

The analysis of how important the theme of the natural environment is within the literature about Brittany.

The theme of nature is so alike, yet completely opposite to the other theme, often prevalent in Brittonic art - death. Nature, or natural environment as a theme is a fertile field for expressions and subtle messages filled with metaphors. It's as simple as saying that the sky darkens, hiding the sun behind the thick blankets of clouds, ever chasing one another amidst turbulent wind, to relay inner conflict, lack of hope and a general feeling of depression. A simple statement of the air thickening and buzzing with electricity can spell feelings of anxiety or overwhelm, whilst the description of the scent of ozone post-storm comes to mean a sense of renewal, new hope and fresh energy that can push the subject further along the path of their goals. Yet this is but a description of atmospheric events. Nature itself, the flora and fauna bring an ocean of meanings hidden in plain sight. Brittonic literature is filled to the brim with them, not unlike a cauldron bubbling over, ready to spill its contents onto the waiting eyes of a reader. By looking at any representation of Brittany, but especially poems and prose, the reader can easily notice the recurring pattern of focus, as nature seems to, even if not in the foreground of the work, be at least on the mid-plane of it. Some take the descriptions of nature to play off of emotions and create atmosphere, whilst as well connecting it to spiritual aspects that are so dear in Brittany (Villiers - *The Sign*). It is also the case for Le Braz's 'Dealings With Death'. This essay will particularly focus on one story for this collection the *Eight Omens Of A Death*, with its clear description of the surrounding world. The way the description of nature is used there is not unlike Villiers', as it builds the atmosphere for the story, but in a different way. It is *clear* that nature and its theme are utterly engraved into the heart of the Representations of Brittany, one way or another and this work will aim to prove just that, using various examples from mainly *The Sign* and a chosen poem from Corbiere, using Duval as a supporting source, rather than one considered to be secondary. As art, especially poems tends to be subjective, rather than objective, this essay will rely less on secondary sources, ready to hand-hold the reader and more on the natural understanding of their work and relation to Brittany as the land that inspired it. However, from time to time secondary sources may be used to provide a wider scope of meanings or understandings of certain metaphors or to validate a certain point made.

Nature, as an entirety of ecosystems and amalgamation of conditions and parts, is a language of its own and for a long time has been associated with Celtic traditions (i.e. Oaks and their associations with Druids, serving as a symbol of stability, and balance and everlasting wisdom). As mentioned previously, in the introduction to this essay, Nature is its own way of communication, almost a language that is universal, that relies on feelings rather than learned meanings to drive the point across. In this case, the descriptions and vast focus on nature within Brittonic works suggest not only a deep, almost subconscious or learnt young, respect and connection to nature, so obvious and clear within Celtic traditions and cultures, which Brittany is a part of, but it also works as an introduction of Brittany to wider circles of interested people, using their emotions and ability to imagine to present Brittany as nature-focused and rich in feelings rather than dry, stifling environment so known to those that set a foot in the city. A direct contrast to the cities that back then were considered the centre of culture and fertile ground for those that wished to develop themselves. In representations of Brittany the wisdom comes *from* nature, the calm spirit, the vast focus on it, it all brings forth a simple message - rather than looking for an elaborate encyclopaedia, one should look for the answers in nature, as it will provide those in spades, whether that is

to give a peace of spirit and mind, or lessons to learn. The nature in regard to Brittany often entices the feelings of nostalgia, recollection, and thoughtfulness, so far so it's openly stated so in *The Sign*, Part of the 'Cruel Tales' -

'And if before the cold weather set in, I wanted to enjoy the latter fortnight of the enchanted month of October among the red rocks, if I wished to see once again the splendour of the long autumn evenings over the wooded heights, I would have to make haste.'¹

Even by simply looking at the words taken straight from Villiers' own work, the association of Brittany with fondness and warmth is very clear. Villier does not simply speak about the weather, especially as later on in the story the weather takes a turn for worse, just as the story does,² further proving that the weather, and therefore nature, plays a crucial part in world-building and this particular Representation of Brittany. Villier goes as far as to use the natural environment, in this case changing seasons, to emphasise the psychological processes at play within Xavier's mind. Not to mention that Nature is mentioned by one of the characters by name.³

Villiers does a splendid job of utilising nature to the benefit of his storytelling, to the point that without it, his work would lose its appeal and charm. Whilst reading the part during which Xavier is suffering a night terror, or a vision, depending on the interpretation, Nature itself seems to be playing the first fiddle - 'The full moon was shining [...]',⁴ 'cold flame',⁵ comparison to the 'gaze of an owl',⁶ 'a bird of night',⁷ even the name of the tavern - the Golden Sun,⁸ these are but a few mentions and references to nature. Analysing it further we can see the reflection of Xavier's mind in the nature he observes or the specific descriptions Villiers uses - Cold winter regarding Paris, describing the cold feeling often associated with the city, so limited in natural places and filled with stone and brick roads, mention of October, which by itself is much less beautiful or warm than September, serves as reference to Brittany itself, filling the reader with warmth and relaxation, the name of the tavern, the Golden Sun, a promise of warmth and beauty, an imagine filled with multi-layered means and associations, each one positive. The very fact that upon arriving in Brittany Xavier mentions starting the day at dawn, is a direct reference to the beginning of his journey. Furthermore, upon close analysis one can notice that Villier does not simply use nature as a mean of building emotions, but also to describe the Brittany itself.

'But the horizon was shining so brightly above the forests of far-off oaks and wild pines where the last birds were flying away into the evening; the waters of a reed-covered pond in the distance were reflecting the sky so solemnly; and Nature was so beautiful[...]'⁹

In those passages, when one asks the question of 'why these specific aspects of nature were mentioned' we can arrive at a few conclusions - the far-off oaks, could be the reference that Brittany is a land away from the Celtic Lands, as oaks are associated with the Celts,

¹ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Sign*, 'Cruel Tales', (1985),
<<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8534§ion=8>> p.184.

² Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *The Sign* p.196.

³ Ibid. p.186.

⁴ Ibid. p.191.

⁵ Ibid. p. 191.

⁶ Ibid. p. 192.

⁷ Ibid. p.192.

⁸ Ibid. p.187.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 185-186.

furthermore, oaks symbolise endurance, wisdom, mystical strength, which could easily be interpreted as Villiers singing praises of Brittany's virtue, especially as Xavier is on his way to visit Abbe, to see his friend and in a way, seek his spiritual guidance as a said friend is a priest. The pines are wild, and less 'civilised', referring to the untamed, natural land of Brittany, at the same time referring to how Brittany was perceived by the outsiders, as partially barbaric, of different customs, especially for those from Paris, or other 'well-civilised' place or big city, but also the fact that it was full of natural potential, untouched, blessed. Brittany is known for its rugged, semi-wild landscapes. By mentioning oaks and *wild* pines, it immediately connects the place to its ancient, enduring roots, its connection with nature and its wistfulness. The last birds flying away are possibly a reference to the passing of time, to the deterioration of Brittany and possible fear that the culture will go away, be forgotten and won't stand the trial of time, especially as Brittany is considered to be a stronghold for 'old ways' when the rest of the world moves on towards the modern development, forsaking its traditions. And lastly, the reed-covered waters, still, humble, natural, not the manicured lawns and well-kept ponds so often seen in maintained lands, but rather raw nature, shaped by its own will. Perhaps this points to coexistence of people and the land, rather than forceful integration of humankind, resulting in almost 'fake', disconnected areas such as busy Paris. Going further, Villier describes 'a leaf falling near',¹⁰ and 'the magical horizon of that region',¹¹ making a poignant reflection once again about the passing of the seasons, leaves are like pages of a book, they tell a story and perhaps in this way Villier referred to another chapter being closed, another story remaining in the past, perhaps trying to say that the times of Brittany's glory were slowly slipping away, especially as he references the horizon. Villier's work does a splendid job of presenting Brittany the way it was. Next, as the story changes, so does the scenery, Villier describes a 'horrible cry, the shrill, terrifying falsetto of the Rookery',¹² referring to the colony of rooks, birds associated with death, decay or bad omens, especially in rural Europe. This not only refers to what is present within Brittany but also the set of beliefs they have, referencing death, as the theme is very present in Brittonic beliefs. Falsetto makes a further point of elevating, creating a vast contrast to the previously serene environment, portraying Brittany as sinister, haunted but alive with *ancient power*. A similar thing happens with the screech-owls and their phosphorescent eyes. The owl passing in between is a reference to the interference of the supernatural in the human world, dividing it, unsettling, whilst the prolonged cry brings the description back to the rookery, emphasising that Brittany has not only the beautiful, glorious side of the natural, untouched environment but that it is filled with haunted aspects and beliefs as well, referring to the superstitions often held by the Britons.

Whilst Villiers does a splendid job of writing prose filled with metaphors and imaginative descriptions, this work could not simply focus on one author. As this work focuses on two representations of Brittany, the second one, whilst of similar themes, is by Anatole Le Braz, 'Dealings With The Dead' and *Eight Omens Of A Death* in particular.¹³ Upon the first part of the story we see the reference to the starry night,¹⁴ speaking of the unobstructed view, lacking high buildings or pollution (which back then was not as bad as it was in the 20th

¹⁰ Ibid. p.186.

¹¹ Ibid. p.186.

¹² Ibid. p.197.

¹³ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead: Narratives From "La Legende De La Mort En Basse Bretagne"*, (1898), <https://archive.org/details/DealingsWithTheDead_201902/page/n77/mode/1up> pp. 74-79.

¹⁴ Anatole, Le Braz, *Dealings With The Dead* p.74.

century London for example), then there is the mention of hay,¹⁵ which goes to portray Brittany as more agricultural than vastly developed like other parts of France. But it is the next page that brings a clearer picture of the natural environment in Brittany - 'To reach the Guindy stream from our house, there is no regular road, but only a narrow path, winding all the way amongst willow trees.'¹⁶ This part is deeply personal, and local, referencing a Bretonic name, with the name ending in -y, the fact that it is described as stream, gives even more of a local, more intimate, natural feeling, the fact that there is no regular road, that the story focuses more on the winding path, portrays Brittany as wild, shaped by human hands and feet, rather than carefully prepared plans, shows connection between the people and the land, working in tandem. It's organic, timeless, unplanned, as there are no *straight* lines, no hard divisions, no *sidewalks*. This part becomes beautifully summarised by the last line, tying in not only the theme of death and, the otherworld but also the emotional aspect of Brittany and its Celtic roots - the willow trees. Willow is often associated with water, dreams, and the border between the worlds, evoking melancholy, a feeling of gentleness, like weeping willow swaying in the wind, and sorrow, by that same association. The willow being near a body of water further limits the space, referring to the realm of Celtic and specifically Bretonic beliefs of the spirit world. Nature is not hostile, the way it seemed in *The Sign*, but rather peaceful, connected, showing (the path), rather than scaring or forcing any sort of thought.

Bretonic works are filled with such descriptions of nature, they aim to simultaneously describe the world of nature and spirit. Such a multilayered connection between various meanings and subjects showcases the importance of the natural and spiritual environment of Brittany, it paints the image of not only a picturesque place but also one filled with secrets, with traditions, where people are deeply intertwined with their surroundings. Le Braz portrays Brittany with characters that are very much *present*, a contrast to Villiers' returnee's description. Le Braz does not aim to contrast the natural environment but rather to highlight it, naturally, as part of the world, layering meaning upon meaning and description upon description, that for an interesting party would paint a vast, beautiful picture of not only the sights but also the insights of Brittany.

To conclude, the natural environment in Representations of Brittany is very present, it is an integral part of it that not only could be used to describe the area for the reader but also *teach* them about Brittany itself. The interconnection of meanings, beliefs and nature itself, so innocently done, goes a long way to Represent Brittany the way it was in the eyes of the writer and in the hearts of its people.

Bibliography:

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<<https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8534§ion=8>>, pp.182-200.

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<https://archive.org/details/DealingsWithTheDead_201902/page/n77/mode/1up>.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.76.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.76.