



UWTSD BA Celtic Studies

Course Module:

Representations of Brittany (HPCS5014,HPCS6014)

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Essay question 1. Assessment Component 1 – 50%

‘Discuss the relationship between humans and the natural environment in literature or art about Brittany. You should illustrate your answer with detailed analysis of at least two of the representations of Brittany studied.’

Due date; 24 November 2023

‘The genius of modern civilization shrinks from forcing its way through the impenetrable primordial forests’ [of Brittany] .

Balzac, *Les Chouans ou la Bretagne en 1799* (written 1829)

Brittany, which by the time that the novel was envisaged as being set, had by 1799 become something of a thorn in the side of the Republic, prompting Honore Balzac to embark upon a work, which later was incorporated into a much larger collective format entitled *La Comédie Humaine*.and which subsequently has engendered the author as a kind of progenitor of a realist school of writing. This methodology is to a certain extent expressed right at the outset of the novel, where we are made aware of a large group of press-ganged Breton peasantry being marched to a recruitment reception location, who might otherwise be possible future members of the opposing counter-revolution force:

. . . a collection of such fantastic costumes and a mixture of individuals belonging to so many and diverse localities and professions that it will be well to describe their characteristic differences, in order to give to this history the vivid local colouring to which so much value is attached in these days,—though some critics do assert that it injures the representation of sentiments. [1]

A prominent feature of Honore Balzac's descriptive texts is apparently strange in that the portrayal of the Breton peasantry, and the poverty that obviously accompanied it, is, as it is, so to speak, as though peasantry had been vanquished by the Revolution, and solely remained in the western extremity. Furthermore, the 'Chouans', otherwise 'rebels', could almost be regarded as some kind of sub-human species, following descriptions such as:

‘ Many of the peasants, in fact the greater number, were barefooted, and wore no other garments than a large goatskin, which covered them from the neck to the knees, and trousers of white and very coarse linen, the ill-woven texture of which betrayed the slovenly industrial habits of the region. The straight locks of their long

hair mingling with those of the goatskin hid their faces, which were bent on the ground, so completely that the garment might have been thought their own skin, ‘

[2]

Thus a kind of goatskin smock, noted as a regional peculiarity, is associated as a characterization of the wearer: man becomes goat, or vice versa as it were.

As the initial chapter of the novel is entitled ‘Ambuscade’, the fate of these peasants is very quickly resolved and they disappear into the depths of the forest area where the column had halted. These forests, symbolic perhaps of an extreme natural state, undefiled, in a region standing as a kind of diametric opposite to the metropolitan society of Paris, particularly that of the post-revolutionary world seem to represent some sort of antithesis. The key expression here would appear to be the ‘genius of modern civilization’ . Whereas the supporters of the Revolution had in its aftermath sought to dramatically reorganize features of education with, for example, a standardisation of arithmetical functions formulated as a decimal system, and even a new beginning for a year one in the calendar similar to the Islamic interventions many centuries before, the prospect of a similar reorganization of the western seaboard seems dismal, particularly in the light of the counter-revolutionary spirit and potential threats inherent in that. Conflict between the brave new world of the Revolution and the old of pre-revolutionary Brittany might be suggested as a major theme within *Les Chouans*.

From a lay perspective, this kind of demeaning attitude towards a sector of society might seem ironic in that the Revolution, which is essentially a kind of peasant’s revolt, in the west is not admitted as empathetic or relevant; but possibly in view of the anti-revolutionary spirit residual to the region, expressed in the novel. then this might be expected. Brittany, it seems, might

be regarded as representative of an extension of England's monarchical structure, not really trustworthy particularly in view of the recent Napoleonic conflict. However, it could well be argued that the events of 1789 and after had the result of not exactly abolishing any French royalty but rather rationalizing this into a Napoleonic imperium, with not just a review of French hierarchical structure, but with a perspective of European geopolitical adventuring as an ideological extension. Under these dictatorial circumstances, the status quo of any region existing as a discrete entity outside this situation, envisaged as progress, might be viewed as eventually precarious. Any thought that a region might be regarded as some exotic appendage imbued with a Celtic mystery did not seem to appeal to Balzac particularly *a propos* the literary style developing within his career:

. . . 'Balzac believed that Romanticism, with its focus on individualism and sentimentality, failed to present a meaningful perspective on society. The goal of his *Human Comedy*, stated expressly in his preface, was to study the "social species" the way a scientist would examine the phenomena of the natural world.'. [3]

If the extract that opens the assignment can be included as representative of a 'positivist' stance, indicative of an ambition towards social and scientific progress, then the alternative view might be a reactionary corresponding 19th century development in the artistic arena of the Romantic movement.

Romanticism and a different Breton perspective: François-Auguste-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand. . . an 'insider's' attitude

In contrast to Honore Balzac (considered as an 'outsider') and as a native of Brittany, in François-René de Chateaubriand we have perhaps a more romantic and positive voice. With *Les martyrs* (Paris, 1809), a prose poem 'intended to prove by example the superiority of Christianity over Paganism' as a source of poetic inspiration: 'With a literary scrupulosity, rare indeed in those days,

Chateaubriand made a point of visiting the places which he was to describe in the last-named work. In fact it was this tour that brought forth the "Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem" (Paris, 1811) ' [4]

In his memoirs Chateaubriand described himself as. . . "a traveller, soldier, poet, publicist, it is among forests that I have sung the forest, aboard ships that I have depicted the sea, in camp that I have spoken of arms, in exile that I have learnt to know exile, in courts, in affairs of the state, in Parliament that I have studied princes, politics, law, and history." [5] The reference to the forest is an interesting contrast to Balzac's metaphor: whereas the Breton woodland and thickets are conveyed as something of a barrier to progress, a dark confusion of an environment ,a threat, Chateaubriand finds inspiration there . . .

'At other times, I would follow an abandoned track, or a stream adorned with its water-plants; I listened to the sounds that emanate from unfrequented places; I put my ear to every tree; I thought I might hear the moonlight singing in the woods ' [6]

This poetic dedication to nature is perhaps most prominent in the example which follows. Here, the author places his ethical approach to the surrounding natural environment as superior to the settlers of Florida. The wilderness is in his eyes sacrosanct:

'The place pleases me; since, for me, it has replaced my ancestral fields; I have paid for it with the products of my dreams and my waking hours; it is to the great wilderness of *Atala* that I owe the little wilderness of Aulnay; and to create this refuge I have not, like the American settlers, despoiled the Florida Indians. I am attached to my trees; I have addressed elegies, sonnets, and odes to them. There is not one of them that I have not tended with my own hands, that I have not rescued from root-beetles, from caterpillars glued to its leaves; I know them all by name as if they were my children: they are my family, I have no other, and I hope to die among them. [7]

This, on the surface, seems to be an obsession, perhaps even a biophile or nemophilist tendency emerging in the writing. But in any case imagery of the solitary traveller. . . tramping the 'abandoned track' in the landscape, of Chateaubriand's journeying, seems something of an idealisation, placing the natural landscape in the most congenial light. We can also possibly detect a fairly common theme in the Romantic movement of the imagery of night, the moon . . .the transfiguration of the otherwise mundane or everyday experience into something possibly supernatural or mysterious . . .

‘ . .in Brittany is the moon rising over the land and setting over the sea. Established by God as the controller of the deep, the moon has her clothes, her mists ’ [8]

This theme is later seen in German romanticism in, for example, the music scores of Schoenberg and Berg, where the character of the music transcends the common harmony into atonality or the impressionistic blurring of Claude Debussy, who also finds inspiration with moonlight, epitomised in the piano scores *Claire de Lune*, or *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*.

.For his talent as much as his excesses, Chateaubriand may be considered the father of French Romanticism. His descriptions of Nature and his analysis of emotion made him the model for a generation of Romantic writers, not only in France but also abroad. For example, Lord Byron was deeply impressed by René. The young Victor Hugo scribbled in a notebook, To be Chateaubriand or nothing. Even his enemies found it hard to avoid his influence. [9]

Victor Hugo's counter-revolutionaries: a romantic 'outsider' and the forest of the Vendée

Of a later generation to Balzac, the turmoil of the counter-revolutionary movement again is the source of inspiration to another 'outsider' in the final novel of Victor Hugo. In a translation, the following description gives a

dramatic contrast between the two societies of Paris and Brittany, in this instance, suggesting a kind of veiled respect, the concept of a 'noble savage' perhaps. An extended extract is included for the purpose of getting a full comprehension of the nature of the writer's psychology:

' He who would understand the Vendée must picture the antagonism of the French Revolution on the one hand, and the Breton peasant on the other.

Face to face with these unparalleled events,—this tremendous promise of every advantage at once, this fit of rage on the part of civilization, this excess of infuriated progress, to be accompanied by an improvement that could neither be measured nor understood,—stands this serious and peculiar savage, this man with the keen eyes and long hair, who lives on milk and chestnuts; whose ideas are bounded by his roof, by his hedge, and by his ditch; who can distinguish each village by the sound of its bells; who drinks nothing but water, yet wears a leather waistcoat worked with silken arabesques,—a man uncultivated, dressed in embroidered garments, who tattoos his clothes as his ancestors the Celts used to tattoo their faces; who respects his master in the person of his executioner; who speaks a dead language, which is equivalent to keeping his mind in a tomb, goading his oxen, sharpening his scythe, hoeing his black grain, kneading his buckwheat cake; reverencing, first his plough, and secondly his grandmother; believing in the Blessed Virgin, and in the White Lady no less; worshipping before the altar, and also before the tall mysterious stone set up in the midst of the moor,—a laborer in the plain, a fisherman on the coast, a poacher in the thicket, devoted to his kings, his priests, his lords, and to his very lice; a man of pensive mood, often standing motionless for hours on the wide deserted shore, listening gloomily to the sounding sea.'

Is it then strange that this blind man failed to appreciate the light? ' [10]

An analysis of this passage might include what follows. Firstly, we have again the association of the Breton peasant and his reluctance in the acceptance of 'the tremendous promise of every advantage' ; in place of which he is happy with his Celtic origins and the implied primitivism of that. Secondly, this

implied pagan past is still present even when professing his Christian loyalty; that is, he can just as easily revere the image of a Neolithic menhir on the moor as much as a church altar. But perhaps it is the Vendée itself, and in particular as an apposite symbol, its forest areas which take on a characterization of insidious rebellion, where the counter-revolutionaries can conceal themselves.

‘ Thus the tragic forests of Brittany once more resumed their ancient rôle of servant and accomplice to revolution.

The subsoil of such a forest was like a madrepore pierced and intersected in all directions by a secret labyrinth of mines, cells, and galleries. Each of these hidden cells was large enough to shelter five or six men ’ [11]

‘These underground belligerents were wonderfully well-informed. Nothing could be more rapid or more mysterious than their means of communication. The bridges and wagons had all been destroyed, yet they found means to keep one another informed of all that went on, and to send timely warning. Messenger-stations of danger were established from forest to forest, from village to village, from hut to hut, from bush to bush.’ [12]

It is as if the Chouannerie had become part of a dark underground world completely at odds with a new spirit and light of reason supposedly offered in the new century. We are reminded perhaps of the subterranean world of H.G. Wells’ novel *The Time Machine*, where the human race has differentiated into two distinct groups: the ‘Eloi’ who live above the terrain normally, and the ‘Morlocks’, who ultimately are their nemesis. In the case of the Breton rebels they have the ability to turn night to day, emerging only when the sun has disappeared, and breathe the fresh night air in relative safety. Their communication is mysterious if not insidious.

Realism in a more positive light? Pan Celticism and Ambrose Bebb

If, as in Hugo's passage above, the concept of a valid Celtic inheritance might be considered as less than flattering; in the case of Ambrose Bebb's work, the advantages of being a Breton peasant was that you belonged to a link in the chain of a pan-Celtic brotherhood:

' One reason for Bebb's devotion to Brittany was that since his youth he had been an ardent nationalist. As a student at Aberystwyth he had edited *Y Wawr*, a student publication which had dared, during World War I, to champion the cause of conscientious objectors and to express approval of the 1916 Easter Week rising in Ireland, [13]

This prospect of a kind of Celtic Utopian progress is evident in the dedication displayed by Ambrose Bebb's time and dedication in absorbing the various cultural aspects of the six Celtic nations, in particular that of the Breton people:

' Bebb had been deeply interested in Brittany. He visited the country regularly and travelled extensively within it, so that he knew its topography thoroughly. He learnt the language, and he had some very good friends among the Bretons. He contributed extensively to *Breiz Atao*, the journal of the Breton nationalists. Through all this he not only gained a thorough knowledge of Brittany, its history, its customs and its religion, but also came to admire the Breton way of life and to sympathise with the aims of those who strove to preserve the country's culture. This led to the publication of three books: *Llydaw* (1929), *Pererindodau* (1941) and *Dydd-lyfr pythefnos, neu y ddawns angau* (1939), an account of his travels in Brittany during the last fortnight before the outbreak of World War II.' [14]

As a travelogue of the twentieth century, we have left the aftermath of the Revolution behind. Bebb describes in some detail his enthusiasm for the particular differences in the attire seen at an open-air service. In the work *Pererindodau*, Bebb regards himself as a pilgrim as he witnesses . . .

‘Sitting on the grass on the slope opposite [the priests on the stage] is one of the most beautiful crowds of people that the eyes of any man can feast upon, The variety in age and dress, posture and colour, are remarkable ‘ [15]

This might suggest that we have moved to a polar opposite opinion of the peasantry within the century between Balzac and Bebb. Whereas Balzac might be considered hypercritical and biased negatively, the description of Bebb in translation seems a vision of perfection. This is something of an utopian scene, particularly when compared with the opening paragraphs of *Les Chouans*.

Assignment summary

Part of the intention of this assignment was to explore various themes emerging in the literature chosen. What has been attempted in this range of views or attitudes is to consider a thematic link, perhaps underlying this in the sense of an urban mind in confrontation to the perceived uncertainty and danger of the relatively untouched topography of the west. The potential foreboding of the dark forest environment, to some eyes, a subconscious barrier to reason and light, but to others, something to be treasured. Similarly, the people who live with this: can they ever be considered on the same intellectual level as the Parisian cognoscenti? To Ambrose Bebb the idealisation of a rural society and the peasantry coming together as a brotherhood in an open-air ceremony seems paramount. It is a natural and beautiful scene. The variety of parochial attire is not strange but to be

expected. To a writer such as Balzac, this might have seemed primitive however.

One suggested observation concluded from the above discussion might be that the 18th/ 19th century criticism of Breton life is seen to dissolve into a greater sense of self-worth and national pride separate from the republican partner, for example manifested in such a convention of the pan-Celtic nations held at the conference of 1930, in London, where an attempt was made to co-ordinate and foster a cross-cultural dialogue between the so-called six Celtic Nations. Brittany had been, as it were, reincorporated into the British family of nations, from where it had originated. But of course later in the century, this would evolve into a 'regionalist' character:

'The liberation of German occupied France in 1944, as well as the regional reorganisation of France during the 1970s and the 1980s, both represent changes for the search for national identity in France and the revival of cultural identity in Brittany. Revivals and redefinitions of Breton culture represent both larger nationalist movements in Brittany, but are also a part of France's struggle with national and cultural identity' [16]

Further discussion or analysis of this position would probably be better expressed in an alternative assignment subject .

Notes

1 Honoré de Balzac, *Les Chouans* Trans.: Katharine Prescott Wormeley 2004 Chapter I 'AN AMBUSCADE'

2 *ibid*

3 *Honore de Balzac* - New World Encyclopedia

4 Bertrin, Georges. "François-René de Chateaubriand." The Catholic Encyclopedia. (Vol. 3)

5 Preface testamentaire, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, p. 4

6 Op cit: BkIII, Chap9, Sec1

7 BkI:Chap1:Sec1

8 *ibid*.

9 Chateaubriand François-René: literary portal <https://adaniportal.kz/authors/view>

10 Hugo, *Quatre Vingt Treize*: Part 3, Book1 CONNIVANCE OF MEN AND FORESTS.

11 Hugo, op cit. IV. THEIR LIFE UNDERGROUND.

12 *ibid*.

13 <https://biography.wales/article/s2-BEBB-AMB>

14 *Ibid*

15 Bebb, (1941), pp: 378-379

16 Hornbeck p.103

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<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Honore-de-Balzac/La-Comedie-humai>

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New World Encyclopedia 'Honore de Balzac', January 2018, 23:48 UTC, <<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/>