

1995

The Emsav in a Novel of Yeun ar Gow

René Galand
Wellesley College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.wellesley.edu/frenchfaculty>

Translation of Reun ar C'halan [René Galand], "An oberenn lennegel hag an Emsav", *Al Liamm*, niv, 289 (Meurzh-Ebrel 1995), pp. 154-158

Recommended Citation

Galand, René, "The Emsav in a Novel of Yeun ar Gow" (1995). *French Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 9.
<http://repository.wellesley.edu/frenchfaculty/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the French at Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in French Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

René Galand, The Emsav in a novel of Yeun ar Gow

Brittany's struggle to regain its liberties (the *Emsav*, in Breton), is a major theme in XXth century Breton literature, as I have had occasion to show in other publications.¹ The links between the *Emsav* and literature can be quite complex: this has been clearly demonstrated notably by Pierrette Kermoal in her study of two works of Roparz Hemon, the poem *Gwarizi vras Emer* [Emer's great jealousy] and the novel *Mari Vorgan*.² She shows how the Breton nationalist ideal is manifested in the form of two beautiful women whose essence is supernatural, the fairy Fant in the poem, and the mermaid Levenez in the novel. P. Kermoal does not mention Donald Kerlaban, the protagonist of Hemon's utopian novel *An Aotrou Bimbochet e Breizh*, but she clearly is another manifestation of the author's ideal, an incarnation of his country's revival. Roparz Hemon makes use of the image of a supernatural woman (or of a woman situated outside of time) like the ancient Irish poets who used her as a symbol of Irish sovereignty.³ In fact, what the critic Youenn Olier wrote about Roparz Hemon might well be applied to many other Breton writers, à l'instar des anciens poètes irlandais qui symbolisaient ainsi la royauté de leur pays.⁴ A vrai dire, on pourrait appliquer à bon nombre d'écrivains bretons ce qu'écrivait Youenn Olier à propos de Roparz Hemon : "... e oberenn lennegel a zo bet heklev an *Emsav* dre vras" [His literary work has largely been an echo of the *Emsav*]. And this is true even if the *Emsav* is not the actual subject of the work. This is exactly the case of Yeun ar Gow's novel, *Ar Gêr villiget* [*The Cursed City*]. The work was not completed until 1962, but it illustrates theories common in the *Emsav* at the time when Yeun ar Gow was politically most active, between 1930 and 1940, theories which Youenn Olier has analyzed with great accuracy.⁵ Yeun ar Gow was born in 1897 and died in 1966. The years between 1930 and 1940 were the years when he was physically and mentally at the top of his powers.

In his novel, Yeun ar Gow explains how, in the middle of the Vth century, King Gralon decided to leave Great Britain with his subjects in order to establish a new kingdom in Armorica, the kingdom of Kerne [Cornwall]. They were not leaving Great Britain because they had been defeated by the Saxon invaders. They left because King Gralon had not been able to make of Great Britain a unified kingdom subjected to his authority. His failure was due to two major defects of the Celts: pride and jealousy. This is why he looked for a place where he could establish a kingdom according to his vision. Since the fall of the Roman empire, Armorica was without a master, and the Armoricans, who were closely related to the Celts of Great Britain by their race and their language, felt fortunate to have a powerful king who would defend them against the pirates who came to plunder and to kill. Monks and priests had followed their king, and they began to lead the Armoricans away from their pagan rituals and beliefs. The arrival of the Bretons, however, did not please the most deeply romanized Armoricans, especially the inhabitants of the city of Ys, wealthy pagans rotten with pride one and all. For them, the Bretons were just Barbarians, but they knew full well that they could do nothing against these valiant warriors, and so their Great Council recognized Gralon's authority, provided their new king would allow them to keep their rights, their liberties, their laws, and their traditional customs. Gralon married Stella, the daughter of the head of the Great Council. One year later, Stella died after giving birth to a daughter, princess Ahès. The child was brought up by Stella's parents,

proud aristocrats who despised the Bretons who did not speak Latin. They filled the little princess with hatred against the Christian faith. As soon as she reached the age of sixteen, she insisted on living in the palace of her grand-parents who had died of the plague. She was thus able to indulge freely in the pleasures of the flesh. Her example corrupted the entire city. The young princess soon became the slave of Satan's envoy, the Red Prince. The city was protected from the sea by dikes and locks. On the Prince's orders, Ahès stole the keys to the locks. The Prince opened the locks and sailed away, abandoning the princess who was drowned with all the city's inhabitants. Such was the fate of Ys, the cursed city.

The reader soon observes that Yeun ar Gow made use of the legend of Ys to present his views on the *Emsav*. Ys is the image of Paris. It was commonly believed in Brittany that the etymology of "Paris" is "Par Ys", that is, in Breton, "equal to Ys". The citizens of Ys had grown too cowardly to fight, and they had needed Gralon's warriors to protect them. During WWI, the French government did something similar, sending Breton regiments to the most dangerous sectors of the front lines: as a result, the number of French soldiers killed in action was double the number of casualties in other regiments. Breton writers who had served during WWI, such as Yann Ber Kalloc'h, Abeozen and Loeiz Herriou, bore witness to the fact, which was widely publicized by Breton nationalists during the twenties and the thirties.

The citizens of Ys have been corrupted by their wealth, and they mistreat the poor. Swollen with pride, they despise King Gralon's followers who don't speak Latin, and must therefore be just uncivilized savages. Breton members of the *Emsav* wanted respect for their traditional culture, and they bitterly resented the contempt expressed in French publications for the Breton *baragouin*: this French word is a combination of two Breton words: *bara* (bread) and *gwin* (wine), and in French it means gibberish. Breton nationalists saw an abyss between the materialist spirit which the French had inherited from the Romans, and the idealism of the Celts. According to the Breton writer Erwan Berthou, the traditional Breton culture was in harmony with the order of nature, whereas French civilization went against nature. The citizens of Ys are city people, the Bretons are country people. For the *Emsav*, city people have no character, no moral fiber. They have lost all control over themselves. A Breton is a real man.

The citizens of Ys continue to worship the false gods of the Romans. The Breton people are good Christians. At the beginning of the XXth century, the government of the Third Republic was strongly anti-clerical. Strict laws had been passed against the Church, many convents and monasteries had been closed, church properties had been seized, and several religious orders had had to leave France. Many Bretons were very much attached to the Church, and at the time when the government moved to seize church properties, they grabbed their guns to defend them. In Yeun ar Gow's novel, it is Venus, the goddess of erotic love, who is worshipped by the citizens of Ys. Gralon has ordered the brothels closed, but there still are many courtesans and prostitutes. Galon's Bretons, on the other hand, have built a sanctuary for the Virgin Mary, who is the living incarnation of absolute purity. For the *Emsav*, Paris, like Ys, was a city full of prostitutes from which venereal diseases would soon contaminate the entire country. For such Breton nationalists as Taldir and Kerverziou, France, like the Roman Empire, was doomed to decadence.

For Yeun ar Gow, the goal is clear: a literary work is a political weapon. The destruction of Ys is equivalent to the ruin of Paris, the symbol of French centralized authority. Some day, the Breton people will again be the masters of their own country, Brittany.

1. "Poets and Politics: The Revival of Nationalism in Breton Poetry since World War II", *World Literature Today*, vol. 54, no 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 218-222; "Modern Breton Fiction and the Emsav", *Keltoi*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 15-20

2. P. Kermoal, "Eus Gwarizi vras Emer da vMari Vorgan", *Preder*, no 90

3. Y. Olier, *Istor an Emsav*, vol. 1, *Preder*, Kaier 15-16 (Du 1960), p. 51

4. Kv. *Baile in Scáil* hag *Echtra Mac Ehdach Mugmedón*

5. Y. Olier, *Istor an Emsav* (Roazhon: Imbourc'h, 1972), vol. II, pp. 143-144, 151-152, 159-160, 177-178, 195-196; vol. III, pp. 261-264, 283-284

René Galand, Professor of French emeritus, Wellesley College

Translation of *Reun ar C'halan* [René Galand], "An oberenn lennegel hag an Emsav", *Al Liamm*, niv, 289 (Meurzh-Ebrel 1995), pp. 154-158