

Williams on Corbière (2012)

Corbière, Tristan. *Roscoff (l'album Louis Noir), un objet poétique et pictural inédit*. Éditions Françoise Livinec, 2012, pp. 39, ISBN 978-2-919199-08-2

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This publication is an object of beauty and a must for bibliophiles and dix-neuviémistes alike. It consists of high quality facsimile prints of every page of the *Roscoff* album and an accompanying booklet providing detailed notes on each leaf. The booklet also contains three brief preliminary articles by Jean-Luc Steinmetz, Pierre Tilman, and André Cariou that explore both the circumstances of the album's creation and the significance of this find for Corbière studies, as well as a substantial essay by the album's discoverer Benoît Houzé. Tristan Corbière (1845–75) arrived in Roscoff from Morlaix in 1864; at nineteen he had hardly left his native Brittany, but the isolation of Finistère should not be overstated as Roscoff enjoyed a certain popularity with artists and writers. Indeed Houzé suggests that Corbière probably courted artists visiting from Paris during this time. The album presents mainly portraits and caricatures of friends and acquaintances and seafaring scenes, in both textual and visual form. Given to Louis Noir, who passed it to his son Robert Noir, the album was eventually lost until Houzé tracked it down in Scotland in 2009. Nevertheless it had always enjoyed a virtual presence in Corbière criticism as a number of scholars had been afforded access to it before its disappearance.

Corbière's notoriety in the French capital is explained in large part by his "Bretonness," despite the fact he never aligned himself with the Breton cause, and that the work of subversion seen in his "Breton" poems is no different from that found in the "Parisian" works. In a short but influential essay in 1884 Paul Verlaine established the dichotomy between Paris and Brittany as key to understanding the work of this particular "poète maudit," by characterizing Corbière as a "Breton bretonnant de la bonne manière." This dichotomy was not finally erased until the publication of Pascal Rannou's definitive *De Corbière à Tristan: Les Amours jaunes: une quête de l'identité* (Champion, 2006), in which Rannou dismisses much previous criticism as "anti-Breton" before advancing his own "métisse" hypothesis, according to which Corbière's work must be understood as the product of cultural hybridity (he is a French-speaking "bourgeois" born in a Breton-speaking area).

While this publication adds no significant new evidence to the question of Corbière's Bretonness, it does serve to nuance our understanding of his trajectory as writer. This album was created four or five years before *Les Amours jaunes* (published 1873), and provides a new reference point for criticism insofar as it contains first versions of some texts as well as some unknown poems, notably "Vieux Roscoff" in the form of a prose poem. We also observe here a tendency towards the *vers libre* before Rimbaud's early examples of the genre. In this vein, the highlight is the discovery of a forgotten variant; a rubbed out poem in the album led Houzé to the discovery of a version of "À mon côté le Négrier" that had been published in a journal in Toulouse by Gaston Martin in 1929. The variant is reproduced here (17).

Much more important is the way in which this publication radically changes how we view Corbière's graphic output. If Verlaine can be blamed for inaugurating the Brittany-Paris dichotomy in criticism, then he was also responsible for locating Corbière's originality in what he does to the French language. His art has generally been considered secondary by critics, however this document shows us Corbière refusing language *on its own*, and insisting on the visual. First of all it doubles the corpus of visual work by Corbière: before his nineteen pictures were known; this album contains a further twenty-six. It also reveals a Corbière who not only took equal pleasure in both media, but also refused to choose one over the other, just as the little seagulls that he sketches here above the words refuse to be mere circumflexes, and hover between the written and the visual. In the same way, he refused to be bound by binary logic, refusing generic definition, and claiming in the poem "Épitaphe," for instance, that his birth was neither breech nor cephalic: "Il ne naquit par aucun bout" (*Les Amours jaunes*). No longer can his art be thought of as his *violon d'Ingres* then, but rather as an inextricable component in the artistic endeavour of one who refused to be categorized, always presenting himself as a blend of otherness: "Bâtard de Créole et Breton" (*Les Amours jaunes*).

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