gascon poem, the autobiographical «*Mon temps passat*», which he recited on occasion in his workshop to interested customers and to two journalists who interviewed him in the last five years of his life. Several other poems, namely those composed by Mr. Sentat between 1977-1984 for his primary male interlocutor, Gaston Thore, a retired horticulturist and fellow versifier, and between 1982-1984 for me, the foreign ethnographer, are analyzed as well.

The Language of the Poetry: Gascon and French

Before passing to the textual analysis, however, a brief overview of French and Gascon use will help to situate their role in Mr. Sentat's communicative repertoire. The Gers, Mr. Sentat's department of origin, has been French-dominant since the turn of the century, as is the case for the other departments which make up southern France. Historically, rural southern France was a setting for the *langue d'oc*, also termed Occitan. The peak of the *langue d'oc*'s literary use occurred during the Middle Ages as the language of troubadour poetry, whereas its northern counterpart, the *langue d'oïl*, would eventually provide the base for modern French. At present, active knowledge of the *langue d'oc* is

3. See for example his autobiographical «*Mon temps passat*» and «*Vie de soldat*». In the body of this article, French text means that the original language of the poem or interview was French. Gascon and French means that the original language was Gascon.

limited to the elderly, while middle-aged and young people, especially from rural areas, more often have passive knowledge of the regional language.

For much of his life Mr. Sentat spoke French with his family, neighbors, acquaintances, and peasant customers. French was the dominant language of his written expression as well, including his private correspondence to his family and sweetheart during his military service in World War One (1913-1919), letters written to his wife and daughter from prison in Toulouse in the aftermath of World War Two (1945-1947), and missives sent to several fellow World War One veterans in the final years of his life (1970-1984). The cobbler's most public texts, the shoe poems which he wrote in the 1930s to advertise his shop, and which he had printed up in broadside form, were composed in French.⁴ These poems dating from Mr. Sentat's young adulthood had the widest distribution; some can still be found in the possession of local families who saved as a souvenir the shoe wrapping papers on which the texts were printed. Finally, Mr. Sentat used French with me during our almost daily conversations in the course of my year in Lectoure (1981-1982), and in the letters which he sent to the States after my departure (1982-1984).

In contrast to the dominance of French in his public writings and business interactions, many of Mr. Sentat's poems were composed in Gascon, the westernmost variant of the *langue d'oc*. At present, much of the controversy surrounding the status of the regional variants of the *langue d'oc* and their degree of maintenance centers upon the way in which they are written. Individuals with relatively little formal education write their local variety (to which they typically refer as *patois*) phonetically, or as it sounds. In purely orthographic terms, the written *langue d'oc* much more closely approximates its spoken form than does, for example, written French. Educated urban authors have adopted the central southern dialect, Languedocian, proposed by some scholars as a standard form to subsume local variants.⁵ Mr. Sentat was typical of those rural writers who preferred to write the regional language phonetically.

Although to write in Gascon was a specialized use of the language, in contrast to its more common use in spoken communication,⁶ Mr. Sentat's adoption of the phonetic spelling used in rural settings made his texts readily

4. His shoe shop poems dating from this time period include «*Commandements du Bouif*», «*Commandements du Marcheur*», and «*Allez voir chez Sentat*».

5. Debate continues over the role of Languedocian as a standard for written Occitan. Béarnais, spoken in the southwestern-most portion of Gascony, as well as the Provençal of the eastern-most part of southern France, have also figured as candidates for a written standard of the *langue d'oc*.

6. See De Certeau (1984), Bourdieu and Chartier (1985), and Lejeune (1989) for further discussion of the impact of writing. Historians Newman (1975) and Rancière (1983) underscore the marginality of the 19th century worker poet, caught between two speech communities, one based in writing, the other in orality.

accessible to his readers. In this respect he maintained a direct link to the oral aspects of the language, as he transposed how Gascon sounded to how it was spelled. In broader social terms, what is remarkable about the *langue d'oc* is that its very spelling has become a symbol system for class and ideology on a regional level. The phonetic orthography marks working class as well as conservative Catholicism in rural areas, while the so-called "classic" orthography marks middle class and militant socialism in urban settings. If in urban settings phonetic orthography has negative connotations for activists in the southern regional identity movement, at the local level it is highly valued. In rural settings, the regional language is considered a highly localized form which is most appropriately and accurately captured by a phonetic spelling. To write in one of the several "standard" forms, including the Languedocian of the Haute-Garonne department, removes the local *patois* from its immediate context and displaces it to a larger community, located in urban centers and unfamiliar with its regional specificity.⁷

Gascon had a deeply symbolic role in Mr. Sentat's life. As a young boy, he heard it spoken by some of his relatives, including his mother, who also spoke her native Catalan at home. He heard Gascon spoken by residents of the farms where he and his mother did part-time summer work. At his elementary school, which he attended from 1900-1906, it was spoken by some of the older farm lads during recess. In an interview with me, Mr. Sentat recalled:

mais le patois ça ne s'oublie pas, ça, c'est maternel, c'est, ça vient... C'est la langue de ma maman, c'est la langue de ma jeunesse. j'ai souffert petit garçon en patois, j'ai joué en patois, j'ai, j'ai béni, aspergé ou déchiré en patois, parfois, n'est-ce pas? Alors, je me suis trouvé bouleversé, bousculé par d'autres gens en patois, qui ne faisaient pas attention si j'étais petit ou grand (April 18, 1982).

Mr. Sentat thus remembered Gascon as central to the very constitution of his social persona in the school setting, in which gender identities were frequently played out. The last phrase refers to his readiness to take on the older boys who taunted him about his small physique and his ethnic identity, as "the son of the Spaniard".

In the course of his adult life, which he spent running his family shoe shop, Mr. Sentat used Gascon on occasion with some of his peasant customers. He concentrated on employing the regional language most in written form in the last fifteen years of his life, in his advanced old age.⁸ Mr. Sentat's return to Gascon

7. Weinreich's classic study (1974) and more recently, Dorian (1989), both devote attention to the specialized functions which subordinate languages take on within the broader processes of language shift and death.

8. Native speakers' return to their regional language in old age has been documented by Bouvier (1973), in a linguistic study of the return to Provençal in southeastern France. Bouvier found that both older peasants, who remained in the home region but who had shifted over to French, and

in the 1970s coincided with the renewed interest in the regional language throughout the region after 1968. In personal terms, Gascon became a code of memory for this man, a means through which to express his inner-most self, to frame the experience of rejection and its reconciliation in writing.

Mr. Sentat's poems frequently took the form of letters which were then transmitted by local messengers. He wrote poems in Gascon for his primary correspondent, Mr. Thore, and occasionally for Mr. Carrété, a retired grain merchant and fellow poet. In addition, he composed poems in Gascon and French on a one time basis for certain individuals. They included several women — a retired music teacher and collector of proverbs; a retired pharmacist; the sister of Mr. Sentat's grand-son-in-law; several nuns from the local convent of Providence who included Mr. Sentat as one of the elderly people that they regularly visited on their daily rounds; and myself, the ethnographer — as well as several men, such as the mayor of Lectoure and a young Belgian summer tourist.

The cobbler occasionally read from his poems to acquaintances and regular customers, and especially to outsiders such as one-time customers who sought a quick shoe repair, vacationing summer tourists, and journalists. At times they became public oral literature, as when Mr. Sentat read aloud from his autobiographical «*Mon temps passat*» to older customers familiar with the time period referred to in the poem, which corresponded to the years 1894-1920. For the most part, however, the individuals for whom the poems were intended read the texts rather than heard them recited. Mr. Sentat's communication of these texts enabled him to re-establish or create social relationships with many of these individuals late in his life. Beyond his poetic interlocutors, Mr. Sentat's writing was known to a few local residents, such as the young doctor from the town hospital/old age home who joked with the cobbler in Gascon in his workshop, or the neighbor who as reporter to a local newspaper wrote the cobbler's obituary after Mr. Sentat's death in 1984.⁹ But most of the town residents were unaware of Mr. Sentat's writing, as is often the case for local poetry.

Capitalization and Linguistic Features

The most distinctive formal feature of Mr. Sentat's written style was his use of capitalization in what were otherwise unpunctuated texts. Analysis of the distribution and content of the capitalized forms reveals how the poet represented

individuals who moved back to their villages of birth upon retirement from careers in Paris or other regions of France opted to return to speaking Provençal in their advanced old age (1973: 231).

9. As part of the obituary, the reporter reprinted a portion of one of Mr. Sentat's French poems, «*Commandements du Bouif*», composed in the 1930s and printed on paper used for wrapping up shoe boxes and other purchases (Abrivat 1984).

himself and others at the narrated level. Positive textual images, particularly those concerning Mr. Sentat, contrast with the negative social ones held by many members of the community, namely the older generation who had been part of the events of World War Two. In the following examples, I point out patterns that emerge from the poems, but which are not entirely consistent either within a single text or between texts. The approach taken combines linguistic and rhetorical analysis of selected verses in conjunction with their larger psycho-social meanings, as keys to understanding representation of self. I touch briefly on the reception of the poems, in order to assess the extent to which their recipients decoded their sometimes hidden messages.

Where other writers might use an underline or italics,¹⁰ Mr. Sentat used capitalization for linguistic and semantic emphasis. In both his French and Gascon writing, Mr. Sentat made standard use of capitalization for proper names of place and person, such as «Crabe» (a local farm property), «M. Thoro» (the father of his primary poetic correspondent, Gaston Thore), and «Billes» (the cobbler with whom he apprenticed in the nearby village of St. Avit from age 15 to 18). His other uses were less conventional. Thus, rather than systematically capitalizing the first word of each new line of verse, as is common literary practice, Mr. Sentat did so only with respect to selected first words. This punctuation of his written version corresponded to rising intonation and emphatic stress of the capitalized phrases in his oral recitation. Such capitalization marked changes in content within the narrative, as would a new paragraph in a prose text:

(1)

en dous porqs et et lou bestia	pour les cochons et le bétail
et lous agnets que sarestaouren pas dé bella	et les agneaux qui n'arrêtèrent pas de bêler
La patrouno, contento de me besé travailla	La patronne, ¹¹ contente de me voir travailler
me ouardèq apes sega	m'a gardé après la moisson

10. In her study of 19th century silk weaver Norbert Truquin's autobiography, Michelle Perrot remarks that Truquin developed his philosophy and social criticism by setting off key phrases, sentences, and moral lessons in italics (1986: 300). Linguist Robin Lakoff (1982) assesses historical use of quotation marks, italics, and capitalization in the shift from oral to written discourse. While italics and quotations seem to have increased their range of usage in recent history, capitalization flourished in earlier periods much more than now. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century writing seems to have employed capitalization, especially of nouns, either in a manner reminiscent of modern German (all nouns capitalized) or as a marker of emphasis, not required but stylistically optional. With respect to age-graded linguistic competence, in children's writing capitalization marks the words of greatest significance, although without recourse to spoken convention. Adults may also use capitals to direct readers as to what is to be considered important (1982: 249).

11. This particular line provides an example of the intersection of form and content. On the one hand, with respect to form, particularly in the oral recitation of the text, this line was accompanied by a pause and increased emphatic stress. On the other hand, with respect to content, the capitalized phrase, «La patrouno» (The mistress) referenced the landowner's wife who directed Mr. Sentat

- (2)
- | | |
|--|--|
| se trabon donq, bien leou lougats | il se trouve donc, (que nous fûmes) bientôt loués |
| lous gades se nero pas parlat | les gages on n'en parlait pas |
| et tabe neri pas estounat | ceci aussi je ne m'étonnais pas |
| Lou segoun cop sieiz mesis y ery demourat | La seconde fois six mois j'y étais resté |
| en de m'en pourta uo pouretto coumo un parat | afin de m'emporter une poule petite comme un moineau |

(«Mon temps passat»)

(«Mon temps passé»)

These changes in content, or pause breaks, marked temporal deictics as well, as the poet moved chronologically through recounting his childhood work experiences. Thus example (2) above marks a break with the opening lines of the poem, and describes how in 1900 Pierre Sentat was hired for his first farm job at age six, when he accompanied his mother who sought to supplement the family revenues through temporary agricultural labor.¹² The capitalized phrase «*Lou segoun cop/ La seconde fois*» provides a transition to the poet's description of the following year, when at age seven he was hired out for a longer period of six months.

In addition to marking pause breaks and emphasis in oral recitation, Mr. Sentat's capitalization of a different element, namely, the written phoneme /h/, corresponded to a linguistic reality: /h/ is aspirated in Gascon, as in English, in contrast to being phonetically unrealized in French. Examples of Mr. Sentat's capitalization of /h/ include:

- (3)
- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| et en dé pas mauéja mé Hascoun | pour ne pas m'ennuyer ils me Firent |
| ana sérqua aïgo à la Hount | aller chercher de l'eau à la Fontaine |
- (4)
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Dinquos aou sè, siès Hours émbara | Jusqu'au soir, à six Heures rentrer le bétail |
| Troubaoui aquet travail, Hastious | Je Trouvais ce travail, Ignoble |
- (5)
- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| mes nery pas trop Hélécát | mais je n'étais pas trop Effronté |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
- (6)
- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| et dambe, poumos, anis et Hariat | et avec, pommes, anis et Farine Bien Moulue |
| Hazèoun un pastis bien feuillettat | Ils Faisaient un pastis bien feuilletté |

(«Mon temps passat»)

(«Mon temps passé»)

in his chores. It thereby privileged the semantic domain of work, a critical element in Mr. Sentat's self-representations. The terms *patron* and *patronne* also are part of artisanal discourse, and refer to the male and female owners of a workshop or family business, typically a husband-wife team.

12. Working on nearby farms was a common practice for the children of artisans. My former landlords, who own a paint store and run an interior decorating business in Mr. Sentat's hometown, remembered having to watch cows and sheep between the ages of 10 and 14, in the late 1940s. Their payment was in kind, and consisted of certain food items (Fieldnotes, August 2, 1981).

By stressing this particular phoneme, the writer underscored one of the most significant phonetic differences between Gascon, characterized by aspirated /h/, and its central and eastern variants Languedocian and Provençal, as well as French, which all have unrealized /h/.¹³ Highlighting a feature of oral Gascon in its graphic form, Mr. Sentat's capitalization was a personal rhetorical strategy for representing linguistic difference in a French-dominant world, reminding his readers of their shared knowledge of the regional language. In the cobbler's oral performances of the poems, he often marked the words beginning with /h/ by increased emphatic stress.

At the purely linguistic level, since Gascon tends toward retaining final consonants while French has open syllables, it is perhaps not accidental that Mr. Sentat capitalized so many stops. A parallel to Mr. Sentat's graphic emphasis in Gascon exists in spoken French, where for *l'accent d'intensité* one lands on stop consonants which are often doubled or trebled for this effect.¹⁴ When asked if it was easier to rhyme in Gascon or French, Mr. Sentat replied: «Oh, en français j'aurais plus de facilité quand même, parce que j'ai tripoté le français quand même dans ma vie plus que le patois» (April 18, 1982). Mr. Sentat's concern for rhyme-making even led to his manipulation of orthographic conventions for representing Gascon in written form. The following example illustrates this point:

(7)

aqui mon conte acabat
n'aouei meme pas tabat

voici mon conte terminé
je n'avais même pas de tabac

(«Mon temps passat»)

(«Mon temps passé»)

The Gascon word for tobacco, *tabac*, is the same as the French. However, Mr. Sentat changed the final "c" to a "t" so that it could match up with the last word of the preceding line, which contained the past participle form of the Gascon verb *acabar*. Insistent on framing much of his writing through the marked genre of poetry, Mr. Sentat was obliged at times to modify Gascon words in order to double rhyme. Although he denied being a writer, Mr. Sentat identified sufficiently with the principle of poetic license to justify his appropriation of a "standard" collective form and its conventions, and to then transform it to suit his own needs.

13. When asked how their Gascon, or *patois*, differs from surrounding dialects or from French, native speakers most frequently cite this phonetic contrast. In so doing they stress the indexical function of this linguistic contrast.

14. Barbara Bullock provided this observation.

Capitalization in the Representation of Self

These orthographic representations of emphasis in punctuation and pronunciation at first suggest that Mr. Sentat's use of capitalization was limited in function to marking discourse, delimiting a poem's rhetorical structure, and emphasizing the phonological aspects of spoken Gascon in writing. However, the linguistic form of examples (3) through (6) overlaps with their content, that of different kinds of work. Examples (3) and (4) enumerate the tasks which the young boy was obliged to undertake: fetch water for the farm animals from the fountain, herd the cows all day long. Example (5) attests to his dependability as a worker. Example (6) outlines the making of a regional pastry with an artisan's eye to how good ingredients and proper techniques resulted in a fine product, the apple tart.

The trope of work is central to various genres of popular writing and takes several forms. In working class autobiography, for example, it may constitute (male) artisanal and gender identity, and draw on traditional elements and the modern 'work ethic' to encode an often hagiographic self-representation (Lovelace 1982; Passerini 1987).¹⁵ In Mr. Sentat's case, it further marked a specific historical period, the 1930s, and a particular political ideology in vogue, that of the National Revolution of occupied Vichy France. The slogan of the National Revolution, «*Travail, Famille, Patrie*», made famous by Maréchal Pétain, represented "work" as key to being a worthy male head of household and a good citizen. Yet the trope of work retains a certain ambiguity in Mr. Sentat's verse, whereby the self is placed in a continually shifting equilibrium drawn between pessimism and action, to borrow Passerini's formulation (1987: 49). In this respect, the cobbler resembled his 19th century worker poet counterparts. Although these poets appeared to celebrate work, in fact they found it simply routine, and therefore unremarkable, or, in a more extreme sense, despised it (Newman 1975; Rancière 1983; Reddy 1986).

Mr. Sentat made regular use of capitalization to highlight a number of themes in his textual representations. These included work, war, and personal time, experienced both daily in its durative aspect, as well as in seasonal and yearly increments. These themes overlapped with grammatical categories which equally referred back to the self. The first involved modal verbs, usually written in lower-case in French and Gascon. Their capitalization underscored what already bears a strong moral tone — "should", "would", "had to":

15. In her study of the cultural experience of Turin workers' memories of Fascism in Italy of the 1930s, historian Luisa Passerini emphasizes the range of meanings associated with the work ideal, which, in combination with a sense of local identity, takes on regressive or progressive meaning according to the historical period and situation (1987: 45).

- (8)
 me Calèou débrouilla
 en de Hè bouno bitto,
 («Mon temps passat»)
- il me Fallait me débrouiller
 pour Faire bonne vie,
 («Mon temps passé»)

«*Caleou*», which means “it was necessary that, one had to” in Gascon, is associated with the neutral third person singular pronoun. By capitalizing this impersonal verb form, the poet stated his opinions more forcefully. In both cases he explained how even as a young child he was forced to fend for himself. This is part of his hagiographic self-representation, which emphasized that he was always exceptional, beginning in childhood. Mr. Sentat also capitalized first person verb forms when referencing himself:

- (9)
 Ery ma foi bien bènant
 («Mon temps passat»)
- J’Etais ma foi en bonne santé
 («Mon temps passé»)

A related example included the personal pronoun, which is only capitalized word-initially in written French or Gascon:

- (10)
 Lous agnets mous calèouo¹⁶ Jou Bira
 («Mon temps passat»)
- Les agneaux doux il Me fallait Virer
 («Mon temps passé»)

Finally, a third instance of capitalization occurred in noun phrases, when Mr. Sentat passed from first to third person, and in so doing represented himself in relation to a larger historical process (see also Passerini 1987: 41):

- (11)
 mè prengueoun coumo un petit Bouë
 et nery pas qu’un petit Baquè
 («Mon temps passat»)
- ils me prenaient pour un petit Bouvier
 et je n’étais qu’un petit Vacher
 («Mon temps passé»)

Example (11) contains a visual parallelism which Mr. Sentat frequently used in paired couplets; repeating the same consonant or vowel, or else contrasting different consonants or vowels, within the same line or across lines. The poet capitalized those aspects of his life about which he had strong feelings, such as

16. As mentioned earlier, Mr. Sentat’s capitalization exhibited some patterns but was not consistent within and between texts. Although example (8) contained a capitalized form of the Gascon modal «*caleouo*», here it is not capitalized.

his exploitation as a child farm laborer. In this last set of examples, the capitalization had double referents — first, back to the author himself, and secondly, to the semantic domain of work. The capitalized noun phrases parallel the earlier mentioned modal forms and underscore the fact that as a young boy Mr. Sentat was forced to work above his appropriate level, exploited by the “bosses”, the land-owners, and, to some extent, his parents.

The other significant domain of personal experience underscored through capitalization was that of war. Mr. Sentat signed up initially for three years, but when World War One actually broke out, his service was extended to seven years:

(12)

l'Homme proposo e Diou dispo
Hescouy 7 ans et nero pas tout Roso
et a la Démobilisation
m'en Tournay coumo un Couyon

L'Homme propose et Dieu dispose
J'ai Fait 7 ans et ce n'était pas tout Rose
et avec la Demobilisation
je suis Rentré comme un Couillon

(«Mon temps passat»)

(«Mon temps passé»)

The first line of this example contains a proverb-like formulation of war, whose durative nature is stressed in the next line, which states the number of years which Mr. Sentat served. An intersection between form and content occurs, for the term «*Hescouy*» repeats the earlier examples of aspirated /h/ in Gascon, which overlaps with representation of self — *I* Did — and with the category of time. The end of the war is underscored by capitalization of the word for demobilization in the third line, while the last line indicated Mr. Sentat's remembered dissatisfaction with what would become his life's job, a cobbler, a profession chosen by his father.

Mr. Sentat's capitalization made for a highly individualized discourse cohesion at the linguistic level, achieved through visual effect and repetition of words, phrases, and rhyme scheme. Capitalization was iconically represented as punctuation in the oral recitations of the poems, and indexically represented in the written version, especially with respect to self. At the extra-textual level, it helped to create a narrative persona through semantic categories. Mr. Sentat's graphic representations had social dimensions which stemmed from his attempt to counter his social and verbal isolation in the post World War Two years. He used capitalization to literally make himself and other people “big”. By positive representation, he worked to reintegrate himself within a local social world from which he had largely been excluded for the second half of his life.

Capitalization and the Representation of Others

Mr. Sentat's use of capitalization was not limited to himself, for he employed this rhetorical device to represent others and draw them into the textual

world that he had constructed. Through capitalization of others, his poems flagged people, a parallel to the cobbler's verbal attempts to engage others in conversation in the shop. The texts accomplished this not only by directly naming these individuals, but by capitalizing their positive traits and significant domains of experience as well:

(13)

y troubey meme M. Thoro
que demouraou pas d'ehoro
Bien Habillat uo crabatto fino
e Tabe aueo bouno mino

j'y trouvais même M. Thore
qui ne demeurait pas dehors
Bien Habillé une cravate fine
il avait Aussi bonne mine

(«Mon temps passat»)

(«Mon temps passé»)

This example underscored the family unit in its reference to the father of Mr. Sentat's major poetic correspondent, Gaston Thore. Mr. Sentat met the senior Mr. Thore in 1912, when, disabled from a riding accident and unable to do much cobbling, Sentat turned to work as a waiter in one of the town's cafés, in order to save some money before signing up for military service in World War One. His reference to his poetic colleague's father concentrated on the well-dressed social body, visible in the town café, an important setting for public encounters. By positively situating the senior Mr. Thore in the local community, Mr. Sentat's verse valorized this man, and, indirectly, himself.

In examples (14) and (15) below, from a poem in honor of Gaston Thore's sixtieth wedding anniversary, Mr. Sentat again underscored the family unit, through commenting on Mr. Thore's wife, children and grandchildren:

(14)

oui c'est grace à ta chere Lyly,
que tu as eu tes chers Petits

(15)

Vos trois grands fils
depuis longtemps mariés
ont a leur Tour des filles des fils
pour tenir votre temps occupé

(«pour un bel anniversaire»)

If in «*Mon temps passat* » Mr. Sentat privileged genealogical continuity in the Thore family through an elder and by going back in time, in «*pour un bel anniversaire*» he turned to future generations — children and grandchildren — and evoked future family time. Mr. Sentat concluded the anniversary poem with the more general theme of life, to be celebrated on ritual commemorative occasions such as this:

(16)

Vive la vie quand tout va bien
on Travaille avec courage

(«pour un bel anniversaire»)

With this remark he made an indirect reference to his own situation — an ever-present concern, even when writing for and about others. Thus, as he celebrated the Thore family's anniversary, this collective celebration led him to reflect once again about his personal position in the social community and larger national events, including the aftermath of World War Two. The last line of this example (16), with its capitalized verb form, repeats the trope of work and refers to Mr. Sentat's laborious efforts to reintegrate himself within the town by serving others.

The next set of examples are excerpted from a poem which Mr. Sentat wrote for me as I prepared to return home to the United States in late May 1982, at the conclusion of my fieldwork. They reveal that the cobbler employed the same rhetorical strategies for more distant "outsiders" as well. The first poem, «*Separation*», elaborates several significant themes:

(17)

et te bas continua, d'Estudia

et tu vas continuer, d'Etudier

(18)

Taouen heyt Hai, counichénso
dambè dè brabos gens
Eros aouéoun la compéténsou
en d'esta dè bouns Régents

nous T'avons fait Faire, connaissance
avec de braves gens
Ils avaient la compétence
pour être de bons Maîtres

(19)

as Troubat, quaouques Proufessous
Damos, charmentos en dè dise
Hommes un paouc fiers et glourious

tu as Trouvé, quelques Professeurs
Dames, charmantes pour le dire
Hommes un peu fiers et glorieux

(20)

et règreton lou depart d'acquèro Maïnado
espérant la bese encouero dans sous Tricots

et ils regrettent le départ de cet Enfant
espérant la voir encore dans ses Tricots

(21)

ouï es l'Americaine de Litouro
que bo apprèngue à Parla

oui c'est l'Américaine de Lectoure
qui veut apprendre à Parler

(22)

béleou un jour nous Tourmèra

peut-être un jour elle nous Reviendra

(«Separation»)

(«Separation»)

In example (17), the domains capitalized refer to my role as a student and my social world, which included the individuals to whom Mr. Sentat and his daughter

had introduced me and who became my teachers of Gascon (examples 18 and 19). With these lines Mr. Sentat emphasized a significant element of my social identity. Although he remained cut off from much of the community, my outsider status motivated him to try and create a social world for me. His image of the ethnographer as a child in example (20) — I was in my late twenties at the time — is a common one in fieldwork relations. Furthermore, it typified the poet's tendency to situate people genealogically, a current practice in rural societies, and his strategic manipulation of a positive image of the family as a source of support and protection from a hostile outside world. Incorporating me into local space — «*es l'Americaine de Litourol/c'est l'Americaine de Lecture*» — he next contrasted my national identity with my interest in learning Gascon, the local language (example 21). The final verse marked future ethnographic time, in hoping for my return (example 22).

A second poem written for me, «*Jour de départ = Fourcat*» continued the themes of language and time, the latter expressed in biological, cultural and ethnographic terms. It also imaged several male acquaintances of mine whom Mr. Sentat met during my fieldwork stay:

(23)

Bats décha, un soubènir
dou bero Jouenesso

Tu vas laisser, un souvenir
d'une belle Jeunesse

(24)

Nou pensos pas, encouèro aous Christs
que daouen tu sè présenton
Praquo soun bien ésbérits
et en prièros, Té Tourmenton

Ne pense plus aux Christs
qui devant toi se présentent
Pour cela ils sont bien éveillés
et dans tes prières, ils Te Tourmentent

(25)

Lous bièls Countaires en patoues
sé lou dimèché, parlon Français.

Les vieux Conteurs en patois
si le dimanche, ils parlent Français

(26)

dambè la Henno à la maison
parlon patoues en tout brèspailla
et daco n'en bien razoun
n'at Jouen, nou lous Controdirà

avec leur Femme à la maison
ils parlent patois au déjeuner
et faire cela ils ont bien raison
aucun Jeune, ne les Contredira

(«*Jour de départ = Fourcat*»)

(«*Jour de départ = Forcé*»)

The first image of biological time (23) implicitly contrasted my youth with Mr. Sentat's old age. The several bearded male acquaintances (24) were imaged by Mr. Sentat in religious terms as "Christs", which he presented in a moralizing discourse that underscored my appropriate behavior according to his Christian principles.

In the final stanzas Mr. Sentat returned to a theme common to many of his poems; the relations between traditional and modern cultures, seen through the contrast between generations. On the one hand he evoked a certain linguistic reality, that everyone speaks French by now, including the farmers who come into town on Sunday for mass (25). He suggested a privatization of Gascon when he went on to say that these same individuals return to their ancestral tongue in the settings of their homes, at the ritual meal of Sunday lunch (26). He concluded with an affirmation of traditional culture, vested in the family elders, as when he commented that no young person would deny the wisdom of this linguistic practice. In fact, few young people actively speak Gascon with their parents or grandparents; they at best have passive knowledge of it. Highlighted through language, this instance gave Mr. Sentat an occasion to assert that cultural authority should be maintained through one's elders.

Psycho-Social Contexts for Local Poetry

What may be distinctive about Mr. Sentat's use of folk poetry are the psychological conditions which motivated the particular narrated representations of their author and of others in his poems. Mr. Sentat felt himself to be small and insignificant in the eyes of the community partly because of his social position as an artisan with a grade school education. But most importantly, this feeling stemmed from his rejection by the community after World War Two. In contrast to a stigmatized social self, Mr. Sentat's textual self was large and important, reflected quite literally in capital letters. Capitalization worked at the rhetorical level to counter the cobbler's feelings of powerlessness. Obsession — Mr. Sentat was constantly concerned with others' opinions of him — and pathos — in fact few people were privy to his inner-most thoughts — both underlay this textual strategy.

In his study of Asturian folksong and poetry, James Fernandez contrasts what he terms "movements of familiarization" and "movements of alienation" in order to analyze which social categories are brought into or expelled from textual space (1986: 82). These categories, which in the broadest sense begin with insiders and outsiders, translate in Asturian village terms to the contrasts between neighbor and emigré, farmer and gypsy, cattle herder and waggoner (*Ibid.*: 84). Far from being exclusively uni-directional, movements of alienation may expel insiders such as neighbors, as well as socially categorized outsiders such as gypsies, beyond local space. In contrast, movements of familiarization may bring other outsiders, including the visiting anthropologist, into local social space via textual space (*Ibid.*).¹⁷ Fernandez accounts for these poetic movements within the

17. To illustrate this last point, Fernandez cites a verse from a praise poem which Jesusa, an illiterate village poet, composed in honor of him and his wife in Asturian, the regional language, after receiving the couple's gift of a pair of slippers. The poet's laudatory movements are present in

context of a larger political economy. He affirms that local verse is typically aggressive rather than laudatory, and prefers to reveal frailty by what he terms "metonymic misrepresentation," or by moving to take a weak part of the person for the whole (*Ibid.*: 85). He suggests at first that textual manipulations of people and their social categories allow marginal individuals such as folk poets to compensate for their own peripheral position in village society (*Ibid.*: 89). Fernandez adds that urban high culture exerts pressures on country folk, whose subordinated circumstances may cause them to put down their fellows rather than to support or elevate them (*Ibid.*: 97). Although he presents the poets on an individual basis, they are part of a collective phenomenon, subjugated villagers, and so we do not have further information about what other kinds of factors, especially psychological ones, might motivate certain poets to diminish rather than aggrandize specific subjects of their verse. Fernandez' discussion of individual versifiers is subsumed by the collective social category of "village poets" and their intentions.

An emphasis on the collective is also present in Renwick's (1980) analysis of local song and poetry in a different setting, that of late 20th century rural Yorkshire. Renwick maintains that local songs are:

seldom made primarily for personal material gain or for individual aggrandizement, whether it be the raising unilaterally of one's social status vis-à-vis one's peers, or the attaining of personal and subjective insight, or even, for that matter, the achieving of psychological 'release'... Rather, the songs are intended to inform, to persuade, to manipulate, or to affirm the relationship of *communitas* with and among Significant Others in one's primary social and cultural networks - those Others who are structurally, functionally, or affectively linked in a direct way with one's life within a family, an occupational group, or a community (1980: 3).

Renwick expresses a folklorist's emphasis on the collective in his evolutionary links between the present individualized forms of local poetry and earlier forms, folksongs, that were communally based in creation, performance and transmission.

In contrast, Mr. Sentat wrote individuals into his poetic texts in order to recreate both himself and a sense of community. His narrated self was created through reference to his own persona as well as through reflections back from others in dialogue. Consequently Mr. Sentat created his narrated self with self and through other, not in terms of self versus other, an opposition implicit in

another poem, this time composed in honor of the son of a neighbor who had helped her. At the beginning of the verse the poet addressed the man by his name, Anton, before proceeding to enumerate his accomplishments. At the end of the verse, however, she literally aggrandized Anton with a new name, that of "Grandón," which may translate as "Big One" or "Great One" (1986: 85). This semantic aggrandizement by the Asturiana folk poet Jesusa parallels Pierre Sentat's visual aggrandizement achieved through capitalization.

Renwick's discussion.¹⁸ Preferring metaphorical aggrandizement to metonymic misrepresentation, and elevation of his poetic subjects, Mr. Sentat made writing a supremely social act. Through writing he sought to actively negotiate relationships with members of several communities: first in terms of an age group, with those persons like himself who were born in the last decades of the 19th century, and for whom Gascon had been the primary code of a rural childhood; second in terms of a social category, that of the peasantry and working class, with people who spoke and understood, but did not necessarily write Gascon, which included many of the older artisans and farmers; and finally in terms of local poets, a limited group which included small shopkeepers and schoolteachers, and who used Gascon above all in written form.

However, although the cobbler intended his verse for a larger "community", the dialogic nature of its composition and communication meant that his writing remained above all a mental representation. Indeed, his elder granddaughter commented to me that her grandfather wrote primarily for himself, not to be read by others. This was true, although the interest in his writing by select individuals — several nuns, Mr. Thore, myself — certainly encouraged Mr. Sentat, who wrote so as to make himself known to his family, to others (including outsiders to the community of Lectoure), and, through myself, even to North Americans. There was an ironic twist to Mr. Sentat's writing in Gascon. Even though the cobbler wrote to reconcile his past as part of a life review for his family, his Gascon texts could not be fully appreciated by them. Mr. Sentat's youngest heirs, his two great-grandsons, could not read Gascon, although their mother and grandmother have excellent knowledge of the regional language. In the course of my fieldwork year, Mr. Sentat created a French version of two Gascon texts, which resulted in the poem «*Mon temps passé*» and a prose text «*La vie d'un écolier au début du siècle*». He composed the latter text to order for his younger great-grandson as part of a school assignment on "life in days past". The cobbler provided a French version because neither his great-grandson nor the boy's fellow classmates could understand the original text.

Mr. Sentat conceived of his verse-making above all as a private act, but it could be appropriated by others in power, such as the ethnographer. Therefore the cobbler's repeated denial of being a writer was not merely due to his perceived lack of linguistic competence.¹⁹ His position may be seen as an act of resistance

18. Saldívar makes this point in his discussion of strategies for representing the self in ethnic autobiography (1985). For him, the public and private are mutually reflexive and constitutive.
19. Mr. Sentat's written correspondence contains orthographic mistakes, largely due to his spelling French phonetically. His self-consciousness about his incomplete mastery of written French was part of the reason he constantly denied being a writer. The mastery of written French, and specifically, of its spelling, is still tested in *concours*, or competitive exams for advancement in certain professions in France and the French-speaking world. The central role of the *dictée* in French language classes is another example. See Weber (1976) and Ozouf and Furet (1980) for other examples of the importance of mastery of French and of its spelling, with reference to the nineteenth century.

to the potential for the appropriation of his writing. As we spoke about his poetry, he joked with me: «Qu'est-ce que vous allez en faire, vous allez me dénoncer peut-être?» in a not-so-veiled reference to World War Two (April 28, 1982). Mr. Sentat's choice of the word *denounce* bore all of its historical weight in the context of his life, and in a more general sense, suggested a moral betrayal, as exposing him to other people's judgments. Historian Michelle Perrot observes that for working-class individuals speaking openly through one's writing is self-exposure, while a sense of secrecy protects them from intrusion of power. In addition, a certain feeling of class respectability tends to repress the inner self or at least renders one wary of making it public (1986: 297).²⁰

Mr. Sentat appeared to share this view, seeing writing as self-exposure, and his verse a key to an inner self which remained hidden from the outside social world. Sensitive to an extreme about the interrelation of private/public faces of self, he manipulated this relation in other communicative contexts. This is evident in his explanation as to why he used Gascon, rather than French, in an interchange with a first-time customer, a man from the nearby countryside:

Pour le mettre à son aise, pour le mettre à plomb, et à ce moment-là, il pense à moi-même, de moi, et il dit *As bien raisoun. En patoes, souy mès commodo parla patoes qu'en français.* Il ne me le dit pas, mais il le pense... et je m'en fais, je ne dis pas un copain, c'est trop commode, mais enfin une confiance... une confiance et on dit comme conversation, de quoi parle-t-on, de rien... (April 18, 1982).

By appealing to a rural man's inner-most identity, that of *patois* speaker, hidden under French, Mr. Sentat indirectly appealed to ethnic and/or class solidarity as well. He made public the personal and private in a spirit of solidarity, as a means by which to develop a future merchant-client relationship. In this instance, Mr. Sentat's gift of speech, the hidden *patois*, paralleled his offering of poems to selected individuals in order to valorize them. Both modes of communication reintegrated him into a social world.

20. In the introduction to her analysis of the autobiography written by the 19th century silk weaver Norbert Truquin, Michelle Perrot notes the scarcity of workers' autobiographies for this time period. Furthermore, private diaries, of women, in particular, have been destroyed or buried away in archives (1986: 297).