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René Galand, *Play, dream and writing in Meven Mordiern’s autobiographies*

Meven Mordiern occupies a dominant place in the history of Breton literature. He is known primarily for his study of the history and culture of the ancient Celts, *Notennou diwar-benn ar Gelted koz* [Notes on the ancient Celts], and for his historical novel *Skêla Segobrani*, which purports to be the memoirs of an ancient Gaul, the warrior Segobranos (*Notennou diwar-benn ar Gelted koz* (Brest : Skridoù Breizh, 1944). Third edition; *Skêla Segobrani* (Saint-Brieuc, Prudhomme). Three volumes: 1922, 1923, 1925). These works have had a profound influence on the evolution of Breton literature between WWI and WWII. Meven Mordiern is also the author of seven books of memoirs which remained unpublished during his lifetime. Before his death, he had bequeathed them to the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures of Harvard, where they are preserved in the Houghton Library. Meven Mordiern had written two of these volumes for the Harvard students, *Envorennou bugaleaj* and *Istor eur c'halvedigez*. They bear the mention: *Texts for the study of Breton syntax and vocabulary*. All of these texts existed only in manuscript form until, thanks to information given to me by two Breton celticists, Per Denez and Yann Bouëssel du Bourg, I was able to locate them. A grant from Wellesley College enabled me to study these manuscripts, to put them in order, and to have them copied. The Breton publishing house Hor Yezh began their publication in 1986, but it was able to publish only *Istor eur c'halvedigez* [History of a calling] and the first two volumes of *Envorennou bugaleaj* [Childhood memories]: the third volume has not been published, nor have the remaining five books of memoirs. The total number of printed pages is 450, which is about one third of the total amount of text. Two other manuscripts are Breton translations of two novels by the French writer Jules Verne, *Les forceurs de blocus* [The blockade runners] and *Une ville flottante* [A floating city]. Another file contains 300 letters addressed to Meven Mordiern by his friend and collaborator Fransez Vallée. The collection of manuscripts includes two more files, the short story *Bodadeg ar pevarzekvet* [The gathering of the fourteenth] and a thick file of notes and drafts titled *Brouilhedou* [Drafts]. The seven autobiographical works bear the following titles (I have added the abbreviations which I have used in the course of this study, the English translation of the Breton titles, and a brief indication of their content):

1. *Tiegeziou bourc'hizien ar broiou-krec'h en XVIIIvet kantved hag an XIXvet kantved (1730-1896)* [TB; French bourgeois families in the XVIIIth and XXth centuries (1730-1896)]. A manuscript of 179 about the author’s ancestors on his mother’s side. Familles bourgeoises de France aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles Manuscrit de 179 pages ayant trait aux ancêtres maternels de l’auteur.

2. *Selladou ouzh an tremened (1750-1932)* [SOAT; Looks at the past (1750-1932)]. A manuscript of 676 pages about the author’s ancestors on his father’s side and about his father’s military career.

3. *Envorennou Gwiler* [EG; Memories of Villiers]. A manuscript of 832 pages. Villiers is the small provincial town where Meven Mordiern spent his childhood years.

4. *An diou levraoueg* [ADL; The two libraries]. A manuscript of 198 pages about his childhood readings.

5. *Envorennou bugaleaj* [EB; Childhood memories]. A manuscript of 479 pages in which Meven Mordiern describes his life from his birth until 1891.
6. *Istor eur c’halkedidez* [IEC’H; History of a calling]. A manuscript of 178 pages in which the author examines the origin and the causes of his passion for the history and the culture of the Celts.

7. *Istor berr eur c’halkedidez* [IBEC’H; A short history of a calling] In spite of its title, this manuscript is a longer version of the preceding manuscript.

All of these texts contain numerous repetitions. If Meven Mordiern had published these memoirs during his lifetime, he would probably have shortened them, retaining perhaps one thousand pages out of a total of twenty eight hundred. This is unquestionably a major undertaking, as important for its interest as for its volume.

Autobiography is one of the most favored genres among Breton writers. I will mention only a few examples: Loeiz ar Floc’h (born 1868), *Va zamm buhez* [My piece of life]; Jarl Priel (born 1885), *Va zammig buhez* [My small piece of life]; Yeun ar Gow (born 1897), *E skeud tour bras Sant Jermen* [In the shadow of Saint-Germain’s steeple]; A l’ombre de la grande tour de Saint Germain; Goulven Jacq (born 1913), *Pinvidigezh ar paour* [The wealth of the poor]; Ernest ar Barzhig (born 1917), *Buhez ha faltazi* [Life and fancy]. One should also take into account the interviews conducted by young researchers among Breton farmers and fishermen born before WWI which have been published by Hor Yezh. All of these autobiographies share a number of characteristic features. They show how strongly attached their authors were to a traditional way of life which was hard, but which also had its joys. Even the poorest among them emphasize the love given to children, and the humble pleasures they found in running about the countryside in the spring, playing with other children, going to local feasts. It was a rural society in which moral and religious values had retained all of their strength. Crime was all but inexistent. The traditional Breton culture was exceptionally rich and vital. Songs, dances, costumes, and even the furniture were works of art, as well as the churches, the calvaries, and the religious ceremonies during which the admirable traditional hymns were sung. In the space of half a century, the socio-economic changes brought about the industrial revolution, two world wars, and the systematic hostility of the French government towards its ethnic minorities all but destroyed this traditional culture. Hence the feeling of melancholy and loss which permeates these autobiographies. The writers mourn not only the happy days of their childhood, but also a world doomed to disappear. Hence also the feeling of nostalgia which characterizes so many of Per Jakez Helias poems, especially those of *Maner kuz* [Secret mansion]. Meven Mordiern’s memoirs have very little in common with these works. He was the contemporary of their authors, but he belonged to an ethnic community and to a socio-economic class which were quite different.

Meven Mordiern was not a native Breton speaker, and his Breton origins are rather dubious. His ancestors on his mother’s side, the Magnans were prosperous bourgeois established in Marseilles and Aix, and they claimed to be descended from Italian aristocrats, the Magnanis, who had the title of marquess. A great-great-uncle of his mother, Émile Magnan, had been a doctor attached to the House of the King.of France. He had seen to it that his niece’s son, Gustave Cabanellas, who was also a doctor, would succeed him in his functions. His niece, Zoé Magnan, had married Joseph Cabanellas, a wealthy merchant from Catalonia.established in Marseilles where he also served as a Spanish vice-consul. Through his mother, Meven Mordiern was also descended from General Lecointe, who had been a governor of Martinique during the
reign of Louis the XVIth. Through him, Meven Mordiern was related to the Beauharnais and to the Empress Joséphine ((TB, pp. 2, 3, 25, 45).

Although they were not extremely wealthy, Meven Mordiern’s family on his mother’s side was very well connected: they counted among their friends wealthy aristocrats, like the Baron of Pontalba, highly placed government functionaries, ambassadors, lawyers, stockbrokers, engineers, naval and army officers, writers and artists. Literary historians might find some interest in the stories, rather for the most part, recounted by Meven Mordiern about such writers as Hérédia, Henri de Régnier, Maurice Maindron, Léon Cahun and Pierre Louÿs (TB, pp. 20, 25-26, 37-38, 108-109, 123, 137; IBEC’H, pp. 78-79, 121-124, 246-247).

Meven Mordiern’s ancestors on his father’s side belonged to a lower class. His great-grandfather was a peasant living in Prunay, near Vendôme. His name was Leroux, and he was rumored to come from a Breton family which had established itself in this area. Meven Mordiern’s father used to say: “Notre nom est Breton” [Our name is Breton]. However, this name is frequently found in all regions of France, although it is also fairly common in Brittany (SOAT, pp. 2-3). Its Breton form would be Ar Rouz, but it would appear as Leroux, or Le Roux, on every official document (birth certificate, tax forms, census forms, voter registration etc…). Meven Mordiern’s grandfather has enlisted in the army of the Republic at the time of the Revolution, and he had reached the rank of lieutenant in the imperial army of Napoleon. Combat wounds forced him to retire from the army, and he was appointed tax collector (percepteur) in Prunay, where he had married. Meven Mordiern’s father was born in 1838, and as an army doctor he took part in all the military campaigns waged by France between 1840 and 1879, the year of his retirement: the conquest of Algeria, the Mexican war, the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. During the latter war, he was in charge of the military hospital of Vincennes, where he became acquainted with a relative of Madame Menjaud, the young widow of another doctor who had died in 1866. She had a son, Georges. Madame Menjaud and Doctor Leroux married in 1877. Their son René, who later would take the name of Meven Mordiern, was born in 1879.

Meven Mordiern’s memoirs have a considerable historical interest. They give a dramatic account of the impact of historical events on individuals and families: one of Meven Mordiern’s ancestors was sent to the guillotine under the Revolution (TB, p. 8). Others, who owned plantations in the French West Indies, were ruined when slavery was abolished. Another ancestor lost much of his fortune as a consequence of the wars between Napoléon and England. The castle which he owned in France was occupied by Russian officers in 1815. Other events mentioned by Meven Mordiern also left their mark in his family’s history: the Revolution of 1830, the anniversary of which was celebrated annually by his grandfather between 1830 and 1848; the cholera epidemic, in 1832; the reconstruction of Marseilles, in the 1830’s; the conquest of Algeria, in which his father took part between 1842 and 1848; the Revolution of 1848, during which his grandfather had to dress as a common worker in order to bring his daughter (Meven Mordiern’s mother) home from school because of riots in the streets; the discovery of gold in California, in 1848, which led Meven Mordiern’s uncle on his father side to seek his fortune in San Francisco; the Crimean war, in 1855, in which his father also took part. Doctor Leroux expected to be sent to China where a joint military force has been sent by France and England to fight the Boxers, but in the end he was kept in France. From 1862 to 1867, he did, however,
take part in the Mexican war, and in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. It was this war which forced Meven Mordiern’s mother to seek refuge in Switzerland (TB, pp. 8, 104-105, 152-154; SOAT, passim). Meven Mordiern’s stepbrother, a lieutenant in the colonial artillery, died in 1895 after an accident aboard the ship which was taking him to Madagascar, which the French was adding to its colonial empire.

Less dramatic, but equally troublesome for the Parisians who were affected by them, were the consequences of the extensive urban renewal undertaken by baron Haussmann. Entire city blocks had to be demolished to make room for the grands boulevards, the wide avenues which go from one end of Paris to the other. Thousands of inhabitants had to seek new lodgings, and for some of them more than once (TB, p. 142). Meven Mordiern also describes the changes brought about by technical advances, e.g., replacing the stagecoaches and the urban horse-drawn vehicles by trains and trolleys. He gives a detailed account of the various buildings in which his family and their friends were living: his great-grandfather castle in the Chartrettes, his godfather’s castle in Maurecourt, his grandfather’s house in Paris, and his country estate in Maisons-Laffitte, the property which his parents rented in Villiers and where he would spend his childhood years. He talks at length about the architecture, the parks, the gardens, the furniture, the way of life of the occupants, their clothes, their physical appearance, the ladies’s hairdos, the books and the papers which they read, their topics of conversation, the stores where they did their shopping, the parties they gave, the friends who visited them, their daily occupations, their children’s education, the servants, the horses and carriages they kept, their cats, their dogs, the animals in their barnyards, and even their toilets. These families could afford to spend the winter in the South of France or to travel abroad. Meven Mordiern’s grandparents once spent eighteen months in Naples (TB, pp. 90-94). Meven Mordiern had the greatest admiration for one of his greatgrandmothers. She was an American, Mary Van Buskirk, whom his great grandfather had married when he was a shipowner in New Orleans. She was a descendant of Dutch pioneers, she rode horses and hunted. An old Indian had taught her how to shoot. She skinned, tanned and killed herself the game which she killed (TB, pp. 47-50).

Meven Mordiern’s relation of his father’s military campaigns is equally fascinating. Historians could use what he has to say about the way in which the French conqueros subdued the natives in Algeria (SOAT, pp. 38-39, 47). As to the Mexican war, a fact which drew the doctor’s attention was the excessive number of French soldiers infected with syphilis. VD cases were far more numerous than combat wounds (SOAT, p. 173). Meven Mordiern does not have much to say about his ancestors’ political opinions, but he makes it quite clear that these staid bourgeois held all the prejudices of their class. Young women could not go out unless they were duly accompanied by a chaperon. There was not question either that young René Leroux would go to the same school as the little villagers of Villiers, whose parents belonged to a lower class, and the boy had to make do with a teacher hired by his parents (EB, pp. 219-226, 304). It broke Madame Leroux’s heart when her brother married the wrong girl: her father commanded tugboat which pulled barges on the Seine. The poor fellow did something even worse: he opened a tavern on the banks of the river. Why could he not have the decency to emigrate to Australia or to Argentina, where he would not be a perpetual cause of embarrassment for his family (EB, p. 253; IBEC”H, p. 82)?

Racial prejudices were even stronger than social prejudices. The great-grandfather who had been a planter in the French West Indies and a ship-owner in New Orleans treated his servants as he had treated his black slaves (TB, p. 49). A great-uncle who had been an overseer
in a coffee plantation in Cuba used to say that his work was limited to whip slaves all day long to make them work (TB, pp. 27-28). Asians were treated with the same contempt (EB, pp. 241-242, 397, 410). It goes without saying that Jews were personae non gratae. There was a big scandal when one of Baron de Pontalba’s daughters married a wealthy Jewish banker, an American named Kulp, for his money, of course! (TB, p. 124). Young René Leroux found it equally scandalous that a young blond and blue-eyed French girl should marry a Syrian: the fact that he was a good Catholic made no difference (IBEC’H, pp. 134, 139). His mother did not like Jews, to such an extent that she had serious doubts about one of the two books which children had to study in preparation for their first communion and their confirmation: the Histoire sainte, based on the Old Testament (the other book was the Cathechism). Both mother and son were horrified by the ancient Hebrews’ rebellion against God’s orders, by their repeated rejection of his Name and his Law. The boy overheard his mother telling his father:”Ces Juifs étaient vraiment vils!”[Those Jews were truly vile!] (EB, p. 221; IEC’H, p. 10). During the years 1891-1894, Madame Leroux purchased the books by Gyp as soon as they were published, and her son, when he saw how ugly the Jews caricatured in these works were, came to detest them(EB, pp. 52-53, 221; IBEC’H, p. 10). When his mother returned to Paris in 1891, after living in Villiers for ten years, she was shocked to see that the percentage of tall and blond men and women had so visibly decreased (EB, p. 53). She remarked that “sous la République, l’apparence de la population était devenue plus juive, plus méditerranéenne” [under the Republic, the appearance of the population had become more Jewish, more Mediterranean] (EB, p. 221; IBEC’H, p. 53). Her son agreed, noting that before 1895 (the date of the first Dreyfus trial), 1899 (date of the second trial), and 1902 (date when the pro-Dreyfus Combes was Prime Minister), there were in the French Army many officers who had the same appearance has his stepbrother Georges, who was tall, had blue eyes, and looked like a warrior. Later on, in his opinion, the number of such officers decreased considerably, and it would be at its lowest between 1920 and 1939. As he considered the number of officers who were dark-skinned and looked more like Jews, shop-keepers and small clerks than warriors, he wondered:”Que feront-ils sur le champ de bataille, lorsqu’il y aura la guerre?”[What will they do on the battle-field, when there is war?]. The French defeat of 1940 gave him the answer he wanted (EB, p. 222; IBEC’H, p. 53). In the 1890’s, all “decent” people were against Dreyfus. It goes without saying that Meven Mordiern’s views had nothing to do with his own experience, but he was not going to let reality interfere with his prejudices. And yet he had had plenty of opportunities to reconsider. One day, as he made fun of the ugliness of the Jews in the presence of one of his uncles, the latter sharply reprimanded him, pointing out that the prettiest girls he knew were Jewish, and that when he was young he had been madly in love with one of them(TB, p. 37). Meven Mordiern also acknowledge that when he was a student at the lycée Condorcet, the best and smartest students were Jewish, and it was one of these Jewish boys, who was as strong and handsome as he was smart, who had come to his help when four bullies had attacked him. (IBEC’H, pp. 34-35; IEC’H, pp. 10-11).

I have emphasized Meven Mordiern’s prejudices because they played a major role in his Celtic calling. I have had occasion to examine the origins and the development of this calling elsewhere, and I will limit myself to my conclusions (See “The Origins of Meven Mordiern’s Celtic Calling”, Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium, Vol. V, pp. 166-186; “Les anciens Celtes dans les œuvres posthumes de Meven Mordiern », Bretagne et pays celtiques .
Meven Mordiern’s mother was so contemptuous of Mediterraneans and Jews that she rejected all of Greek and Roman antiquity, and that she worshipped only the Nordic races. Writers like Madame de Staël and the Romantics had already proclaimed the superiority of Nordic literatures over Greek and Latin literatures, and Gobineau, in his Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1854), had launched the myth of the superiority of Nordic races, of their tall blond warriors. Meven Mordiern’s mother had found in the ancient Gauls a perfect incarnation of this ideal. Her son was only three or four year old when she told him these words which she would often repeat to him: "Nous ne sommes ni Romains ni Latins. Nous sommes Gaulois." [We are neither Romans nor Latins. We are Gauls] (EB, p. 309; IEC’H, p. 6; IBEC’H, p. 57). The fact that his father believed in his own Breton origins and the affection and respect which his parents had for the Breton people reinforced the boy’s interest in his supposed Celtic origins. This interest was reinforced by their frequent summer stays in Brittany. Meven Mordiern and his parents spent their summer vacation of 1881 in the Pouliguen, but it was mostly after they moved back to Paris, in 1892, that they went faithfully to the seashore in Lohietas, near Vannes, every year until 1906 (SOAT, p. 1). Their celtomania was encouraged by current fashions. From 1884 to 1887, the young René Leroux often wore clothes imitating traditional Breton costumes: embroidered waistcoat and wide-brimmed hat with a ribbon. Writers like Loti and Charles Le Goffic, as well as the singer-songwriter Théodore Botrel exploited clichés about Brittany and the Breton people. Twenty years earlier, it had been the fashion to dress young boys in Highlander kilts, ribboned bonnets, and socks, because French translations of Walter Scott’s novels were extremely popular. Madame Leroux’s celtomania had been encouraged by Henri Martin’s Histoire de France, whose author glorified the beauty and the bravery of the ancient Gauls. The boys found these readings so exciting that he got his hands on everything in print that had to do with the history of the ancient Celts, L’Anneau de César [Cesar’s ring], by Alfred Rambaud, Les Mercenaires [The Mercenaries], by Léon Cahun, Les Gladiateurs [The Gladiators], by Whyte-Melville, a book about English history which included sections about Scotland and Ireland novels of Walter Scott in which Highlanders and Welshmen appeared as heroes, La Villemarqué’s Barzaz Breiz (a collection of traditional Breton ballads]), and works which glorified the Bretons’ rebellion against the Revolution. He was full of admiration for the uniforms of the Black Watch regiment and for the Highlanders he had occasion to see in 1889 (EB, pp. 309-311, 325, 329, 334, 461; IEC’H, pp. 1-7, 12-15, 25-29; IBEC’H, pp. 59-60, 222; ADL, pp. 5-7, 34-35; SOAT, pp. XVII, XLVII-L). This romantic vision of the Celtic races would strongly influence his own monumental study of the ancient Celts, as well as his historical novel Skêtla Segobrani and his autobiographical writings.

The young René Leroux retained only a few memories of his 1881 stay in Brittany: fishing boats, nets, the smells of fish, tar, and rosin. He had also enjoyed hearing the bagpipe. His next stay, in 1892, he enjoyed the sailing vessels which were still often to be seen in Nantesá harbor: they reminded him of the sea voyages described in such ancient Irish writings as qu’Imram Brain maic Febail ocus a Echtra. During his later stays, he took pleasure in visiting the seashore around Lohietas, Guérande and her ramparts, the ancient castle of Susinio, the dolmens and the menhirs of Carnac, the chapel built on top of the tumulus of Saint-Michel, its prehistorical museum, the old church in which the remains of the Breton saint Gweltaz are preserved. Saint Goustan’s fountain brought him another pleasure: two young Breton girls were
washing their laundry near the fountain, and in order not to wet their clothes, they had turned up their skirts. The young fellow passed by them in silence and without staring at them, but he had had a chance to observe how shapely their legs were. A Breton priest with whom he had become friendly encouraged him, when the time would come for him to choose a spouse, to select a young Breton peasant girl: he could guarantee their purity he could. Another priest, a Frenchman, tried to persuade him that Breton people had the same vices as others, but the young boy refused to believe him, and he felt himself quite vindicated when a friend of the family, a young woman who lived at a certain distance from Paris and who sometime came home late, had to cross an empty field through which a railroad track was being laid. She was warned that this could be dangerous, but she answered there was nothing to be afraid of: all the workers were Bretons. The young René Leroux had so strongly identified with the Celts that he once got mad at a peasant who called his restive horse “sale Breton” [dirty Breton]. The boy had a pocket knife which he had bought in Lokeltas, and another schoolboy made fun of it, but another school boy, a blue-eyed Breton, told him: “Ne fais pas attention à ce que dit ce type. J’ai le même couteau à la maison.” [Don’t pay attention to what this guy is saying. I have the same knife at home]. In Lokeltas, unlike the other French vacationers, he loved the local food: shellfish, crêpes, cidere, and he like to hear Breton spoken. He was quite pleased that the parish priest continued to say his homily in Breton, in spite of the crowds of French visitors (EG, E****, H****; IBEC’H, pp. 162-198, 239-240; EB, pp. 99, 162).

In his passion for the Celtic races, young René Leroux seriously began to study their languages, concentrating at first on Breton, more easily accessible to him. He purchased grammars and dictionaries, books in the Breton language, and books dealing with the history of Brittany. Shortly before his death, he bequeathed his entire library to the Breton writer and scholar Roparz Hémon (IBEC’H, pp. 32, 55, 63; EB, pp. 42, 322; IEC’H, p. 59; ADL, p. 6; SOAT, p. L). At the age of eighteen, a medical examination revealed that René Leroux was unfit for military service because of a cardiac problem. Physically unable to lead the life of an explorer which he had dreamed of, he decided to devote his life to the defense and illustration of the history and the culture of the Celts. His stepbrother had died in 1895, and his father in 1897. René Leroux lived with his mother in Paris until she died, in 1920. He then settled in the village of Saint-Hélory, near the town of Saint-Brieuc. He chose this place to be near the man whom he considered as the best authority on the Breton language, François Vallée. He lived off his inheritance, which unfortunately the fall of the French currency would considerably diminish. In fact, he was able to survive only with the help of an old family friend, at first, and later thanks to the occasional subsidies which his friend and collaborator Vallée gave him.

In order to show how much he wanted to reestablish his Breton identity, René Leroux modified the spelling of his name: Le Roux, instead of Leroux. Le Roux is a closer equivalent to the Breton form of the name: Ar Rouz. It is also the spelling most frequently used in the Breton-speaking western half of Brittany, whereas the spelling Leroux is more common in the French-speaking eastern half (this information has been provided by Gwennolé Le Menn, who teaches at the Université de Haute-Bretagne). He later went still further, signing his publications Meven Mordiern, a name made up of the names of two early Breton saints. His collaboration with Vallée took different forms. For sixteen years, from 1920 to 1936, they met three times a week at Vallée’s house in Saaint-Brieuc, for several hours each time. Ar first, Meven Mordiern did not feel too assured in his handling of the language, and Vallée translated the texts which his friend
had written in French. Later on, Meven Mordiern felt competent and confident enough to do without his friend’s help.

Meven Mordiern firmly believed in the resurgence of Brittany, of her language, her culture, and her people. His mission was to make the coming generations of young Bretons share his faith. In his massive *Notennou diwar-benn ar Gelted koz* [Notes on the ancient Celts], he gathered practically all of the knowledge available at the times about the origins, the history, and the culture of the ancient Celts in order to restore in the Breton people the pride deserved by their ancestral heritage. The three volumes of the historical novel *Skêtla Segobrani* have a similar purpose. *Istor ar Bed* [The history of the world] have a different goal: Meven Mordiern wanted to provide his readers with the totality of modern science as well as with the linguistic tools required to discuss any scientific subject without resorting to French. As to his memoirs, Meven Mordiern did not attempt to compete with the great French, English, or German writers. If he had written in these languages, he would never have considered writing for publication what he considered to be just trifles. In his preface to *Tiegeziou bourc’hizien eus ar broiou-krec’h en XVIIIvet kantved hag en XIXvet kantved* [French bourgeois families in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries], he gives this justification: "Le breton, toutefois, a été abandonné dans les bas-fonds et négligé pendant sept siècles au moins, en raison de la cowardise, de la paresse et de l’aveuglement de ceux dont c’était le devoir de le maintenir au rang élevé qui était le sien. En attendant mieux, en attendant que paraissent des écrivains capables de présenter en breton des mémoires pleins d’intérêt, des mémoires d’importance à quelque égard, ces babioles ont leur valeur, ne serait-ce que sur le plan de la langue. Ces mémoires, tout comme mes souvenirs d’enfance, démontrent que le breton est tout aussi apte à décrire la vie des bourgeois dans les grandes villes qu’à illustrer la vie des paysans dans leurs champs et dans leurs chaumières. Il fallait que cela fût nettement prouvé à tous ceux qui en tiennent pour la ‘petite Bretagne’ (si tant est que l’on peut, sans pécher, appliquer ce nom si beau à un pays pourri par la romanisation). Je n’ai jamais mis en doute la supériorité de la ‘grande langue des Gaules.’" [The Breton language, however, has been abandoned in the lower depths and neglected during seven centuries at least, because of the cowardice, the laziness, and the blindness of those whose duty it was to maintain it at the high rank which was its due. While waiting for something better, while waiting for the coming of writers able to present, in Breton, memoirs full of interest, these trifles have their value, be it only on the linguistic level. These memoirs, as well as my childhood memories, demonstrate that the Breton language is as apt to describe the life of bourgeois people in the big cities as to depict the life of peasants in their fields and their cottages. This had to be clearly proved to all those who believe only in ‘little Brittany’ (if one may without sinning such a beautiful name to a country rotten by Romanization). I have never doubted the superiority of the “great language of the Gauls].

It goes without saying that Meven Mordiern would not have devoted his entire life to the creation of such a considerable body of writing if he had not been motivated by an impulse which very likely had its origins in his unconscious. The violence with which he rejected Freud suggests that he was afraid to explore these origins. The analysis of play presented by Freud in the *fort-da* episode is too well known to need a detailed explanation. I will only mention that play occupies a considerable amount of space in Meven Mordiern’s memoirs. He was an only child, he had no class-mates and no playmates. In order to provide him with some distraction, his mother taught him how to play by himself. His stepbrother, she told him, invented games
inspired by the adventure stories which he read. This is what the boy did, and his favorite games were inspired by the history of the Celts. He recreated their expeditions through southern Europe, the battle of Allia where the Celts defeated the Romans, the trimarkisia with which the Celtic warriors cut to pieces the Macedonian phalanx in 281 BC, the Scottish forays through the counties of Northumberland and Durham in 1327, and many other battles. The chimney of an old underground laundry room became a watch tower on the Scottish border from which he could keep watch on English territories. Recreating famous battles between Scots and Englishmen, Bannockburn, Flodden or Prestonpans, he charged the enemy, a Scottish bonnet on his head and a claymore in his hand, shouting “Alben! Alben!” [Scotland! Scotland!]. Inspired by Walter Scott’s *The Legend of Montrose*, he discharged his weapons on the men of Argyle. He gave the manikins which represented the enemy the names of the worst enemies of the Celts, Cesar or Postumius, and he did not stop hitting them with his arrows or his javelins until they were totally demolished. In all of this games, he always sided with the Celts against the Romans, the Highlanders against the English, the Bretons against the Saxons, the Welsh against the Normans. Meven Mordiern seems to be looking for similar victories when he anticipates the restoration of the past glories of the Celts.

His short story *Bodadeg ar pevarzekvet* gives the key to an interpretation which is more directly tied to the role of writing. It relates a dream which occurred in 1936 or 1937 (BAP, p. 18). Meven Mordiern had taken as models for some of the characters of his novel *Skêtla Segobrani* members of his own family who, by their physical appearance, reminded him of ancient Gaulish or Celtic figures. Writing his memoirs also brought back to his mind memories of his family. He had also made use, in fragments of the *Skêtla* which he later discarded and destroyed as well as in other writings, of individuals whom he had met during his walking tours in the countryside around Paris and who, in his eyes, looked like typical Gauls (BAP, p. 12. The writings referred to are tales inspired by his visions of ancient Gaul: ”Logotigiakos” (*Gwalarn*, Gwengolo 1938); “Gant Luoez and Doueed” [With the Armies of the Gods] (*Gwalarn*, Mwezeven-Gouere 1938). The dream which Meven Mordiern is a typical wish-fulfillment. The narrator, Ategene Roudikos, is the barely disguised persona of the author, who even has given him a Greek-like form of his own name, René Leroux, which is appropriate to the period in which he has placed the events related in the story, antiquity. The narrator has traveled all over the Roman Empire, and beyond its borders. He is now returning to his ancestral home, in Gaul, in the land of the Carnutes. He has to be there for the gathering of the fourteenth, which is held to commemorate the dead. In India, Ategene Roudikos has learned the art of creating illusory creatures which look exactly like living animals or human beings. When passing on the Mediterranean shore, he makes a stop at the grave in which a sister of his who died in childhood is buried, and he makes her appear before him. He embraces her, and he kisses her forehead. She has substance and warmth, but, like all the shades recreated by magic, she is unable to speak. The narrator takes her with him on his horse. During their long ride, a little of the narrator’s heart has penetrated his sister’s shade, and when they reach home, she is able to speak. In their home, the narrator sees all of those whom he knew as a child, who have died, and now who reappear during this holy night: the man who was the companion of his childhood, Antoniakos, two young girls to whom he had been attracted, his mother, his father, his uncles, his mother’s father and grandfather. His mother’s great-grandfather welcomes him (BAP, pp. 8-
18). The dream is an obvious victory over the passage of time which has left Meven Mordiern alone, robbed of the affection and the company of all those whom he loved during the happiest part of his life, his childhood. The dream is a negation of death. The magic which brings back to life is the magic of writing, through which he infuses into all those whom he thus brings back to life with his own vital substance, just as they infused with their own vital substance the figures of the ancient Celts whom they thus brought to him through space and time.

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