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LA VILLEMARQUÉ'S *BARZAZ-BREIZ* (1839–1845–1867): A ROMANTIC FICTION TO REINVENT ONESELF

Nelly Blanchard

1. Introduction

In August 1837, Viscount Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué approached the minister of Public Education of the time, M. Salvandy, and offered to publish a collection of popular songs of Armorican Brittany in order to contribute to a better knowledge of French history. The request, which was duly passed on to the Committee on Historical Works,¹ received a negative response in 1838. The following year, de la Villemarqué decided to publish the *Barzaz-Breiz* (*The Popular Ballads of Brittany*) at his own expense. He was only 24 years old at the time. This book would bring him fame, give him a name and was to influence all of his future work. Before publishing the *Barzaz-Breiz*, de la Villemarqué wrote ten articles published in *L'Écho de la Jeune France* and *La Revue de Paris* and in fact published articles and books until the end of his life.

The *Barzaz-Breiz*, the text of which was written and published by de la Villemarqué in 1839, was then further developed and modified twice afterwards, in 1845 and 1867.² To this day it remains one of the best known books in Breton language literature. It has been the subject of numerous articles and three doctoral theses written by Francis Gourvil,³ Donatien Laurent⁴ and myself.⁵ This paper sets out to present the results of my research on the subject.

1 The *Comité des documents inédits de l'histoire de France* was founded in 1934, and was later re-named *Comité historique des arts et monuments* in 1840.

2 La Villemarqué, Théodore Hersart (de), 1839, *Barzas-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne, recueillis et publiés avec une traduction française, des éclaircissements, des notes et les mélodies originales, par Th. de La Villemarqué*, Paris: Charpentier. New edition: La Villemarqué Théodore Hersart (de), 1845, *Barzaz-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne recueillis et publiés avec une Traduction française, des Arguments, des Notes et les mélodies originales par Th. Hersart de La Villemarqué*, 3rd edition with the addition of a further thirty-three new historical ballads, Paris, Delloye. New edition: La Villemarqué Théodore Hersart (de), 1867, *Barzaz-Breiz. Chants populaires de la Bretagne*, 6th edition, Paris: Librairie Académique Didier et Cie.

3 Gourvil, F., 1960, *Théodore-Claude-Henri Hersart de La Villemarqué (1815–1895) et le «Barzaz-Breiz» (1839–1845–1867)*. Origine-Éditions-Sources-Critique-Influences, Oberthur: Rennes.

4 Laurent, D., 1974, *La Villemarqué collecteur de chants populaires: étude des sources du premier Barzaz-Breiz à partir des originaux de collecte (1833–1840)*, PhD Dissertation, Paris Sorbonne University, published in 1989 under the title *Aux sources du Barzaz-Breiz. La mémoire d'un peuple*, Douarnenez, Ar Men.

5 Blanchard, N., 2006, *Barzaz-Breiz. Une fiction pour s'inventer*, Rennes, PUR.

A great many people who have an interest in what is called the ‘matter of Brittany’ will have a copy of the *Barzaz-Breiz* on their bookshelves, yet does it still have relevance today, and if so for whom? Owning the book is one thing, actually reading it seems to be another. Very few people have in fact read it from cover to cover. Admittedly it is not an easy book to read as the presentation is both dense and somewhat austere, and it is often conveniently considered and used by most people as simply a collection of popular songs. This allows the reader to pick and choose information when required without needing to read the text in its entirety.

Yet there are several reasons why the *Barzaz-Breiz* should not be reduced to just a collection of popular ballads as its title and research on the subject suggest. First of all, the authenticity of the songs of the *Barzaz-Breiz* and their possible modification, manipulation — or even their total invention by de la Villemarqué — have been the object of so much scholarly debate since the beginning of what came to be called the *Barzaz-Breiz* dispute, that attention has almost exclusively been focused on the ballads, leaving the rest of the text in the shadows. To be more precise, around half of its text has been overlooked, which seems very problematic.

Secondly, there is a yawning chasm separating La Villemarqué’s work from that of his contemporaries who also collected popular songs. The very make-up of the text sets his work apart: it comprises a preface, a very long introduction, a series of songs (each of which is preceded by an argument and followed by notes and details) and a conclusion or an epilogue, depending on the edition. It should be noted that songs in Breton only occupy a very marginal place in the last edition where the text appears at the bottom of the page in small characters. The book forms a space which is made up of de la Villemarqué’s words and serves as the locus for his reallocation of meanings to words: it reveals the author’s conception and understanding of terms like ‘religion’, ‘nation’, ‘nature’, ‘the people’, ‘poetry’, ‘truth’, etc. What we are given to read here is no less than a dissertation about the author himself. In this paper the work has been approached from the opposite point of view: the author refuses to consider that this text is a collection of popular Breton songs. On the contrary indeed, de la Villemarqué has illustrated his ideological leanings with popular songs and ballads which can be seen, in the end, as a collection of images or vignettes embedded in the framework of his discourse. This paper therefore posits that the *Barzaz-Breiz* is not a mere collection of popular songs but rather a text — de la Villemarqué is not a mere collector but an author.

2.1. The architecture and the writer

It is difficult to classify the *Barzaz-Breiz* or compare it with other works, as it belongs somewhere between two poles — literary fiction and history. Because de la Villemarqué’s approach is so original, it is neither relevant nor appropriate to position the author between Walter Scott and Manzoni on the one hand, and Augustin

Thierry and Jules Michelet, prominent French historians, on the other. Since a historical novel is defined from the onset as a fictional text based on history, his work cannot be compared to historical novels which were extremely popular at the time. Neither does it find a rightful place among contemporary works dealing with the history of the French (Michelet 1833), the Gauls, the French Revolution (Michelet 1847–1853) or the history of the conquest of England (Augustin 1825). In order to determine precisely which of the two poles the *Barzaz-Breiz* belongs to, it is necessary to clarify whether the author seeks to convince the reader, as a historian would, or to appeal to his emotions, as would be the case in a work of fiction.

One is first struck by the scientific tone the author employs. His terminology is typical of that used in a scientific argument, with key words like ‘prove’, ‘judge’, ‘specify’, ‘compare’, ‘study’, ‘opinion’, ‘science’, ‘example’, ‘observation’, ‘method’, ‘reflection’, ‘intellectual’, etc. To this can be added the regular division and numbering scheme used throughout the text as well as the imposing mass of footnotes (nearly 300 footnotes in the first edition, more than 430 in the second edition and 370 in the last edition). Other elements further contribute to giving academic quality to de la Villemarqué’s work: the authors he cites in these same notes, ranging from Julius Caesar to Montaigne or even the Grimms, or the prestige of those people he mentions in his preface (all known for their erudition, as well as famous politicians, etc.). In short, all of this combines to lean in favour of a scientific text whose objective is to persuade.

Yet, if we examine the text more closely, some elements seem to contradict this interpretation. This is mainly because the author is constantly present in the text (an average of 1100 references to him throughout), with even as many as 16–19% of the footnotes being auto-referential (practically one footnote in five). Clearly, the author occupies a central place in the text. It is he who gives coherence to the succession of voices of the text, uniting the many voices by staging and casting them as a director would his actors. As well as these multiple voices the author orchestrates *mise en abyme* situations: his own, the voices of the authors he cites, that of the Breton people expressed through the singers and those of the diverse characters who express themselves from within the narrative of the ballads itself. And it is also de la Villemarqué, as the author, who serves as a guide and takes the reader by the hand on this guided tour among a collection of popular ballads which he has carefully selected. We know, for instance, that de la Villemarqué systematically left aside bawdy Breton songs and satires against the nobility and the local clergy. In this way, one understands that far from being just a collection of songs that have simply been analysed and commented, the ballads are there to illustrate the author’s ideas. The author does not say ‘Here is a ballad and here is another’ but rather ‘in order to understand the history of the Breton people, you will first read the words of such and such a song, then those of another which concur with what such and such a person says, and of yet another whose theme I will explain’, etc. This is why the

role of the author in the *Barzaz-Breiz* is so important: it is he who writes it, exposes everything on paper and who sews his own patchwork based on the selected pieces.

It is therefore necessary to question and identify the precise agenda and roles of this writer and what he expresses. Upon reading the *Barzaz-Breiz* it becomes clear that de la Villemarqué intends to appear knowledgeable and impress the reader with his erudition: those particular role and voice dominate the text, yet the writer also takes on other roles in the work. Indeed, he shows himself (boastfully so at times) under several guises and assumes diverse social *personae*. This has a varying effect on the reader who is in turn interested, convinced, impressed, but also at times charmed and moved. The several roles identified in the text correspond to four essential functions: the writer dispenses knowledge, justice and morality, emotion and concepts about identity. De la Villemarqué stages and dramatises the writer's role by carefully casting and piecing together different roles for the latter. By echoing one another, superimposing themselves or merging into one another, these different roles make him appear as a kaleidoscopic and dazzling character, many-faceted and brilliant, who has the reader spellbound. Despite the objective scientific discourse, the subjective presence of the writer is overwhelming so that one must come to the conclusion that the text is governed by a logic that implies the primacy of the writer's staging over the scientific principle. In other words, the latter is simply another tool used by the writer in his bid to win the reader over and put him on his side.

The writer is bent on charming the reader, yet on several occasions he stresses his desire to transmit truth and authenticity. Are attempting to charm the reader on the one hand and professing to tell the truth on the other compatible? Can they be anything but mutually exclusive? How can a discourse arguing truth and authenticity regarding a collection of songs develop from within the framework of the dramatisation of the popular songs and ballads presented in the work? Thanks to the studies of Gourvil (1960) and Laurent (1974), we know that, before publishing them, de la Villemarqué reworked the ballads to some extent, and even to a considerable degree in several instances. Should we therefore doubt the honesty of the writer professing to publish authentic material or should we believe in his sincerity? The latter option seems more plausible, since restoring the songs he collected was part of the author's conception of what authenticity implied. What we would consider authentic songs nowadays are songs published under the exact form in which they were heard, with nothing added, nothing taken away — no changes whatsoever. However, de la Villemarqué's vision was coloured by the Romantic ideal, and at the time 'truth' and 'authenticity' did not have the same meaning.

Indeed, for de la Villemarqué, truth goes far beyond reality. Reality presents itself under the form of fragments or vestiges, but what matters is what he sees as the truth, that is, the original material. It is not the debris of songs he collects but rather the *Ur*-song that matters. For de la Villemarqué, truth should be sought

under the veil of reality, hence the collector's duty is to make whole once again that which is fragmented, in other words, to rebuild a monument out of the vestiges. One of the approaches favoured by the Romantics was the resort to empathy, a power of sympathy stimulated by one's imagination, in this case the ability to imagine what was missing in the material collected, a creative imagination used in the service of truth, or as I have chosen to put it, true invention.

For de la Villemarqué, then, the conception of truth and of authenticity has nothing to do with the Manichean dichotomy between truth and fabrication. As a writer influenced by Romantic ideas, de la Villemarqué does not adhere to this rationalist concept which recognizes the limits of perception and accepts them, he rejects the view of the world as limited by what is fragmentary and factually incomplete. The *Barzaz-Breiz* dispute was born of the changes in the perception of these concepts, at a time when positivist norms, still in place today, were imposing themselves little by little: de la Villemarqué was blamed for having published "fake" songs — for having printed a forgery. Yet we can easily imagine the author's distress at having these judgements passed about his work in terms of truth and fallacy or forgery since his aim and approach was of a wholly different order. And his silence regarding these accusations can perhaps be understood as the author's refusal to recant.

2.2. Space and time

The study of space and time in the *Barzaz-Breiz* highlights the author's very particular vision in which two concepts coexist. The first is the Christian notion that Time causes degeneration, it is destructive and leads to the deterioration and decay of all things since the original creation of the world as pure and perfect. In this Christian conception, the present has nothing to offer but mediocrity, since what originally existed has now become defiled and fragmented: "*Ses haillons laissent briller parfois les fils d'or d'une splendeur passée*" ('in its rags the gold threads sometimes glint fleetingly, betraying its past splendour') (de la Villemarqué 1839: lxi). We find the same idea expressed by Rousseau who writes that "all is well that comes out of the hands of the Author of all things. Everything degenerates in the hands of Man."⁶ It is a very similar notion that is expressed by de la Villemarqué when he declares, "to me, it does not seem that mediocrity was the character of the original popular songs; on the contrary, I believe that they were, in principle, rich and ornate."⁷

Yet de la Villemarqué continuously stresses the correspondences between the past and present, between Armorica and Brittany, between the bards and the

6 « *Tout est bien sortant des mains de l'Auteur des choses, tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme* » (Rousseau 1992: 5).

7 « *La pauvreté ne me semble pas le caractère des chants populaires originaux ; je crois au contraire qu'ils sont riches et ornés dans le principe* » (de la Villemarqué 1839: iii).

popular ballad singers, between the heroes and the peasants, between the druids and the priests, etc. This is a way of saying that all elements of the past can be found in the present and that, likewise, all elements of the present are manifestations of the past.

This outwardly contradictory dual vision rests on the idea which the author weaves into the pages of his book, namely, the existence of a matrix, an ancestral, original source, or as the author puts it throughout his work, a primitive source from which all the existing material originated. For de la Villemarqué, this original matter, the essence of the Breton character, is immutable. One therefore finds in his work both the notion of a permanent time-space, situated in a *U*-chrony and a *U*-topy (my emph., N.B.); a central core, an essence of Nature (the vocabulary regarding origins is repeatedly linked to that of nature, with frequent analogies to the plant world) and the expression of a temporality, with the passing of time — History — that superficially degrades things.

Le génie de la poésie populaire dans tous les temps et chez tous les peuples, atteint dès sa naissance son complet développement. Comme la langue et avec la langue du peuple, elle meurt, mais ne change pas de nature ; toutefois elle ne peut se soustraire à l'influence des siècles ; mais, nous le répétons, son essence ne varie pas.

(de la Villemarqué 1839: xxii-xxiii)

Since the beginning, and as with all peoples, the genius of popular poetry achieves its complete development as soon as it is created. Like language and along with the language of the people, it dies, but does not change its nature. Nevertheless, it cannot escape from the influence of past centuries. We repeat it and its essence does not vary.

Here is another extract which is directly influenced by the Grimm brothers:

Celui-ci ne fait que greffer des tiges nouvelles sur un arbre qu'il a planté, ou qu'accélérer, par une culture plus soignée, la pousse de quelques branches moins vivaces, ceux-là ressemblent à la nature, qui, par d'éternels renouvellements, remédie à ses propres pertes. L'arbre de poésie, parvenu à son développement complet, peut donc de temps à autre, quoique vigoureux et plein de sève, laisser tomber des rameaux morts, bientôt remplacés par d'autres ; mais désormais il reste inviolable et respecté.

(de la Villemarqué 1839: lxvi)

The latter [popular songs] only graft new branches onto the tree which has been planted or, thanks to more careful nurturing, accelerate the growth of the shootsof a few less vigorous branches. These mirror nature which, by eternal renewals, com-

pensates for its own losses. From time to time, the tree of poetry which has fully matured may, even though it is vigorous and full of sap, let fall the dead branch, which will soon be replaced by others, and from henceforth, it will remain inviolable and respected.

This trans-historical vision of time-space is in fact the original imprint from which the same motif is recreated *ad infinitum*. It is the place of stability and of eternity that contrasts with the corrupt reality. Neither it is affected by the passing of time, since de la Villemarqué shows that it remains intact through the centuries: the people continue to sing, despite the Revolution being the greatest upheaval in history. The author does not in fact use either the tools of geographers nor those of historians: the *Barzaz-Breiz* is not a historical text, it offers instead the author's thoughts concerning truth and time and the various temporal levels. It tells a story in which the common thread is neither history, nor the events which can only be judged as superficial, but the matrix, that place of stability and truth, on which secular time has no hold and which takes on a sacred quality. Through these popular songs, de la Villemarqué affords his readers an insight into the sphere of the sacred.

2.3. Incarnation

The last point I will make in order to demonstrate that the *Barzaz-Breiz* leans more toward fiction than history is how this matrix becomes incarnated through the Breton people who are one of the main pillars on which the text's structure is built. When de la Villemarqué speaks of the Breton people, he is clearly re-appropriating the notion of the primitive world. However, he does this only partially, since he leaves aside the concept of the primitive world as a minor period in evolution when mankind had yet to be steered onto the path of progress. Instead, he expresses the idea that the primitive state was a time when men were equal and happier. While one school of thought considered the golden age as a time that was yet to come, another school, to which de la Villemarqué belonged (along with Tacitus, Montaigne, La Fontaine and Rousseau) saw the golden age precisely as the original and the primitive state. The French Revolution made the people visible, even conspicuous, by giving them a central place and the myth of the Noble Savage as theorised by Rousseau was transformed into the myth of the People. The Romantics set out to discover and study what the People had produced, believing that they would in this way discover the essence of the nation and the origins of time (Vico 1725–44; Herder 1784–91). It is through the People that the matrix comes alive, as the People are (unknowingly) its flesh-and-blood incarnation: they both originate from the matrix and enable it to express its full meaning and potential. Indeed, it is the People who give the matrix depth and importance by providing us with the link to our own origins that other men (i.e. the degenerate and restless population

of cities) have lost. The People eventually come to symbolise eternity (popular traditions, customs and their legacy), as implied by Millet in *The Angelus* where time stands still for the peasant woman — a picture “with its roots in the beginning of time”, as Françoise Cachin, a French art historian, put it (Nora 1997: 961). In this way, de la Villemarqué does not present a picturesque, endearing people as Emile Souvestre⁸ had done before him, but a people with more depth and new symbolic weight. In this way, he reveals a hidden deity.

The word “people” is rarely used by de la Villemarqué with the meaning of a multitude or a crowd. Since the Revolution, two ideas have dominated in French thinking. The first one sees the people as representing the entire population of France — a vision which transcends the notion of classes in the name of a common republican law. The second considers the people as a class or an order, also commonly known as the “third estate”.⁹ Intellectuals do not all agree on exactly who should be included in the latter: for some it encompasses the popular classes and the bourgeoisie (Sieyès),¹⁰ while for others, the third state only comprises the class of workers from which the bourgeoisie are excluded (Marx), or the miserably poor (Roux)¹¹ (Julliard 1997: 2364). Neither of these corresponds to de la Villemarqué’s vision. The people can occasionally oppose the king, the nobles and the clergy but the author does not adopt a republican (i.e. revolutionary) position. Furthermore, in the *Barzaz-Breiz* the people never work, they are never hungry and never suffer from economic or social injustice. The writer does not adopt a discourse which takes into account the concept of classes — what unifies the people is of a different order. De la Villemarqué’s vision is closer to the notion of *ethnos*: the conception of a continuum ranging from a homogeneous whole to a specific and permanent identity, not opposed by those above but by those on the fringes of society.

Furthermore, this vision of identity and ethnic belonging is juxtaposed with a structural vision of the people. The Breton people of the *Barzaz-Breiz* are an organic community: contrary to what is the case in society, what binds them together are eternal and indomitable natural relations, namely blood ties, common geography and a common spirit. It is a collective identity which supersedes individuals and the people described in the text are perceived as a single entity. As the book unfolds, the Breton people are presented as a sort of collective individual, an entity which

8 Emile Souvestre (1806–1854) published *Les Derniers Bretons* (1836), *Le Foyer breton* (1844). Cf. Plötner-Le Lay 2007.

9 For further discussion, see Yves Coativy’s article in the present volume.

10 Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (abbot Sieyès, 1748–1836) was an author and politician who lived at the time of the French Revolution and Consulate.

11 Known as the *curé rouge* (“red priest”) for his support of socialist and anarchist ideas, Jacques Roux (1752–1794) campaigned for the setting up of a democratic and social republic.

embodies thousands of beings. For the author, the people are thus not the sum of all the individuals, but rather what all of them possess and which each and every one of them has in common with others: the very notion of sharing. Each individual being echoed in the others, the author relies throughout his work on recurring rhetorical techniques such as “the Breton peasant”, the “Breton”, “in general”, “we”.

The people stem from nature and are described as a living organism, either a human being or a plant: “the moral seeds that were sown in his young soul never die; on the contrary, they grow, bear fruit and one can still, after many centuries, judge the quality of the seeds by their fruit” (my trans., French original in de la Villemarqué 1845: 474). One finds in de la Villemarqué’s ideas biological concepts and the notion of the *Volk* developed at the time, most notably by Herder (Moser 1956: 7): the people become an organism possessing a *Geist* — a soul and an individual character. Although they are physically sung by a singer, the popular tunes and ballads stem from the soul, the collective spirit and heart of the people. The voice of the singer corresponds to the voice which passes through him, but also to all the potential voices of the individuals that make up the people: in effect it corresponds to the soul of the people. “Therein one feels the heartbeat of a noble race; the national poets have given him a voice; they are the mouthpiece which expresses the passions of all; opinion is incarnated by them” (my trans., French original in de la Villemarqué 1867: vii). Since the people do not express themselves individually, truth lies beyond the individual and within the people; it is beyond the phonic rendering of the song where one can find the soul of the people.

De la Villemarqué ends up transforming the Breton people into a character of sorts and determines its personality and psyche by making conscious choices — pushing certain characteristics into the shadow and highlighting others (e.g. the Celtic origins of the Breton civilization). He shapes an image of the Breton people which corresponds to his own imagination and which in fact exists only in the *Barzaz-Breiz* itself.

Although the *Barzaz-Breiz* is presented as authentic, it is clearly a fiction in which the writer plays the leading role. In it, the Breton people and the matrix which de la Villemarqué dreams of take shape; but without his text, they do not have any real consistency. The *Barzaz-Breiz* is a fiction, yet this does not mean that we are dealing with a narrative text or a text which presents itself as a fictional piece of work. Rather, it is a fictitious text in the sense that, at any moment, the author makes his own imagination an object of discourse, to the point that it becomes the very subject of the text. Hence the reader can no longer distinguish fiction from history and the imaginary from reality.

2.4. The matter and the material

After having analysed the structure of the *Barzaz-Breiz* and the way it functions, I shall concentrate on the themes broached in the text. The analysis of the themes highlights their great diversity (the people, nature, the state, the nation, religion, justice, poverty, art, etc.) as well as the way they are interwoven and disseminated in the text. It is worth noting that the author never treats a subject in its entirety, preferring instead to direct the spotlight on certain specific aspects while leaving vast, empty gaps in others. The *Barzaz-Breiz* is not an ideological text in the sense that de la Villemarqué does not propose a system of ideas. Moreover, the thematic study of the book reveals quite a few contradictions in the author's thought processes. For example, the author is jubilant about the patriotic violence of which the Bretons are capable, but lapses into nostalgia when confronted with the loss of nationalist fervour; he violently rejects the current laws, but supports the nobles who follow the French civil code. He firmly adheres to the principles of the monarchy but presents himself as a Republican candidate to the parliament of 1849. He violently rejects the French, but accepts an alliance with them.

Indeed, beyond these contradictions, these *lacunae*, a dissemination of ideas, cross-sectional trends and patterns appear in the analysis. Among these is the author's insistence on three main elements:

- (1) Everything that relates to the essence of the people, to what is indigenous, intimate (the songs are the intimate journal of the people who reveal their thoughts and feelings in this way), to interiority, orality, the unconscious, to nature and natural laws and to what is organic. It also includes everything which functions independently without outside intervention such as, for example, the social harmony experienced by the people of the *Barzaz-Breiz* based on a primitive natural organisation: each person has his or her place, for example the poor are happy and the nobles — their elder brothers — take care of them.
- (2) Everything that represents power, moral force, pugnacity, but also physical force, violence (including murder at times, notably when expelling foreign invaders) as well as the rejection of outsiders. Everything that is artificial or arbitrarily imposed from the outside and, more precisely, the bourgeoisie, Protestantism, civil law, etc. There is a fundamental and natural incompatibility between this imposed power and the authentic essence of the Breton people. They therefore must preserve themselves from this outside influence. In addition, one also notes the author's fondness for creative power, vigour of expression, most notably in the ballads and songs, and of which the people itself is unaware.

- (3) The notion of fusion of the nation and religion in a single matrix (which contributes to updating the links between the Breton language and the Catholic religion, already long intertwined in Breton literature, and most notably since Father Maunoir).¹² It also applies to the fusion of the terrestrial and the celestial and of History and Nature, which allow one to escape universality and to maintain oneself in the framework of eternity.

These three elements happen to be the three characteristics that define beauty for de la Villemarqué. In the end, beyond the thematic contradictions and the *lacunae* one can note in his commentaries, it is the aesthetic dimension that gives the text a homogeneous quality. The one thing which de la Villemarqué remains faithful to throughout is aesthetics. Indeed, he only allows in his *Barzaz-Breiz* material which contains an element of beauty. The *Barzaz-Breiz* is, in fact, an aesthetic representation of the world. The work does not convince the reader but sweeps him away thanks to a certain vision of beauty, the sharing of its author's sensitive experience of politics, social and moral considerations and the passage of time. De la Villemarqué also aims to use words in a way which liberates them from rational interpretation or from appearances and materiality. He reshapes and redefines them in such a way as to transform the third estate into a joyous people. Likewise, he transforms superstition into spirituality, war into a healthy and liberating force; he changes monotony and awkwardness into demonstrations of truth. He views instinct as art and the unconscious as knowledge — precisely what the Romantics were searching for. This vision is constantly nourished by reality, resorting to a distillation process in order to obtain concentration of beauty, an essence, thereby always leading to idealisation. The author refuses to consider ugliness. For this reason, de la Villemarqué depicts Brittany and the Breton people of the *Barzaz-Breiz* in accordance with the allegorical model of the Atlantis myth whereby he is a Breton Robinson Crusoe exiled in Paris who entrusts his imagination with the task of recreating a picture of his native Brittany.

2.5. Affinity and revolt

De la Villemarqué belongs to the Romantic Movement: one needs only see the

¹² Father Julien Maunoir (1606–1683) was a French Jesuit priest, who preached extensively throughout Brittany over a period of forty years, evangelising Western Brittany. Legend has it that Father Maunoir learnt Breton overnight through divine intervention, making him a very popular figure. Referring to Breton being the ideal language for the expression of the Catholic faith, he wrote: "For the past thirteen centuries, no manner of infidelity has soiled the Breton language, through which the Word of JESUS-CHRIST has been preached, and he is yet to be born, the man who will hear a Breton-speaking Breton (*sic*) preach a religion other than the Catholic one" (« *Il y a treize siècles qu'aucune espèce d'infidélité n'a souillé la langue, qui vous a servy d'organe pour prescher JESUS-CHRIST, et il est à naître qui ayt vu Breton Bretonnant prescher autre Religion que la Catholique* ») (Maunoir 1659: 4).

aesthetic basis for his discourse, his choice of themes (the people, the popular songs of Brittany and elsewhere) as well as the notion of race and the way he handles these themes. There is for instance a certain Germanic mysticism which always combines science and the sacred in de la Villemarqué's writing, and also one finds a form of hero worship inspired by Walter Scott in his work. All of this makes him a multidimensional Romantic. As unclassifiable and incomparable as it is on the whole, the *Barzaz-Breiz* is a fragmented romantic text. It is one of the later masterpieces of European Romanticism nourished in part by the French Romantic Movement (i.e. Augustin Thierry), but even more so by Anglo-Scottish Romanticism (especially Walter Scott) and, above all else, German Romanticism (Herder, Grimm). Let us take a brief look at these literary, methodological and philosophical affiliations.

As all Romantic authors, de la Villemarqué expresses his inner self in the text. However, contrary to many Romantic writers who express themselves using the first person "I", de la Villemarqué adds an entity between himself and the text, between himself and his inner self: he uses the collective "we", referring to the Breton people. The *Barzaz-Breiz* belongs to what one might define as objective Romanticism. It differs from subjective Romanticism and the direct expression of one's self, as in the case in the work of Lamartine, Stendhal or Musset. Here, the author uses an entity that exists outside of his text (contrary to fictional objects) and which allows him to share his feelings and ideas with as wide a readership as possible (the same can be said of Scott, Grimm, Fauriel or Michelet). Subjective and objective versions of Romanticism are two variations of a personal and aesthetic expression. Elated, the author idealises his subject matter, and, by resorting to symbols, provides an insight into poetics.

Contrary to the objectivist movement which considers the object as a study case, the Romantic Movement implies that the author acts as stage director. De la Villemarqué shapes the Breton people in his image and brings it to life, even if this life is a romantic one. And, by doing so, he imposes himself directly or indirectly in the text. De la Villemarqué is not an ethnologist who describes an objective reality, an object. On the contrary, it is the object that brings the author to life. In other words, the author of the *Barzaz-Breiz* is not an "I" that explains a "we" (the Breton people) but a "we" that illustrates the "I" and which is the reflection of de la Villemarqué's inner Self.

What lies behind this "we"? What does de la Villemarqué intend to express by using it? Revolt in all its various forms is the answer. Romanticism was a movement of revolt (against an established order, against dominant values), but spontaneous, unplanned revolt, only loosely organised and theorised, and thus, not uniform. English pre-Romanticism was a reaction against the French Enlightenment and German pre-Romanticism (*Sturm-und-Drang*) was a reaction against the bourgeois *Aufklärung*. Whether on the right or the left, Romanticism was above all a reaction,

a refusal of the constraints imposed by the political, social, moral, aesthetic and scientific orders and such like.

It was first and foremost an insurrection against the rising power of the bourgeoisie in society, against the slow and deep transformation brought on by capitalism. Romanticism was a criticism of modernity induced by the industrial revolution which had led to the dehumanisation and alienation of human beings. In this changing world, what could someone like de la Villemarqué, a young nobleman of twenty-four, possibly do in France during the 1830s and 1840s? There were no longer any professional armies, and the nobility was thus deprived of one of its primary activities. The nobility had progressively lost its powers since the Revolution. How could one accept the idea that one no longer had a future? There were two choices: lapsing into melancholy or embracing active revolt, as de la Villemarqué did. He expressed revolt against the modern world, against the bourgeoisie, against materialism and money, against the Law, but also against Protestantism, against the Empire, against absolute monarchy.

The only possible solution envisaged by de la Villemarqué in his *Barzaz-Breiz* is a return to the primitive framework of the matrix. In order to reach his destination, however, he also embarks his reader on a journey into the world of the Breton “people”. The only antidote, then, is to return to an initial, more primitive stage through the intermediary of this redemptive “people”. The latter act as a link with the origins and the past, but above all else, it represents the matrix, the unchanging core, a symbol of permanence in the face of an ever-accelerating succession of historical events that fail to affect it. Since the French Revolution, history had been characterised by upheavals and convulsions, leaving no room for doubt about the reality of history. For de la Villemarqué, this realisation was painful: by revolting against France, he was also revolting against the idealisation of France as the sole creator of history and carried along generations of people, helplessly swept into this upheaval of their world. His way of fighting against history was to demonstrate the existence of an immutable, unchanging place with eternal and indestructible values — the nation, essential Nature. While France stood for history, Brittany symbolised permanence and afforded a shelter against history. The Breton people of the *Barzaz-Breiz* are the Scythians of Chateaubriand, who wrote: “Good Scythians, if only you were still here today, I would have sought among you a shelter from the storm” (Chateaubriand 1981: 91). Yet while Chateaubriand expressed melancholy, what transpires in de la Villemarqué’s writing is a feeling of revolt.

One must remember that de la Villemarqué was in his early twenties when he wrote the *Barzaz-Breiz* and this can be sensed through his prose: it bears the hallmark of a young man still in the making. This existential dimension gives a rather moving quality to the text: one can hear the young nobleman’s revolt, perceive his energy, and behind the impermeable duality of the worlds that he weaves together

(the harmonious Breton world versus an artificial, foreign world, the French world especially) one can even sense a form of defence of the author in the face of the acculturation he feels threatened by. But why did de la Villemarqué insist on this impassable frontier between the two worlds? Particularly since he himself was a product of the two and divided between the two cultures, in that he was:

- (1) an aristocrat in a world where nobility had lost its meaning;
- (2) a Breton who spoke French and wrote in French, because he was not able to resist the prestige and hegemony of the French language. Thereby, contradicting his initial intention;
- (3) a young man in exile, voluntarily so since fame could only be acquired in Paris, in the alien world, which symbolised France, the City — everything that de la Villemarqué rejected in his text

Indeed, he frequented the intellectual and literary circles of the French bourgeoisie. Even though he was both a French-speaker and a Parisian, he stubbornly defined himself in the *Barzaz-Breiz* as a Breton nobleman, a Breton-speaking one at that.

3. Conclusion

If the *Barzaz-Breiz* still retains its power of attraction and has not fallen into oblivion, it is probably on account of the fact that it is not a historical text that has simply long outlived its scientific value. Neither is it, in my opinion, a simple collection of popular songs and ballads accompanied by commentaries. It endures because it is fiction and offers the reader an idealised vision of Brittany and the Breton people which leads us to discover the soul of a people through its ballads. It enables the reader to discover the spirit hidden in the matter. The ambiguity and haziness de la Villemarqué maintains between what is real and what is fiction greatly contribute to the appeal the work still exerts on the reader. This interpretation may account for the symbolic success the text has enjoyed.

Reading the text as an expression of the author's inner feelings and opinions affords an insight into a personal and existential dimension of the *Barzaz-Breiz*. Here, one perceives the author's desire to reinvent himself and the world that surrounds him, a world in which he feels he has no place and which he violently rejects. This sentiment of revolt has a power of attraction that has not weakened over time.

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