



UWTSD BA Celtic Studies (distance learning}

Module: Representations of Brittany (HPCS5014,HPCS6014)

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Essay question 2. Assessment Component 2 – 50%

‘ How useful is it to view Brittany’s culture through the lens of postcolonial theory? You should illustrate your answer with detailed analysis of at least two of the representations of Brittany studied.’

Initially, it might be useful to consider aspects of this question in close detail, as the position might not be as straightforward as imagined. We need to establish some parameters. For instance, what do we mean by ‘culture’? A term which is easily introduced into a discussion, which might include a broad array of aspects of life. Secondly, is it necessary to assign a ‘theory’ to life, artistic endeavour, intellectual activity in a contemporary Brittany, or indeed any other country which has emerged or is emerging from the domination of another set of values belonging to a neighbouring regime or overseas or distant country or indeed empire? Usefulness, it might well be said, could be personal, a subjective opinion dependent on relevant insight into these issues and the set of views pre-existing or resulting from.

Firstly, with regard to a theory as suggested or implied by postcolonialism, *Oxford Bibliographies*, a research utility, has as a definition . . .

‘ Postcolonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century

Introduction’ ¹

There is ‘a body of thought’. So what might this be? And more appropriately, how is this specific to Brittany?

The acclaimed author on Breton cultural development throughout the 19th and 20th century, Dr. Heather Williams, maintains that. . .

‘The ‘Brittany’ we are dealing with in the late twentieth century has shed its aura of poeticness, and the prettiness that went with that notion in the nineteenth century, to reveal a brutally honest picture. Brittany has exchanged its noble savages for a modern, oppressed proletariat. However, poetry and politics are not polar opposites; we could go as far as to say, in the case of Brittany, that poetry = politics. It is widely accepted that one cannot tell the story of the birth of Breton national feeling, or the Breton movement, during the Romantic revival without making a long excursion into the world of literature, and especially that of poetry.’ ²

So, what we can perhaps deduce from this type of appraisal is that political reaction is more effective if clothed in poetic form, which it could be argued is an established fact with universal relevance and coverage. The mention of ‘aesthetic’ in the opening definition above might have some relevance; but as poetry has a strong societal or community oriented role, either by public narration, songs or ballads, then in this context, as a means of social protest, there can be little doubt as to the intentions behind composition of this medium. Possibly an overt example of the reaction against the external forces impinging on the countryside, as envisaged by the poet, we might consider what could be thought of as a visually explicit example. . .

Strip. Despoil our Country
Sweep away the sacred oaks of the Druids
The birches of the Celts and the yew-trees
—And the chestnuts of our youth—
In which our birds sang.
Start fires in the moor

¹ J Daniel Elam, *Postcolonial Theory* in Oxford Bibliographies (Oxford: University Press 2019)

² Williams, Heather, *Postcolonialism and Brittany*: study text, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2023 , p, 6

In the heath. In the broom waving
Like seas of golden water ³

This certainly has the feeling of desperation within the text, as translated. The author and lecturer Diarmuid Johnson describes Duval stylistically as having a twin theme focused on ‘the demise of Bretton civilization and the rise of French hegemony. Treatment of the first transports us into a world that has vanished, and the many glimpses afforded of this world ensure the endurance of the work as a social document.’ ⁴

This latter comment is possibly reflected in the closing lines of Duval’s poem where we might feel the impression of some sense of regimentation upon even the landscape as interpreted by Duval. That is to say that she sees before her the transformation of a ‘native’, local panorama transformed into regulated rows of afforestation, imposed by a colonial administration:

Long rows of lead soldiers
Tedious songs of their resin trees
With strange names!
And soon ... If we don’t pay attention
On the great organ
Of their dark and sad forests
—Fertilized with the ashes of our trees—
The Atlantic Wind
Will play while singing
...The Requiem of our Country.

Work of the foreigner November 1967. ⁵

Notwithstanding Diarmuid Johnson’s description of the poetry as being the product of indignation, we can perhaps detect a certain degree of intertextuality when re-reading these lines. Is Duval perhaps at least subconsciously reverting back to the 19th century romantic imagery and nostalgia when talking in terms of ‘the sacred oaks of the Druids, The birches of the Celts and the yew-trees —And the chestnuts of our youth— ‘ , and ‘In the heath. In the broom waving , Like seas of golden water’ ? And we might even detect a hint

³ Anjel Duval, trans, Trimm *Work of the foreigner* , lines 1 - 8

⁴ Diarmuid Johnson, www.anjela.org/oberenn/articles

⁵ Ibid. Lines 15 - 24

of melodrama with . . . ‘ The Atlantic Wind Will play while singing ...The Requiem of our Country.’

Returning to the initial question as to a recognisable theory, further analysis of this term could include the following suggestion . . .

‘Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts at coming up with a single definition of postcolonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept.’ ⁶

Association with Duval and other authors could be possibly seen to be reflected by reference to this comment. For example, celebrating cultural identity in the cause of postcolonialist expression is something to be expected, it could be argued. But when discussing the merits of the significance and relativity of the local Breton dialect as opposed to that of the Republican ideal of a competent French linguistic society, via the state education system, the parents of a contemporary author of Duval, Pierre-Jakez Hélias, in his autobiography, *Le Cheval d'Orgueil*, state that he must be prepared to learn to speak French most of the time as times had changed, and whereas they had managed with a limited set of French language skills, he would only be able to use his Breton with a declining number of people. Inability or reluctance to assimilate the French language would have been considered a ‘disgrace of the family’, destined for a life of cattle herder. ⁷

This kind of transgenerational area of conflict seems to manifest itself later in a post Second World War political environment:

‘ . . . the left-leaning political orientation of the 1960s and 1970s Breton cultural revival, led by poets, activists, musicians, artists, and language

⁶ <https://art.washington.edu/sites/art/files/documents/post-colonialism>

⁷ Op cit. chapter 4, p.151

advocates, all inspired by May 1968 and the era of decolonization, who saw in the countercultural Breton movement an alternative to French, bourgeois cultural dominance. Even the most sympathetic studies of the Breton movement, however, have pointed to a fundamental, and, perhaps, inevitable paradox at the movement's core. The movement's preoccupation with defining and defending an abstract Breton identity, a Pan-Bretonness, was, in fact, at odds with how the majority of the Breton population viewed itself, identifying predominantly as members of a local community rather than with region as a whole. In promoting this militant Pan-Bretonness, the Breton movement often alienated those members of the Breton community for whom it sought to speak...'⁸

Translation of folkloric elements into French for publication also became a focus for critical response to the work of Hélias by Xavier Grall (1930–1981) a journalist, poet, and Breton nationalist. An example is highlighted by Heather Williams

'... The way in which Hélias translates literally from the Breton is condemned by Grall as a 'tentative de folklorisation', because, for example, translating 'ifern yen' as 'enfer froid', when 'enfer cruel' would be more appropriate, or using 'mignon' to translate the Breton word for friend, when it would be more accurate to translate as 'ami', makes Breton life seem quaint and curious. Grall goes as far as to argue that this makes Hélias's text 'colonializing':⁹

But of course, the 'quaint and curious' in literature can be an attraction to readers living outside that culture. And when considering the geographical aspect of France as a 'regional' country, the proposition that Brittany is the subject of colonization by a central bureaucracy has to be tempered by the fact that other regions also differ culturally from the Parisian paradigm of civil model as for example the Mediterranean south and contested Germanic east as well as the western Atlantic seaboard. A similar non-homogeneous position is seen for example in Italy within the contrasting cultures of the rural south and that of the sophisticated metropolitan society of Milan.

⁸ Annie de Saussure, *Conflicts in Breagnes: Identity Politics and Literary Networks in the Postwar Breton Movement(s)* Yale University

⁹ Heather Williams *Notes on revolutionary poetry*, study text, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2023

While political issues are important in a 'culture', the vehement attitudes expressed by activists such as Grall have to be balanced against the movements in the global economy. As Hélias suggested in his excerpt quoted earlier, 'times had changed', and as the author and translator Lenora Timm, Duval's major translator, in her article, *The Way We Were: Twentieth-Century Brittany Through the Eyes of Breton Language Memorialists*, there existed a certain dilemma in the retrospective views on predominantly rural society:

. . . 'Looking back over six to eight decades during which their lives, and those of most European peasantries, were transformed by the forces of industrialization and other aspects of modernization, our authors write with affection and a certain constrained nostalgia about a world that has been lost. . None argues for a return to the way things were.'¹⁰

Returning again to the opening definition offered by *Oxford Bibliographies*, including as a definition some consideration for aesthetic issues, we might pose a further question as to what direction the art world has taken during the 20th century and whether there is any correspondence between the writing of Duval and Grall however unlikely that may seem. What seems to be the case here is a situation of not so much painters 'of' Brittany, as painters seduced 'by' Brittany as a series of outsiders. As an example, the Brittany Tourist Board speaks of artist Paul Sérusier's experience. . .

'After his stay in Pont-Aven, Paul Sérusier wanted to find a primitive and preserved side of Brittany. In the Monts d'Arrée, Huelgoat, with its rocky formations and its legends, provided the matter for some unique [and absorbing] paintings, imprinted with archaic spirituality'

Again, the attraction of the seascape among other points of interest has been an influence, not forgetting the historical significance of the religious traditions of the community . . .

. . . 'painters loved its Celtic past, its legends, its countless chapels and crosses. Their brush strokes reveal lively, festive and colourful scenes of markets, weddings, religious pardons, the fishing ports and sea bathing.'¹¹

¹⁰ Op. cit. p 442

¹¹

<https://www.brittanytourism.com/matching-what-i-want/ideas/in-the-footsteps-of-painters-in-brittany>

We are perhaps entering a world engendered by the Tourist Board of a kind of neo-romanticism, where the difference of the 'other', the strange, more natural and ruggedness of an Atlantic oriented environment is to be celebrated and promoted, if not on purely cultural defensive grounds, then as part of Trimms' process of 'modernization', having a welcome economic impetus. If this is a valid point, then the language used by the Board would possibly resonate with the outsider seeking a different experience: 'archaic spirituality', a 'Celtic past', 'legends' , all of these facets of humanity have obviously become again very relevant in a hypothesised postcolonial environment, an asset to be exploited rather than suppressed.

An earlier native Breton artist of some distinction, Jeanne Malivel (1895-1926) from Loudeac, co-founder of *Seiz Breur* (the Seven Brothers), a Breton national arts and crafts movement between the two World Wars, as a woodcut engraver and illustrator, followed the trend of a separate Celtic artistic influence. An interesting example is listed as Plate 1 in the Appendices. We seem to see here a reflection of Duval's sentiments with personifications of France and Brittany in what appears to be or could possibly be interpreted as, a woebegotten embrace, where France's outstretched hand hovers above the purse of Brittany in a portrayal of theft and exploitation, if this is what was intended, as a synecdoche perhaps.

Now, as a regional entity in the French Republic, within a greater European Union, the twentieth century experience discussed above has quite possibly become less relevant in view of the establishment of the 'Atlantic Cities' initiative set up in year 2000, where the recognition of the fact that Brittany was part of a transnational network which could provide an additional economic framework as a move to promote cooperation between cities in the Atlantic region.

'United by a common coastline, Atlantic cities are attractive and innovative territories that guarantee a high quality of life, supported by numerous economic centers of attraction. The cities of the Atlantic, located on the outskirts of Europe, have developed strong and diverse cultural identities under the influence of the Ocean, the mixing of cultures, commercial exchanges and migratory movements which have followed one another over the centuries.

The cities of the Atlantic have a remarkable natural and historical heritage, but fragile and exposed to the effects of climate change. In addition, the peripheral location of these cities,

which has become more pronounced since Brexit, constitutes a major social and economic challenge. Atlantic cities considered that these issues went beyond the local framework and required transnational territorial cooperation to collectively find answers to these issues.’¹²

This brings into mind the earlier movement of the early twentieth century ‘Pan-celticism’ but obviously in the era of global capitalism and where shifting loyalty in a European European idealism as witnessed by dissatisfaction from various states necessitates wider views of future security and resilience.

Concluding on the discussion of the textual survey, from a personal view, the notion of a postcolonial ‘theory’ has been more constructive than negative, as initially feared. On the other hand, perhaps other equally relevant descriptions might seem to fit, as with for instance ‘concept’ . . . the concept of a 20th century society wishing to express its own cultural identity and heritage without undue interference from neighbouring powers in the spheres of language, literature, politics, and so forth. Taking as an example, a similar condition of a later 20th century Wales, there appeared to be no theoretical impetus behind the development of a Welsh Senate other than a desire to move from a federalist administration to a regional power with the authority to manage health, education, etc., and tax raising facilities where possible, eventually to construct a framework to manage this.

It is interesting to speculate whether we could perhaps rephrase the assignment question, taking account of the above commentary, in a sense of viewing modern Brittany through a ‘prism’ of postcolonialism, where facets of life split off into various shades of socio-political opinion, radicalism, national pioneering art movements, self-styled poetry, nostalgia and latterly a recognition of a role in a greater global vision but again not overlooking a Celticity involving Atlantic cultural links with southern Ireland, with the glaring deficit being the south coast of Wales and Cornwall, both disenfranchised from the European Union.

¹² Mission statements published by Atlantic Cities, 2023.

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Appendices: Breton 20th century art

Plate 1: Jeanne Malivel: The Union of Brittany with France (1922)



