

**Insider vs Outsider**

**La Braz vs Balzac**

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## Introduction

### Contemporary Views of Bretons by the French

#### Starting With A Very Non-Academic Approach to An Academic Subject

The aim of this essay is to compare literary representations of Brittany, through the assessment of selected works by Honore' de Balzac (1799-1850) and Anatole Le Braz (1859-1926). These men, the former a playwright and novelist from Tours, the latter a thoroughly Breton poet, folklorist and translator, provide a suitable baseline for scholarship that peers through the multicolored stained-glass window of art, travel pamphlets, theatre, film, fiction, political poetry and literature to better understand the cliches, stereotypes, associations and portrayals of Brittany from its cultural renaissance in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century to present; a date-range that roughly parallels key related milestones including the French Revolution, the Celtic Revival (s), Romanticism, the Industrial Revolution, Modernism, Naturalism, Breton Nationalism, Post-Colonial France and Britain and recent internationalist Collectivist movements and current events along the way.

*The Matter of Brittany* is a complex, unique rollercoaster. A fertile field of study, it is as a hub with spokes of interest for several disciplines to include:

- Celtic Studies – The Bretons, like the Welsh, are a continuous and in some ways isolated, ancient, and Celtic culture.
- Artistic and Intellectual Movement Studies – 18<sup>th</sup> Century to present Brittany is an incubator for Romanticism, and Realism (and their variants).
- Political Sciences – A sub-kingdom (now defined as a Province) of France, Brittany is geographically located as a very close neighbor to Paris, and thus nearly center of the action during the Age of Revolutions (1770-**\*\***). Ever associated with politics, both Right and Left leaning movements have claimed Brittany for their causes.
- Folklore and Spirituality – The Bretons have a rich oral and written tradition in this category, ranging from its critical role in the development of Christianity during the Age of Saints to pre-Christian monoliths, stone circles, and Faerie-lore.
- Arthurian Studies – Several main characters from the corpus of the Arthurian saga are such as Merlin, The Lady of the Lake, Budic, and Amwn Ddu (the Black Knight) are closely connected to Brittany.

The confluence of these genres coalesces into a kaleidoscope of cliches, stereotypes, legends, and lore. With the benefit of hindsight and access to a body of written examples, scholars can now look back and attempt to not only understand the key drivers behind the representations of Brittany, but also study to determine whether or not notions of “le

bretonisme” has a basis in veracity, was a fabricated construction by different motivations and forces at sundry times, or if the truth of these portrayals lies somewhere in the middle.

Balzac and Le Braz, whose works serve as the primary sources for this essay, will shed light on the key drivers and hopefully help the reader’s pursuit of the ‘invented or real?’ question. Prior to exploring these canonical, academic works, however, it is of importance to *start with the end in mind* and briefly document the modern fruit produced by representations from the past. In the below example, individuals from inside and outside of Brittany are dialoging on an online forum on Reddit where the subject question is:

*‘How is Brittany perceived in France?’*

The link to this dialogue is offered as citation in the footnotes and bibliography. The running comments and responses include the following ‘ping-pong’ of insult, apologetic rant, armchair history and diadectids:

*‘Inbreds’*

*‘They marry their cousins’.*

*‘They are racists that think their race is more special than other French.’*

*‘Closer to nature than the rest of us.*

*‘Special, ancient Celtic people.’*

*‘Their regionalism makes just makes them appear to be racist morons.’*

*‘Alcoholics’*

*‘Nowadays (the perception) is positive, a place to take holiday. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century it wasn’t the same’*

*‘Religious, superstitious, fatalists’<sup>1</sup>*

The brief exercise of sampling this form of modern dialogue, with the understanding that there are many ‘keyboard warriors’ making comments that should be consumed with a grain of salt, illuminates the very topics studied with sincerity and seriousness amongst students and scholars. The grain of salt is still a grain and did not spontaneous manifest from nothingness. Rather, two to three hundred years of literature, art, propaganda, music, and film (along, of course, with one-to-one experiential interactions) forged these representations; with Balzac and La Braz being two foundation-stone contributors.

## **Honore’ de Balzac’s – An Outsider’s Representations of Brittany**

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<sup>1</sup> Reddit, *How is Brittany/ Bretons perceived in France?*, (2022),

<[https://www.reddit.com/r/france/comments/z2f9xs/how\\_is\\_brittany\\_bretons\\_perceived\\_in\\_france/](https://www.reddit.com/r/france/comments/z2f9xs/how_is_brittany_bretons_perceived_in_france/)> [accessed 06 January, 2024]

## Key Drivers Behind the Representations:

### The Father of Realism - Individual Worldviews and Circumstances

Honore' de Balzac, born in 1799 in Tours, France is regarded as 'The Father of Realism'. This moniker, although complimentary, seems to reflect the sum of bad experiences of youth, the result of which produced a skeptical, blunt view of the world combined with a begging for honesty, and progress.

As a child, Balzac suffered chronic health issues, spent the years of his infancy separated from his mother, being reared by a wet nurse, struggled in school, had disdain for the Priests who attempted to educate him, held both Romanism and Protestantism in contempt, found difficult holding down an apprenticeship at law or 'regular job', failed in speculations in business several times and, at the age twenty, bemoaning his disdain for the common life, declared *"a clerk, a machine, a riding-school hack, eating and drinking and sleeping at fixed hours. I should be like everyone else. And that's what they call living, that life at the grindstone, doing the same thing over and over again.... I am hungry and nothing is offered to appease my appetite."*<sup>2</sup> Balzac appeared to have emptiness in all the major categories connected to happiness (health, family, faith, etc). The realist, also a young Patriot of France, looked to a kind of evolutionary spiritualism to fill the void, which he summarized in his own words, writing 'I am not orthodox, and I do not believe in the Roman Church. I think that if there is a scheme worthy of our kind it is that of human transformations causing the human being to advance toward unknown zones. That is the law of creations inferior to ourselves; it ought to be the law of superior creations. Swedenborgianism, which is only a repetition in the Christian sense of ancient ideas, is my religion, with the addition which I wish to make to it of the incomprehensibility of God.'<sup>3</sup> Convalescing from another failed business, and not yet thirty, the young Balzac stayed for a time in Fougères, a border town between Brittany and France, from here he began to write *Le Chouans*.

This brief synopsis of a complicated life has bearing on Balzac's representations of Brittany, for he is not writing about Brittany as an area of academic interest, nor was the Frenchman in anyway enamored (at the time) with Celticism. Rather he appears to have been using Brittany as 'punching bag' for his scathing review of mankind and life itself.

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<sup>2</sup>V.S Pritchett, *Balzac*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc 1973) Inc. [ISBN 0-394-48357-X](#), p. 42

<sup>3</sup> Freedom From Religion Foundation, *Honoré de Balzac* (2024), < <https://ffrf.org/ftod-cr/item/14332-honore-de-balzac>> [accessed 7 January 2024]

## **Along Comes the Breton Literary Revival**

### **The Times and Seasons:**

Balzac began writing the first (of three) novels that include Brittany or Breton subjects in 1828. At the time it was titled *Le Dernier Chouan ou la Bretagne en 1800*, but the novel would receive a new version in 1834, and a new title *Les Chouans ou la Bretagne en 1799*, only to be revised again to be included in his greater work on the whole of French society, *Comédie Humaine*, in 1845. These date spans are important when juxtaposed against ‘the times and seasons’ relative to the Breton literary revival.

Prior to the 1830’s, Breton historians suggest that most clichés about Brittany were negative, conjuring connotations of backwardness, drab poverty, and primitivism to Parisians or ‘outsiders.’ But several key events confluence in just a very short time, resulting in a dichotomous flip of perception.

Around 1760, the Scotsman, James McPherson claimed to have discovered ancient epic poetry attributed to a bard Ossian. At this terminal point in the history of Celtic people, the English Empire was on the rise, an unwanted *union* which felt more like continued colonization and a crisis of identity combatting subjugation filled the air, and writings of poets, authors, antiquarians, and politicians of the time. Wales would follow Scotland, discovering its ancient and primal pedigree as the original Britons, restoring its gorsedds and discovering/recreating its own poetic and literary traditions. Meanwhile on the Continent, the movements of Celtic Romanticism would reach the Bretons, also a Celtic people, who would produce three seminal works in the 1830s.

*Marie* (sentimental patriotic poems by Auguste Brizeux, 1831), which were followed by Émile Souvestre’s most lasting legacy *Les Derniers Bretons* (a “psychological portrait” of the Bretons, published in book form in 1836),<sup>i</sup> the decade closes with La Villemarqué’s *Barzaz Breiz* (Breton ballads translated into French with elaborate introduction and commentaries, 1839). These three works were crucial in the development of the Breton movement, or “le bretonisme,” and had a profound effect on subsequent representations of Brittany and Bretonness in literature.

France, not far removed from its series of Revolutions and hungry to rediscover its own past, looked both to the Gallic and Brythonic pedigree of Brittany, resulting in an explosion in trendy clichés, notions and perceptions of France’s peninsular ‘Celtic’ province, Brittany.

Against this backdrop, Balzac produces *Le Chouans*.

### **The Representations of Brittany in *Les Chouans*.**

#### **Brief Synopsis of *Le Chouan***

*Le Chouans* is a historical novel that takes place following the execution of Marie Antoinette. Napoleon is in power, but civil wars have erupted in pockets all throughout the provinces of France, including Brittany. The Royalists make use of a band of peasant-warriors in Brittany called Chouans or “screech-owls”, to execute guerilla style war tactics and perpetuate an insurgency. The setting is Brittany, the backdrop is the insurgency, but the plot is that of a love story about a woman who falls in love with a man from the opposing side. Balzac leverages the setting and backdrop to espouse his views on Brittany, or perhaps, his goading of French readers to confront their own primitive roots and nature, and *progress*.

### **Representation 1 – Animalistic, Primitive**

The easiest to document, and most quoted representations about the Bretons in Balzac’s first work that mentions them are his aggressively nasty comments that compares the local Breton peasants to animals, and to *savages* or lesser, primitive beings.

The leader of the Chouans, Marche-a-Terre, is a major character, and described early and in the novel:

This unknown man, short and thick set in figure and broad-shouldered, had a head like a bull, to which, in fact, he bore more than one resemblance. His nose seemed shorter than it was, on account of the thick nostrils. His full lips, drawn from the teeth which were white as snow, his large and round black eyes with their shaggy brows, his hanging ears and tawny hair,—seemed to belong far less to our fine Caucasian race than to a breed of herbivorous animals.<sup>4</sup>

Balzac’s comments here overtly compare March-a-Terre to looking like a bull, making fun of his nostrils, and suggesting his hair is like a bovine creature. He continues:

His long and shining hair fell straight, like the goat’s hair, on either side of his face, being parted in the centre like the hair of certain statues of the Middle-Ages which are still to be seen in our cathedrals.<sup>5</sup>

And, to finish the representation:

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<sup>4</sup> Honore’ De Balzac, *The Chouans*, translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley, Ebook edition, The Project Gutenberg, 5 March 2016 < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm> > [accessed 6 January, 2016], p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Honore’ De Balzac, *The Chouans*, translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley, Ebook edition, The Project Gutenberg, 5 March 2016 < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm> > [accessed 6 January, 2016], p. 9

The coarseness and roughness of the man,—chopped out, as it seemed by an axe, with his rough bark still left on him,—and the stupid ignorance of his features, made him seem, for the moment, like some half-savage demigod.<sup>6</sup>

Balzac is able to package, in just a few short paragraphs rendering the peasants as animal like (which direct correlative descriptions) and savage, but also when insulting the hairstyle, making the Bretons seem out of date or a picture of the past as ‘certain statues of the Middle-Ages.’

## **Representation 2 Balzac’s Digression, He Means It**

These shocking descriptions appear early in the novel. A reasonable argument could be made that Balzac is sharing these ideas from the lens of the narrator or writing from the perspective of another. This is quickly disproven by the fact that Balzac himself pauses the action, very much like a movie Director pausing production and recording an educational message for future viewers, and writes a short essay in an entirely different, non-fiction style, in the midst of his otherwise fictional prose:

It is necessary here to make a digression, or the fears of the commandant will not be intelligible to those stay-at-home persons who are in the habit of doubting everything because they have seen nothing, and who might therefore deny the existence of Marche-a-Terre and the peasantry of the West, whose conduct, in the times we are speaking of, was often sublime.<sup>7</sup>

Balzac is here stating that, for those who may not be informed about the nature of Brittany, and the Bretons, he will, using his code realism, educate them. Writing of Marche and his men, Balzac states, *The sketch here made of a Breton valley and of the Breton men in the detachment of recruits, more especially that of the “gars” who so suddenly appeared on the summit of Mont Pelerine, gives a brief but faithful picture of the province and its inhabitants*<sup>8</sup>.

Then a long, scathing monologue ensues:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 12

Brittany is the region in all France where the manners and customs of the Gauls have left their strongest imprint. That portion of the province where, even to our own times, the savage life and superstitious ideas of our rude ancestors still continue—if we may use the word—rampant, is called “the country of the Gars.” When a canton (or district) is inhabited by a number of half-savages like the one who has just appeared upon the scene, the inhabitants call them “the Gars of such or such a parish.”<sup>9</sup>

There is no literary device or metaphor here. The representation is that the Bretons are savage, superstitious, and rude. He continues:

This classic name is a reward for the fidelity with which they struggle to preserve the traditions of the language and manners of their Gaelic ancestors; their lives show to this day many remarkable and deeply embedded vestiges of the beliefs and superstitious practices of those ancient times. Feudal customs are still maintained. Antiquaries find Druidic monuments still standing.<sup>10</sup>

Here the timing of *Le Chouans* is paramount. It’s written exactly at the crossroads when Celticism ‘flipped’ from a negative to positive cliché. The druidic practices of the Bretons are presented as superstitious and cited as a cold fact, minus any romantic dressing. Turning from their superstition, the embedded essay then turns to the deep connection Bretons have with the land and the manner in which it locks them away from French (Parisian) modernity. “Primordial” and “impenetrable” forests are powerful metaphors for Balzac’s representations.

The genius of modern civilization shrinks from forcing its way through those impenetrable primordial forests. An unheard-of ferociousness, a brutal obstinacy, but also a regard for the sanctity of an oath; a complete ignoring of our laws, our customs, our dress, our modern coins, our language, but withal a patriarchal simplicity and virtues that are heroic,—unite in keeping the inhabitants of this region more impoverished as to all intellectual knowledge than the Redskins, but also as proud, as crafty, and as enduring as they.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 11

Lastly, the 'inserted lecture' concludes with a multi-layered statement with a dual meaning:

The position which Brittany occupies in the centre of Europe makes it more interesting to observe than Canada. Surrounded by light whose beneficent warmth never reaches it, this region is like a frozen coal left black in the middle of a glowing fire. The efforts made by several noble minds to win this glorious part of France, so rich in neglected treasures, to social life and to prosperity have all, even when sustained by government, come to naught against the inflexibility of a population given over to the habits of immemorial routine. This unfortunate condition is partly accounted for by the nature of the land, broken by ravines, mountain torrents, lakes, and marshes, and bristling with hedges or earthworks which make a sort of citadel of every field; without roads, without canals, and at the mercy of prejudices which scorn our modern agriculture. These will further be shown with all their dangers in our present history.<sup>12</sup>

When Balzac refers to Brittany surrounded by light, he may not just be referring to the climate. The proximity of Brittany to the French Revolution, the Renaissance and other revolutionary movements, and his insistence that they are Gallic people stuck in the past strongly seems to be the inference in this representation.

### **Representation 3 Connectedness to the Land and Final Considerations**

There is a scene in the novel where the French officers struggle with maddening frustration at the hesitance to leave the boundary between Brittany and Maine (France). Although he earlier uses terms like "primordial" to describe the landscape, now Balzac shifts to more romantic, complementary descriptions that remind the reader more the Welsh *hiraeth* than the writer's typical mechanical realism:

A number of evergreen hedges, defining irregular pieces of property which were planted with trees, gave to this carpet of verdure a character of its own, and one that is somewhat unusual among the landscapes of France; it held the teeming secrets of many beauties in its various contrasts, the effects of which were fine enough to arrest the eye of the most indifferent spectator.

At this particular moment the scene was brightened by the fleeting glow with which Nature delights at times in heightening the beauty of her imperishable

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 18

creations. While the detachment was crossing the valley, the rising sun had slowly scattered the fleecy mists which float above the meadows of a September morning. As the soldiers turned to look back, an invisible hand seemed to lift from the landscape the last of these veils—a delicate vapor, like a diaphanous gauze through which the glow of precious jewels excites our curiosity.<sup>13</sup>

There is a subtle shift in the novel whereby Balzac appreciates the beauty of the land and, although sermonizing for progress, a respect for those connected to it. When the lead soldier demands a response for why the Chouans won't cross the border, a dramatic answer is given, "*You ask why?*" *replied a voice. "Because"* said the gloomy apparition, with an accent which proved his difficulty in speaking French, "*there Maine begins*" (pointing with his huge, rough hand towards Ernee), "*and Bretagne ends*."

When Balzac wrote the first edition of *Le Chouans* representations of Brittany were condescending, and negative, by the third iteration, more than fifteen years later, Celticism, Romanticism and Breton clichés and Gallic-lore were en-vogue. Although there is no evidence of content changes within the text, his next two novels certainly do.

The Outsider and Frenchman, Balzac, although the Father of Realism, either became fond of Brittany, or lightened his stance over that time. His aim was to chronicle the shortcomings of all French society, not necessarily to 'pick on the Bretons', the extremity of his pejorative comments notwithstanding.

His other two, later works featuring Brittany are entirely opposite. Where the land is described as unkept and dangerous in *Le Chouan*, by the time *Pierrette*, his final work set or referencing Brittany, is published the overtures are entirely positive, alluding to the land as innocent, childlike and pure. The sophistication of Brittany's customs and costumes are respectfully treated, and Brittany's men cast as good patriots.

Contradictory and enigmatic, the representations of this Outsider, the Father of Realism, seem for the most part unrealistic and his approach, even if intended to pull his Provencal neighbors into modernity, had such ugly early excesses that they have forever devalued and discredited his representations.

### **Anatole Le Braz - An Insider's Representation of Brittany**

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 7

If Balzac's use of Brittany as an object lesson for the reprobate and empty nature of France (and mankind) in his *human comedy* had nothing par se to do with Brittany, meaning that his colonial styled harshness was 'not personal', then Anatole Le Braz, writing a generation later, as the ultimate ambassador for Brittany, is certainly his anthesis.

La Braz, born in 1859 (nine years after Balzac's decease) was a *Breton of the Bretons*. Born in the commune of Saint-Servais, Côtes-d'Armor, he spent his youth amongst woodcutters and charcoal burners, wholly immersed in a Breton speaking culture.<sup>14</sup> Although La Braz attended college in Paris, he soon returned to Brittany where he taught in Lycee and spent years gradually translating old Breton songs into modern French.

An established translator and scholar, La Braz had what appears to be a balanced political view, spending time in as president of a conservative organization, *Union régionaliste bretonne*, which was focused on Breton Nationalism and Regional Independence, but also, and at overlapping times, was an active member of the *Association des bleus de Bretagne*, a group that was, in 1899, promoting the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in Brittany.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of personal politics, La Braz was very serious about Breton culture, history, language, and literature. The French Government dispatched Le Braz on no less than twenty cultural missions the world over and he can fairly be categorized as *an ambassador for Brittany, and for France*.

Against this backdrop, La Braz, who composed more than sixteen poems, compendiums, short stories, and songs, took up the most well-known Breton stereotypes: their special relationship to Death.

## **The Representations of Brittany in *Dealings With The Dead, Narratives From La Legende De La Mort En Basse Bretagne***

### **Brief Synopsis of Le Morte**

For ease and consistency of citations, the authorized 1898 translation from French into English by Mrs. A.E. Whitehead with an introduction, and extensive commentary from 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritualist Arthur Lillie, is used in this paper. Additionally, there is a contributing introduction by Monsieur L. Mariller.

The translator and contributor's comments surrounding *Dealings with the Dead* are a perfect match for the tone, pitch, and style of La Braz's own treatment of the subject. Namely,

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<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, "Anatole Le Braz," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 20 November 2023, 14:38, < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatole\\_Le\\_Braz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatole_Le_Braz) > [accessed 6 January 2024]

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

although modern readers might approach the book as a collection of campfire ghost stories, *Dealings* is written in a serious, scholarly manner; more like unto a book that would be studied by late 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophists or debated amongst high society elites and thinkers versus a kitschy fantasy collection of tropes.

The book itself is an extensive collection of first-hand accounts, gathered by La Braz himself from villages (teachers, farmers, artisans etc.) throughout Brittany centered on the subject of death, and *the dead*.

Therefore, unlike Balzac's representations, if those memorialized by La Braz are clichés and stereotypes, then they are clichés and stereotypes invented or embellished by the object of the stereotypes themselves. This seems unlikely given that there are over thirty-five different stories, poems, proverbs and other wisdom and accounts given by individuals who, in many cases, never met one another. How the Breton beliefs on death are utilized in art, or for politics or literature or any other genre is a separate matter but does not disannul the sincerity of those who profess them.

### **Why the Close Connection to Death in Brittany?**

The topography of Brittany is secluded, peninsular, and dangerous. This naturally leads to a cumulative attitude towards death. The preface to *Dealings* summarizes this:

Round his coasts sweep some of the most dangerous seas in Europe, and at night in a tempest he hears the shrieks of the drowning (or rather drowned) sailors, who come sometimes to tap at his cottage door; but he is too terror-stricken to open to them. He has in his province the terrible " Bay of the Dead," close to the Isle de Sein, whither, on the " Day of the Dead," all the ghosts of the year in Europe are supposed to swarm. The Breton with grim humour calls the terrific rocks that bound his coast " the pebbles " (les cailloux), rocks that are the gravestones of many tall ships. *Le morte*, page 8 (preface)<sup>16</sup>

Next, as a Celtic people-group, the Bretons, whose ancestors are primarily from Wales and Cornwall, have endured a perpetual series of invasion by Romans, then Saxons, then

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<sup>16</sup> Antole La Braz, *Dealings With The Dead Narratives From "La Lengende De La Mort En Basse Bretange"*, trans by A.E. Whitehead (London: George Redway, 1898), p. 11

Vikings, then Normans. The very fabric of their history, like the Welsh, is one of constant death, and existential struggle. This can't do naught but impact perceptions on death, the afterlife, etc.

Lastly, in addition to topography and history, the Pre-Christian worldview of the Bretons carries its understandings, doctrines and practices concerned with the end of life and the spirit world. Combining these three ingredients is what makes Brittany a fertile ground for cultural nuance and subsequently, cliché's, stereotypes, conjecture, and representations. The preface continues:

There is in Brittany no wall of separation between the real world and the land of marvels. The distinction between the natural and the supernatural does not exist in the mind of the Bretons, that is, not in the same sense that it does with us. Living and dead have a common title to be inhabitants of this world. And the two groups live in perpetual relation the one to the other.<sup>17</sup>

Their manner, as recorded from La Braz's interviews, of Bretons living in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Brittany was:

Folks fear the Anaon as they fear the tempest and the thunder; but to hear the ghosts moaning in the rushes that skirt the ditches near the high road is not more strange to them than to hear the love notes of the birds in the hedges.<sup>18</sup>

The Anaon referenced is "The Dead," while the Ankou is an office or function conducted by the Dead, or sometimes an Otherworldly spirit. There are practices, rituals, and rites where the Ankou and the living play their roles in end-of-life scenarios.

La Braz captures this within a short section of *Dealings*, recording then teaching on a midsummer rite:

#### XXV.—The Midsummer "Tantad " or Bonfire

On St John's night (June 24th), in all the villages and hamlets of Lower Brittany, the " Tantad " or Bonfire is lighted. W h e n the flames have abated, all the people meet round the pile of ashes, and begin to recite the Litany for the Dead. It is always an old man who says it, the people answering. When the prayers are

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<sup>17</sup> Antole La Braz, *Dealings With The Dead Narratives From "La Lengende De La Mort En Basse Bretange"*, trans by A.E. Whitehead (London: George Redway, 1898), p. 15

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 15

over, the old man rises, and every one present rises also, and all in a ring go round the "Tantad" in silence. At the third turn they stop, and each person picks up a flint and throws it upon the fire. This flint is called by the name given to the Dead, "Anaon."

This rite over, the crowd disperses.

As soon as the living have departed, the dead come forward, for fire attracts the dead (it is said), the dead being always cold, even in the hot nights of June. They are glad to be able to warm themselves amongst the remains of the "Tantad." They sit upon the stones on which it was built, on the "Anaon" placed there expressly for them. And there they warm themselves till morning.

The next day the living come and visit the place.

Whoever finds his flint (Anaon) turned over, may expect to die during the year.<sup>19</sup>

Turning to his actual interviews, which represent the preponderance of the content in La Braz's collection, the translator and great poet of Brittany captures the candor and sincerity of individuals speaking on either taboo or very somber subjects. This essay surveys two examples:

### **Representation 1- VI. — Eight Omens of a Death**

*The Eight Omens of Death* deals with the subject of omen portending death. The account is given by a schoolmaster, who themselves were given the tale firsthand from an old weaving woman from the village. It opens:

Every time that one of my family has died, I have been warned by an omen; but the most remarkable omens that have ever come to me have been those which preceded the death of my husband. I was subjected to every variety of these during the seven months that his illness lasted.<sup>20</sup>

The woman goes onto describe paranormal activity (awakening to loud noises, windows opening on their own etc) that escalates throughout the days leading up to her husband's passing. There is a powerful short snippet in her account where, when she goes to attend to a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 157

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 74

window she could swear was opened, only to find it closed, she then, perplexed, opens the door. The scene before her is peaceful and tranquil:

I got up at once. To my extreme surprise, the window was fast shut. I went to the door and opened it. The night was fine and the stars were shining. The linen hung upon the hedge where I had left it. The trees were motionless ; there was not a breath of wind. <sup>21</sup>

The next of the unexplained activities comes later in the account when her husband, known to be fast asleep, calls to her. The incident is witnessed by a neighbor, who also hears her husband. The description alludes to the husband, already betwixt and between life and death, calls to his wife as an omen preceding his own death; a living ghost as it were.

A month or two later the woman is subjected to the sound of what could be apparitions preparing her spouse's coffin. She cries into the night:

Then there was the sound of whispering amongst several persons. Then came a noise as of the moving of planks, and, next, the regular knocking of a hammer driving in nails.

All this was very extraordinary, for the trap-door of the garret had not been lifted for more than a week, and I knew there could not be anything in the garret but part of a truss of hay, a few small faggots, and certainly not a single plank.

I called out loudly, "Who is making that noise up there, keeping Christians awake?

I made the sign of the cross and I waited. But as soon as I had spoken, the noise ceased. <sup>22</sup>

Her husband is unwell. But she continues to describe him as 'no better or no worse'. The paranormal events occur over a long space of time (more than a few months are hinted) when finally, she is visited by the Ankou, a servant or angel of Death pushing, or sometimes carried by a ghostly cart:

But the last night was the most terrible of all. My husband, who did not appear to be worse, had forbidden me to sit up. When I had made sure that he was

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 74

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 74

tranquil, I tried to doze. But immediately the jolting of a cart fell upon my ear. It was more startling because there was no roadway near our house. When we first came to it, we had had to transport our furniture in wheelbarrows. Nevertheless, this conveyance seemed coming to our house. The creaking of the ill-oiled axletree became more and more distinct. Ere long I heard it strike the gable-end of the house. I rose and knelt. In the wall against which the bedstead was placed, there was a sky light. Through this I looked, expecting to see the cart. But I saw nothing but the white moonlight and the dark outlines of the trees beside the field ditches. The axle- tree, however, continued to grate, and the cart to jolt. It went round the house once, twice, and then a third time. At the third circuit, a tremendous knock thundered on the door. My husband woke with a start. "What is it?" he whispered. I did not wish to distress him, so I answered, "I do not know." But I was shivering with fear. It is impossible to die of fright, or I should never have survived that night !

My husband died the next day, a Saturday, exactly at ten o'clock. <sup>23</sup>

Skeptics would suggest that the old weaver is passing down a legend given that the final act of the tale includes a very standard 'Grim Reaper' styled motif. This is possible but again, having the benefit of Breton literary revival that was nearly one hundred years old at the time the story was relayed, the reasonable assumption would be that the weaver and the teacher would share the account 'as folklore' to La Braz. Instead, the old weaver is speaking experientially of her own husband. The reverence connected to speaking of a dead spouse and the firsthand nature of the gathering of these stories suggests "something" to them.

## **Representation 2 XXVIII — Weep not the Departed**

In the final representation analyzed for this paper, La Braz documents a story that sounds more fictional or allegorical, but not as whimsical or cliché. It is a portrait of Brittany's ongoing blending of pagan, occult or 'non-Christian' beliefs used to support Christian concepts.

The first clue that the storyteller's account is a story, and openly stated as fictional, is that it begins with 'Once upon a time a young girl'<sup>24</sup>. This introduction tends to precede an allegory, proverb, or lesson. The plot centers around a young girl from Coray who mourns overly from the loss of her child. The text reads:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 79

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 158

Day and night she did nothing but weep.

Sometimes she would rave like one demented, crying out, " I must see m y mother again! I must see my mother!"

Not knowing what to do, the neighbors consulted the Rector, who was a holy man.

He went to see the girl, and instead of reproaching her for her lamentations, he spoke to her with gentleness and compassion. When she seemed somewhat calmer, he said to her, " You would be very pleased to see your mother again, would you not, my child?" <sup>25</sup>

The Rector, a Priest, prescribes a spiritual solution (necromancy) to an emotional problem (mourning/depression). And not just a spiritual treatment, but one strictly forbidden nearly universally by every form and flavor of Christian. Instead of teaching her the plain Biblical doctrine that the living cannot contact the dead, or finding comfort in Christ, he somehow has the ability to conjure up the girl's deceased mother, knows when and how she will appear, and arranges an audience for the weeping daughter to interact with the spirit.

The child sees her mom, but the outcome is not what was expected, nor positive:

One Soul, however, the last in the pro cession, seemed to drag herself along pain fully, bent down with the heavy weight of a bucket which she carried, filled to overflowing with water which looked black and unpleasant.

The girl recognized her mother and was struck by the expression of displeasure which appeared on her face.

Having returned home she began to weep more than ever, feeling certain that her mother was unhappy in the other world. She was puzzled about that bucket of black water.

At daybreak she went to speak to the old Rector. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 159

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 150

The Rector allows the lesson to continue and promises to enable the young girl to see her mom during another ghostly procession. The result is the same, but this time the child actually speaks to the spirit:

"Mother!" she cried, "Mother, why do you look so sad and grieved?"

Hardly had she spoken, when her mother rushed precipitately towards her, and exclaimed, shaking her apron violently: "Why do you look sad? Unhappy girl, when will you give over weeping for me? Do you not see that you are obliging me, at my age, to act as a water-carrier? These two buckets are filled with your tears, and if you do not cease to shed them I shall have to drag them along until the day of Judgment! Remember that the Dead ("L'Anaon") should not be wept. If Souls are happy, tears disturb their bliss. If they are not yet in Heaven, their progress is delayed. If they are lost, the tears shed for them come down upon them as a fiery rain, adding to their torments and increasing their regret."<sup>27</sup>

La Braz makes his own note that the belief that sorrow increases the suffering of the lost at the end of the text. He goes on to record that the young lady never weeps over her mother again and is granted a third and final encounter with her, this time seeing her happy, light procession.

This tale is a perfect example of Breton traditions that use occultic or pagan notions to teach Christian concepts and ideals (mainstream Christianity teaching a similar notion that believers shouldn't weep like the heathens do, knowing they will see their loved ones in the resurrection). The blend, shared naturally and with gravity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrates the enduring staying power of the Celtic intertwine of pagan and Christian traditions, thoughts, and doctrines.

Whereas Balzac's "Outsider" view portrays a savage, superstitious people, the "insider of the following generation", La Braz, represents the Bretons as a spiritual people, surrounded by death, dealing with it via analogy, and tradition, without fully dismissing that "where there is smoke, there is fire." Any unique attribute of a culture can be overused and diluted, used for good or for ill, appropriated, or celebrated. When studying the polarity of these two influential writers and their extremes, the weight of evidence leans towards the Breton revival of the 1830s being sourced in something, at least partially true, unique, and special about Brittany.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 162

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