Youenn Drezen’s Night Wake at the Island’s End: A Reading

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Poetry has always been, everywhere and in every period, influenced by the feelings and the emotions caused in the hearts of men by the events which happen in their life. Among all these events, death is without a doubt one of the most important, and one finds, in Breton as well as in other languages, many masterpieces inspired by this theme. *Buhez mab den* [The Life of Man, a medieval poem], for instance, displays man’s horror before a rotting corpse with as much power as Villon’s celebrated works *Ballade des Pendus* and *Le Grand Testament*. And such poems as “*Marv Pontkalleg*” [The Death of Pontkalleg] (Kervarker, Barzaz [Breiz]) or “*Kanenn evit Deiz an Anaon*” [Song for All Souls Day] are quite equal, in my humble opinion, to Siegfried Sassoon’s and Wilfred Owen’s poems about the fate of young soldiers killed in the trenches of WWI (see for instance “Dreamers” and “Rear-Guard”, by Sassoon, and “Dulce et Decorum Est...” and “Exposure”, by Owen). And I must confess, when I compare Hugo’s celebrated poem “*Ceux qui pieusement sont morts pour la patrie...*” with “*Dulce et Decorum Est...*”, that I find Hugo’s verses somewhat pompous. I am also inclined to place Youenn Drezen’s poem about the death of his friend Jakez Riou, *Nozvezh Arkuz e beg an enezenn* [Night Wake at the island’s end], as high as Shelley’s elegy on the death of Keats, *Adonais*. The Breton and the English poets share the same despair before the fate of these two young writers carried away by Death at the peak of their fame, before they had a chance to fulfill their mission on earth. This does not mean that there are no major differences between the two works, far from it. At any rate, my only purpose is to study Youenn Drezen’s poem. Villon, Shelley, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen is to show how much I respect and admire Youenn Drezen’s masterpiece, in particular, and Breton literature in general. In his note on *Night Wake at the Island’s end*, Per Denez writes:”Youenn, the son, tells me this is one of the poems his father liked most.” (1) I will mention that it is also a favorite of mine. One must reflect on the title. “Night”: a brief halt between two days. It will not put a stop to the flow of time. This night is only a moment in the endless succession of days, of months, of seasons, of years, of centuries, millennia. “Wake”: a funeral rite invented by man to confront death, to give some sort of meaning to an absurd fate. “Island’s end”: the poet stands at the farthest end of the continent, on a small piece of land surrounded by the sea. The island reminds the reader of Donne’s celebrated words which Hemingway used as an epigraph to his novel *For whom the bell tolls*: “*No man is an Iland, intire of it selve; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontorie, as well as if a Manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved with Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee*”.

Below the title comes this dedication: ”*In memoriam Jakez Riou*. Youenn Drezen ha Jakez Riou had been sent together to Spanish seminaries, first in the Basque country, and then in Castilla, but neither of them felt called to become priests, and theu returned home after five or six years. In Brittany, they worked as journalists. They also became Breton nationalists, and took an active part in the Breton literary renaissance. Jakez Riou died in 1937, at the age of thirty-eight. He had already published important works, short stories, plays, and he left several unfinished projects. Youenn Drezen had been his best friend, as is shown in *Night wake at the island’s end*.

The poem is divided into four parts. It begin at twilight, and ends at dawn. Just as the world passes from the darkness of night to the light of day, the poet goes from mourning, suffering and sadness to hope and to life. He must find the strength to tear the “black sheet” of
mourning in order to drink “the water of Light” The poet has returned to his native land. There has been no change in the islands, the sky, the stars, the fields, the shore, the ocean. He has been happy there with his friend, when their heart thrilled with the pride of youth:”Mornings laughed / And my heart was open / And the magic roads of the entire world were open to my will / And by my side / Strong and merry, and burning with faith / Walked my friend.” The land has not changed. The poet, however, returns with empty hands,, his soul defeated by disappointment and disillusion, He has known the cruelty of mourning, he has heard “the strain of that which cannot be redeemed / And the sobs of the De Profundis rising towards the galleries.” He would like to go back in time, to the “unshakable faith” of his childhood, to believe again “that the darkness of the world is not for ever mute / And that we’ll find again our loved ones in the serene clime of another life / Where no anguish is left!....”, “to believe that every ordeal, every sickness was but an illusion, / Every pain suffered but a delirium and a nightmare, / And the our friend’s broken life, the mourning, the churchyard/. To believe, as once we did, that above us, in the Haven of the Angels, / A Kind God reigns, keeping his Eye on our wretchedness, / Grinding each failure into flour.” The poet refers to the Christian faith. For Catholics, the felicity of Paradise has a price: the pains suffered in this vale of tears. They must share in Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. The poet has lost the faith of his childhood. This faith is now but a dream. To believe as he once did, he would have to lose his reason. He would have to “sleep like a frog on the cress of his tiny pond, / like moles in their burrow, and ants in their nest / On the warren…. / Sleep like the quiet clouds, / And the grains of sand on the shore, and reeds…” Reeds? According to Pascal, this is exactly what man is, he is just as fragile, but, for his misfortune, he is a “roseau pensant”.

In the second part, this is what the poet must acknowledge: “…we no longer can forget, / Nor share in the balm of sleep.” He will have to seek another way, a way he has forgotten along with the language of his native land. From her, he had received a priceless gift:”A magic potion, Fancy”, the power to change “the pebbles on the beach” into “the Dragon’s diamonds”, and “heartbreak into the heavenly scent of the rose”. As long as he will live, the departed loved ones “shall remain forever alive, with the smile of their white teeth.” Here opens a dialogue between the poet and his native land about the meaning of his loss. What is living, truthfully? Tame beautiful girls? Drink “precious wine in banquets?” get drunk with the “sonorous enchantment of violins”? Dancing, singing, exercise one’s limbs in sport games? Visit faraway places? He has seen one hundred thousand men march in Berlin, Rome and Moskow, and countless in France and America, all the efforts of peace time to kindle “the ashes of war”, and he remained as indifferent before them as before the conflagration in Smyrna, the black plague in India, the famine in China, the earthquakes in Tokyo. Women’s love, worldly pleasures, faraway journeys and historical catastrophes have left him exhausted and disillusioned, and this is the reason why. “from the heights of the sky to the centre of the earth, / The black drape of mourning hangs with its tears. (2)

In the third part, the voice of the land is heard, offering the poet reasons for living. It shows him how life began there, with “monsters as large as cathedrals”, “The fight of Heat against the invading Glacier”, “the assault of the Sea, and the collapse of the Ice-field”, “the ancient Giants who lived for long centuries, and mastered the sea monster”, “the World taking shape”, and finally the birth of “the Beauty of the World”. Here the poet appears closer to the theories of Bergson on “l’évolution créatrice” or to those of Teilhard de Chardin on the Omega Point than to Darwin. For him, it is pointless to ask “Why mourning? Why suffering?”: “… to find a meaning to the mystery of the cradle and the grave, / To find a key, if there is one, to the secret of suffering, / To drink, at last, if it exists, the water of Enlightenment, / Since neither the Earth nor the Wise Men can give witness, -- One has to wait until the Other Side, should there be
one – Appear behind the black doors of Death”. What is, after all, what is claimed by the priests after the druids? “A pleasant consolation, an illusion perhaps and a dream, so cherished and so fragile!”. How, then, can man live without any meaning for the question of death, without a key to the meaning of suffering?. The answer is to be found in the final part of the poem.

Man must keep silent and open his eyes and ears. The Sun, “the Archer”, the “Resplendent Bearer of Light”, is shooting his arrows over the heights, morning is laughing, bells are hailing the break of day, and here is the lesson offered to the poet by the voice of his land:”Singing, blooming, gaining beauty under the eye of the sun, / That, my son, on this hard and kind earth of yours, / Is everybody clear mission and destiny. / Growing, maturing, give fruit, with the seed of another life / In every fruit, this, clearly, is the meaning of life, / Shown to you by bird, beast, and grain of wheat.” In the final verses, an unexpected image appears under the poet’s pen:”O Sea, shining between the pine, / Hydra curled in the setting of the green hills…” And a little further on he shows the Hydra rising on her “emerald coils”, and he salutes her:” Invader which nothing can stop or corrupt, bringer of life, / Quick-moving, cold, limpid-eyed serpent, and blue!” She brings quickness and youth, forever renewing”. The poet thus evokes the mythical image of the Ouroboros, the Serpent holding her tail in her mouth, the circle without beginning or end, the symbol of the Eternal Return, The image of the female Serpent brings to mind the lines of Valéry s Le Cimetière marin about ““la mer, la mer toujours recommencée”: “Hydre absolue, ivre de ta chair bleue, / Qui te remords l’étincelante queue…” Valéry also sweeps away the soul’s longing for an Eternal Life beyond the grave and joyfully accepts the brief life of the body as he chooses these words of Pindaros as an epigraph to his poem:” :”Mê, phíla psukhá, bíon áthánon speude, tan d’émprakton ántleí makhanan”. Camus chose the same epigraph for his celebrated essay Le Mythe de Sisyphe, but in the French translation:”Ô mon âme, n’aspire pas à la vie immortelle, mais épuise le champ du possible” The sea, for Valery, is also the “Grande mer de délires douée, / Peau de panthère et chlamyde trouée…”

There are antiques vases showing Dionysos, the god of drunkenness, sailing on the sea, clad in a panther’s skin and wearing a khlamus, a cloak which is just a piece of cloth held on his shoulder by a brooch. Valéry has rejected the vain longing for Eternal Life represented by Apollo Pythias, the god of the Sun, and chosen the Sea, associated with Dionysos. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche had made the same choice. I mentioned Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin. In Night Wake at the Island’s End, Youenn Drezen is closer to Nietzsche’s concept of the Eternal Return, and perhaps also to his ideas about the striving of life towards its highest goal, the “Resplendent Beauty” of the Übermensch.

NOTES (1) Nozvezh Arkus e beg an enezenn, Al Lamm, niv. 151 (Meurzh-Ebrel 1977, pp. 86-102
(2) It was the custom, in France, to hang a black drape adorned with silver tears over the front of a house in which the body of a dead person was laid out waiting for the hearse to come.

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Translation of Reun ar C’halan [René Galand], “Eveziadennou diwar-benn Nozvezh Arkuz e beg and Enezenn”, Al Lamm, niv. 324 (C’hwervrer 2001), pp. 83-89