

Bérroul's *Tristan* (c1170) : Lovers in a Cornish Landscape

L'exactitude n'est pas la vérité (Henri Matisse)

Since the earliest texts of *Tristan* mention specific place-names in Cornwall, it seems logical to stand at famous sites, and say "This Is Where It Happened." Worthy academics have researched that journey. Their work is a useful, intriguing resource for scholars and poet-translators. It may help us understand the history and dissemination of a tale which is at the same time universal, European, Celtic and Cornish. But it's all speculation.

Exactitude fails to reach the soul of story, which takes place in the imagination and heart, not on a certain piece of land. I don't look for map references, but for the spirit of place. Or rather, places for you to encounter your own visions of the genius loci. We've chosen peaceful sites with birds, plants, ancient trees and traces of the historic landscape. Tristan and Yseult, always hungry and in danger, walked observantly on such paths.

Thin places

This concept has been embraced by the Celtic church, but it surely has ancient pagan origins. At Thin Places, the veil between this world and the otherworld is so delicate that we can sense another dimension. According to our perceptions, the otherworld may be anything from paradise to fairyland, another time, or hell itself. These insubstantial thresholds may lead to inspiration, new perceptions, insight into the unconscious or a meeting with the Muse. Such crossings are places of decision, change, adventure, hazard; the wise traveller seeks the right companions and guardians on the way.

I hope that all human beings have some way of experiencing the profundity of their Thin Places. Some like to be systematic, using divining rods or following the theory of ley-lines. Others travel inwardly by meditation or prayer. For some people, Thin Places can be marked at specific points on the map.

But the essence of the experience is that it's a private, personal discovery, both ephemeral and overwhelming. I can't believe that every visitor to Stonehenge or Glastonbury Tor will have a Thin Place moment. Yet something/someone glimpsed in the corner of the eye may haunt us for life as a love object, a symbol, a companion, a metaphor or totem.

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

(William Blake - *Auguries of Innocence*)

Crossing places

In myths, legends, moral tales, fairy stories, folklore and blockbuster movies, there are places of fate, challenge, adventure and danger. Very often they are crossings, ferries, bridges and fords.

At the crossroads, the devil lies in wait for you. It is a dangerous place, for you must decide which way to go. Everything depends on your choice. In a story from a time of plague, the Three Dead rise up from their graves at the crossroads to warn the Three Living: "As you are now, so once were we, And as we are so shall you be."

There are several crossings in Bérroul's 12th century *Tristan*. Two Cornish one are *le Mal Pas* (the bad crossing) and *le Gué Aventuros* (a place where anything might happen, sometimes translated as the Perilous Ford. I might call it the Ford of Destiny).

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Ancient routes

Nowadays most traffic in Cornwall goes east/west, via the main roads. Tourists come and go, trucks roar up-country across the river Tamar. To modern Brits, the south-west is remote and beautiful. Yet visiting drivers often say "The Cornish coast is lovely, but inland it's just bleak, grey and boring. With no trees."

Many of those trees were lost to the navy and the mines. Cornwall, with its wealth of tin and copper, was once rich and powerful. For most of the last 3,000 years, the coast was bustling not with surfers, yachts and sunbathers, but with international trade. Hidden away are old roads, meandering, peaceful, overgrown. They pre-date the Norman conquest in 1066, and it's possible that they reach back to the Iron Age. Oblivious of London and England, these ways cross the peninsula from north coast to south.

The traffic of centuries has incised deep marks on the landscape. Old roads get worn down by heavy wagons, and churned up by countless workhorses and cattle. In a bad winter they would be all but impassable. Labourers dug drainage ditches, spread cobbles over the mud and laid timber on boggy places. Steep gradients would be levelled by deep cuttings. In some places, the banks of the hollow-ways are over three metres high.

Before the age of fast, reliable roads, people and goods went by sea. Costly cargoes were exchanged from the Mediterranean (wine, olive oil, spices, silk) to the British Isles (Cornish tin, with gold, silver and copper from Ireland, Wales & Cornwall). The Celts also exported cattle, hunting dogs, horses and slaves.

This was valuable trade. A ship carried many wagon-loads and was faster than overland travel. But navigation was an uncertain art, and the Cornish coast has unpredictable currents and is prone to savage Atlantic storms. Countless ships have foundered on the cliffs and reefs. Rather than sail round the most hazardous headlands, Land's End and the Lizard, goods would be unloaded and transported overland from one haven to another.

Market places

One ancient portage route is now a long-distance footpath, the Saint's Way, from Fowey to Padstow. Bérroul's *Tristan* (c1170) mentions places on the way (Lancien, St. Sampson). Another track goes from St. Ives Bay to St. Michael's Mount, which was a famous trading harbour. Bérroul describes the market on the Mount, where the hermit Ogrin buys fine clothes for Yseult to wear at her state reunion with Mark - deep-dyed silks, light and dark squirrel fur, finest wool and white linen. At the horse-fair he buys a horse fit for a Queen, a docile palfrey with harness decked in (Irish?) gold.

Such sites maintain high status. Trading places need authoritative administrators. King Mark can be imagined in such a role. Transactions would be managed by trustworthy, literate record-keepers. It was customary to keep truce (fighting is bad for business). People from many cultures and religious groups would mingle in peace. Major harbours and markets are traditionally places where knowledge, ideas and stories are exchanged (think of Alexandria's great library, and the Baghdad of the *Thousand and One Nights*).

Miners, lepers, soldiers, Celtic saints, hunting parties, vagabonds and pilgrims came to these ancient places. So did minstrels, entertainers and poets, who could expect to find a good paying audience. I believe (though can never prove) that Bérroul was such a person. He finds imagery in things seen on his way; events happen in places that his audience will recognise. If you have a fine horse or a funny dog, he'll incorporate it into the story. Each cliffhanger will make you long for the next episode. I'd love to buy him a pint of Guinness.

Jane Tozer : May 2010

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Inspiration and Source Material – a personal list

12th-13th century French

Bérroul, Thomas & anonymous poems

Early French Tristan Poems (2 volumes) ed. Norris J Lacy (Brewer, Cambridge 1998). Has parallel English translations. Expensive, but to me invaluable - the proceeds of a translation prize!

Bérroul

The Romance of Tristan by Bérroul edited by Alfred Ewert (Blackwell, Oxford 1939)
Le Roman de Tristan par Bérroul edited by Ernest Muret (Champion, Paris 1928)

Thomas

Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas edited by Félix Lecoy (Champion, Paris 1991)

English Translations from French & German

Bérroul

The Romance of Tristan & The Tale of Tristan's Madness trans. Alan S Fedrick (Penguin 1970)

Gottfried von Strassburg

Tristan with the Tristan of Thomas trans. A T Hatto (Penguin 1960)

A Modern Version

Tristan and Iseult Rosemary Sutcliff (Oxford 1971) A dramatic and emotive version of the legend, without the sentimental trappings of courtly love. This book gives a real sense of Dark Age life. Sutcliff's novels for young adults inspired a generation of aspiring archaeologists and historians.

Music for your time machine

Tristan & Iseult

Boston Camerata Joel Cohen, Henri Ledroit, Anne Azéma (Erato 1989). Winner of the Grand Prix International du Disque. A narrative compilation of early music and poetry. Dramatic & glorious.

This recording is very expensive in the UK, so buy the reissue from the USA, via Amazon.com. Their code for this disc is ASIN: B0013N443W. When searching, key in the ampersand *Tristan & Iseult* or you'll find yourself paying through the nose.