

Assignment 1 – HPCS 5014 – Representations of Brittany.

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How important is the theme of ‘return to nature’ in literature about Brittany?

Introduction

This essay will examine the theme of ‘return to nature’ within literature about Brittany by analysing works from Ambrose Bebb, John Dyfnallt Owen, Balzac, and Dr Heather Williams, as well as making reference to journal papers. From these, the essay will look not only at the theme of ‘return to nature’ in a literal geographical sense, but also from the perspective of the social construct and the ‘nature’ that this can present

Background

In a 2007 paper presented at the Society of Dix-neuviémistes 5th annual conference, Dr Heather Williams stated that “Brittany is trapped by nature.”¹

An examination of various different texts from the 19th and 20th century can show that although the imagery used by different writers has changed over time, references to nature are a common theme. However, does this really mean that the Breton people are trapped by nature or that the writings of various authors has created a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Whilst geographically it could easily be argued to be the case that Brittany is trapped by nature, as it is for the most part surrounded by the sea on the north western coast of France. However, from a literary perspective, does how Brittany is portrayed, trap the Bretons into being viewed in a specific way?

Balzac

If we initially look at the works of Balzac and specifically his novel *Les Chouans*, we are presented with a mixture of imagery that is at times providing stark and somewhat harsh views of the Breton landscape, and at others presenting a view that details the beauty that can be found within the landscape.

In one section Balzac describes a conscript who is marching with the republic army as having a face that has “angular outlines presenting a sort of vague likeness to the granite which forms the soil of the region”.² Again, it could easily be argued that Balzac is being accurate with his description of the landscape in this passage. However, the inference that it provides is of a landscape that is harsh, unforgiving, and perhaps not productive or fertile. By creating a likeness of the character to this landscape however, Balzac portrays a person who has been shaped by the landscape in which they live. Has that character then been trapped by nature?

¹ Heather Williams, 'Ecocriticism and a French province, The power of nature of Brittany and the Bretonnes', *Society of Dix-neuviémistes annual conference*, Cambridge, 2007.

² Balzac, *Les Chouans*, (Project Gutenberg, 2016) < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm> > [accessed 30 October 2021].

Balzac uses similar images when he describes a valley that has “Mountains of gneiss and slate”.³

By contrast, he further describes how these mountains “made a vast enclosure, circular in form, in the centre of which a meadow lay softly stretched, like the lawn of an English garden.”⁴

These two extracts provide very different views of the Breton landscape, a view which is harsh and unforgiving, whilst at the same time hides the real beauty that can be found if a person looks from the correct perspective. This again raises the question as to whether Brittany is trapped by nature, in part due to the geography of the area that prevents people from being able to see what is actually there, although the question could also be posed in the form ‘is nature trapped by Brittany’?

Balzac returns to a softer and more beautiful description of the Breton landscape when he states

If a quiet imagination will picture to itself these rich fluctuations of light and shade, the vaporous outline of the mountains, the mysterious perspectives which were seen where the trees gave an opening, or the streamlets ran, or some coquettish little glade fled away in the distance; if memory will color, as it were, this sketch, as fleeting as the moment when it was taken, the persons for whom such pictures are not without charm will have an imperfect image of the magic scene which delighted the still impressionable souls of the young officers.⁵

Within this passage Balzac gives us vivid descriptions of the beauty and almost playful nature of the Breton landscape, suggesting that it may have a long lasting effect upon our very souls

It is worth noting that Balzac was not a native Breton and lived in Paris where he had been apprenticed to a law firm and also worked as a journalist before trying to start his own publishing business which ultimately failed.⁶

Although not born in Brittany, and living in Paris, would today lead us to label Balzac as an outsider, it is also noted that he did travel to Brittany to conduct research and so ensure that his novels were accurate in how they portrayed the region.⁷

In a video lecture Dr Heather Williams stated that Balzac’s goal with his novel was the physical and moral improvement of Brittany.⁸ We can contrast this with a quote from another French novelist Victor Hugo who stated about Brittany “Since being in Brittany I’m in the filth. Washing Brittany off would require a whole ocean. The size of the washbasin is just a measure of this great dirtiness”.⁹ Although taking a very extreme view of Brittany in his description,

³ Balzac, *Les Chouans*, (Project Gutenberg, 2016) < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm> > [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Oxford reference, *The New Oxford companion to Literature in French – Balzac, Honoré* (2005) < <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198661252.001.0001/acref-9780198661252-e-326?rskey=G4sU11> > [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁷ Yourdictionary, *Honoré de Balzac* < <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/honore-de-balzac> > [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁸ Heather Williams, *Outsiders views of Brittany*, [video lecture to B.A. Celtic Studies year 2] available at: <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8534> [accessed 30 October 2021].

⁹ Ibid.

that at times differs from some of the descriptions used by Balzac, it is notable that Hugo still held Balzac in high esteem as a writer and spoke at Balzac's funeral saying that Balzac had been revolutionary in his writings "whether he knew it or not, whether he wished it or not".¹⁰ We can also see in both of these quotes, elements of the discrimination that existed towards the Bretons, what has been described by some writers as the post-colonial attitude towards the Bretons that could easily lead to them being trapped by nature.

Bebb

By contrast, Ambrose Bebb was Welsh rather than French or Breton, although obviously, the Bretons and the Welsh share a cultural heritage via the Celtic language. In the years between the first and second world wars, Bebb travelled to Brittany and wrote about his visits. In this way, as with Balzac, he could be considered as an outsider, although from his writings it is obvious that Bebb considered that he had a kind of kinship with the Breton people due to his being Welsh.¹¹

Within *Pererindodau*, one of Bebb's works, he is perhaps less obvious in his use of a nature theme than Balzac. When describing a mass that he attended in Sainte-Anne the only direct reference that he made to nature was when referring to the congregation, "the pilgrims gather from the dunes and the beaches, from the fields and their carriages".¹²

However, although there is a lack of direct description of the natural environment within his narrative, it is obvious that Bebb both enjoyed his visits to Brittany and wanted to convey the joy that he experienced there to his readership.

The way that Bebb describes "one of the most beautiful crowds of people that the eyes of any man can feast upon"¹³ allows us to understand his joy, but also some of the 'true nature' of the people of Brittany. When people are observed being themselves and behaving in a completely normal way, and that is then reported in a totally unbiased and accurate fashion, it could be said that there is a return to nature within the writing, albeit that the nature is of a social construct rather than the more obvious physicality of the natural world.

We can see this again in the same extract when Bebb describes the women as "noble"¹⁴ and that men are wearing "velvet hats, decked with ribbons and buckles, in their blue waistcoats with black and yellow velvet, and rows of colourful buttons."¹⁵

We can even draw parallels between how Bebb has described this scene and with how Balzac described the waistcoats of the Bretons as being "adorned with two parallel rows of brass

¹⁰ Oxford reference, *The New Oxford companion to Literature in French – Balzac, Honoré* (2005) <
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198661252.001.0001/acref-9780198661252-e-326?rskey=G4sU11>> [accessed 30 October 2021].

¹¹ Ambrose Bebb, 'Pererindodau', in *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature*, ed. by Jaqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005) pp. 397-398 (p.397).

¹² Ambrose Bebb, 'Pererindodau', in *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature*, ed. by Jaqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005) pp. 378-379 (p.378).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ambrose Bebb, 'Pererindodau', in *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature*, ed. by Jaqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005) pp. 378-379 (p.379).

¹⁵ Ibid.

buttons”¹⁶ which he then further described as being like “corn flowers and poppies in a wheat field”.¹⁷

John Dyfnallt Owen

Another Welsh writer, Owen again visited Brittany in the years between the first and second world wars, much the same as Bebb.

In his work ‘From the Breton Headland’ Owen describes a visit to a fishing quay at Concarneau. He states

The harbour was alive with fishing boats – boats unlike any to be seen anywhere in the world. There was movement, bargaining, buying, and selling everywhere, and the stench of fish filled our nostrils. The streets were filthy”.¹⁸

Whilst we can still see the link to nature via the fishing within the writing, we are again given a nature of the social constructs that existed at the time, much as we saw within the writing of Bebb.

We can see this further when Owen describes a group of fishwives who “demanded payment for a photograph”,¹⁹ stating that they “Objected to the French from Paris making fun of them”.²⁰ It is interesting to note the language used by the fishwives in stating that it was the “French from Paris”²¹ who made fun of them, so demonstrating the separation between the people of Brittany and the rest of France, and perhaps giving a clear view of the nature of the social construct that existed within the country at the time.

The importance of the fishing industry within Brittany is long and historical. The Newfoundland Heritage website states that fisherman from Breton were fishing within water around Newfoundland as far back as 1504²². In an article on the importance of fishing within the Breton region, Charles Menzies noted that in the late 19th century i.e. between the time of Balzac’s *Les Chouans* and Owens *From the Breton Headland*, the economy of Bigouden in Brittany was saved due to the increase in the fishing industry²³.

It is also interesting to note that in his article, Owen wrote that “Our eyes were drawn to the ever changing colours on the westerly horizon, the ships moving as if in a dream on the edge of the sea in the heavy hues of the restless scenery”²⁴. This brings to mind a picturesque and idyllic location that is ideal to visit as a tourist, albeit one that it is a working village.

¹⁶ Balzac, *Les Chouans*, (Project Gutenberg, 2016) < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1921/1921-h/1921-h.htm> > [accessed 30 October 2021].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John Dyfnallt Owen, ‘From the Breton Headland’, in *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature*, ed. by Jaqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005) pp. 388-389 (p.388).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, *The International Fishery of the 16th Century*, (1997) < <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/exploration/16th-century-fishery.php> >. [accessed 30 October 2021].

²³ Charles Menzies, ‘Class and Identity on the Margins of Industrial Society: A Breton Illustration’, *Anthropologica*, 39.1/2 (1997), 27-38 (p.28).

²⁴ John Dyfnallt Owen, ‘From the Breton Headland’, in *The turn of the ermine : an anthology of Breton literature*, ed. by Jaqueline Gibson and Gwyn Griffiths (Francis Boutle Publishers, 2005) pp. 388-389 (p.389).

However, one of the last notes made by Owen in his piece is that “Perhaps Concarneau is now one of the seaside towns of Brittany weaned by politics away from the traditions of the past”.²⁵ It is interesting that in his text, Owen is describing a wonderful scene that most might yearn for, and so escape the frenetic nature of modern life. In his own work Menzies notes that “agriculture in the region has been in decline for most of the century”.²⁶ This perhaps fully marks the changes that Owen was witnessing 60 years earlier.

It is also interesting to note a comment from Pierre Jakez-Helias, a Breton actor, journalist and author, that he made during the inter-war period. In *Enacting Brittany*, Patrick Young quotes Jakez-Helias as saying “I don’t know why, but it was on that very day, looking at the Bay of Audierne, in a place called Penhors, that I saw the dawn of a new age.”²⁷ Jakez-Helias was writing about his early life within the Bigouden region of Brittany, and as we have seen earlier in the work of Menzies, this particular region was undergoing major economic changes during this period. Perhaps Jakez-Helias was commenting upon this change, although from the short extract it cannot be determined whether he viewed this dawning of a new age as a positive thing to be embraced or a negative thing to be lamented.

The final text that will be examined is a work by Dr Heather Williams, ‘*Travelling between Wales and Brittany*’. Within this, Williams notes that John Dyfnallt Owen who we looked at earlier, in his work titled ‘*O Ben Tir Llydaw*’ “congratulates himself for leaving the beaten track in order to see the authentic culture that is being lost or about to be lost”,²⁸ and further notes, quoting Owen directly, that the reason for getting off the beaten track was “to see the true Brittany, and not the half French Brittany along the main road”.²⁹

This raises an important issue. The text indicates that Owen considers that Brittany is in some way being changed from its true nature by virtue of being part of France and hints at the post colonial attitude that exists towards Brittany from the rest of France, particularly Parisian France, that we have also seen in the quotes from Owen’s texts relating to the Breton fishwives. It seems strange that a post revolution country that had as its founding principals ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity’, and had this as part of the constitution written in 1848, and in later revisions of the French constitution in 1946 and 1958³⁰, that visitors such as Owen should then be noticing and documenting that the true nature of a region was being lost.

Indeed, if we refer back to the 2007 paper presented at the Society of Dix-neuviémistes 5th annual conference, the writer concludes that “The powerful cliché of the power of nature over them has been used over the centuries to simplify, infantilize, and homogenize Bretons.”.³¹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Charles Menzies, ‘Class and Identity on the Margins of Industrial Society: A Breton Illustration’, *Anthropologica*, 39.1/2 (1997), 27-38 (p.28).

²⁷ Patrick Young, *Enacting Brittany*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) p.1.

²⁸ Heather Williams, ‘Travelling ideas between Wales and Brittany’, *VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2.1 (2018), 47-54 (p.52).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ministère de L’Europe et Des Affaires Étrangères, *Symbols of the Republic* (2021) < <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/symbols-of-the-republic/article/liberty-equality-fraternity>> [accessed 3 November 2021].

³¹ Heather Williams, ‘Ecocriticism and a French province, The power of nature of Brittany and the Bretonnes’, *Society of Dix-neuviémistes annual conference*, Cambridge, 2007.

This would give a very direct indication that the theme of 'return to nature' is indeed an important one within literature about Brittany, even though it is at times providing quite a negative view of the region.

It is however perhaps inevitable that elements of a 'true nature' of any place or society will be changed and lost over the course of time such that it is not possible to 'return to nature' in the sense of a social construct for ongoing life. Indeed, it could be debated at length as to what actually represents the true nature of any region or people. If it were possible to look back far enough through history there would likely be numerous changes to that true nature, dependent upon what time period was examined. However, this should not ignore the recognition and indeed respect of that true nature that has been documented in texts through the ages. By looking at the theme of 'return to nature' in this way, it could be concluded that the theme is very important within the literature about Brittany.

What we can see from all of these texts is the real importance of the theme of 'return to nature'. However, what must not be overlooked though is the complexity that can exist within the statement. To merely look at a 'return to nature' as something that documents and comments upon the natural beauty, or indeed harshness of the Breton landscape, would miss the very important aspect of the nature of the social construct within not just Brittany, but within France overall.

To return to a question that was posed at the beginning of this essay, namely 'does how Brittany is portrayed, trap the Bretons into being viewed in a specific way?', it would be possible to answer this by saying that if we were to take at face value everything that has been written about Brittany and the Breton people, then it may well trap them into a specific way of being viewed, whether via the physical nature of the region or through the social nature of the region and it's people. However, due to the way that information is presented within the modern world, it is entirely possible that an individual could research and form their own opinion on this. It could also be argued that the only way to truly form an opinion, would be to visit the region, talk to the people of the area and find out for oneself.

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