

Guillevic, *Geometries*¹

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The last decade or so has been a fruitful time for the publication of English translations of Guillevic: notably three bilingual editions, John Montague's *Carnac*², Patricia Terry's *The Sea and Other Poems*³ and Maureen Smith's *Art Poétique*⁴, as well as Maureen Smith's translation of the poet's interview with Lucie Albertini and Alain Vircondelet under the title *Living in Poetry*⁵. *Geometries*, Richard Sieburth's monolingual version of *Euclidiennes*⁶, signals the continuation of this welcome trend. Much of Guillevic's *oeuvre* still remains unavailable in English translation, so one might initially regret Sieburth's choice of text given the existence of Teo Savory's *Euclidians*⁷. Such reservations, however, swiftly disappear once the remarkable quality of Sieburth's work becomes apparent.

The front cover describes the poems as 'Englished' rather than 'translated', suggesting this will be a 'free' rendition that gives precedence to the impact in the target language over close adherence to the original, one that will lay claim to being a text *à part entière*. The neologism may also dispose the reader to anticipate wit and inventiveness. Both these expectations will be fulfilled. Turning then to the blurb on the back cover, one reads Pierre Joris's declaration that 'these [Englished] gems have kept all their Gallic lightness and grace', as if to reassure the reader of the volume's fidelity to its original. While 'Gallic lightness and grace' may seem a somewhat reductive account of Guillevic, it is interesting that the

book is enclosed by elements related to the perennially vexed question of a translation's relation to its source.

This is a matter Sieburth expands upon in his Afterword, in which he charts the genesis of *Geometries* from his initial 'very loose versions' of some forty years ago. He explains what he wanted to produce in comparison with Savory's translation:

Although quite "faithful" to the originals, Savory's versions sounded (to my ear at least), too prim, too proper, in short, too British (as in the use of the verb "to pop off" for "to leave"). I was after something zanier, something more palpably spoken, more apostrophic, more wildly allegorical and anthropomorphic, more on the order of a talking cure – after all, Guillevic had himself described the book as a working through of an obsession.

To my British ear, the issue is so much a matter of primness and propriety, but rather a questionable understanding of faithfulness. By 'quite "faithful"' Sieburth presumably means that Savory stays very close to the denotative level of the lexis of the original as well as to its verse structure. In comparison, Sieburth's Englished versions are considerably more liberty-taking. Achieving the effect to which he aspires involves expansions and contractions: in unpacking the originals, his versions may extend the number of strophes (his *Acute Angle* has seven couplets compared with Guillevic's four) or alternatively condense them, as in his *Scalene Triangle*, where 'Bon pour danser,/Pour virevolter//Sur ma base, sur mon sommet,//Sur mes côtés, mes autres angles' becomes just 'Born to dance,/To spin/Every which way'. Other symptoms of 'Englishing' include Plan I's declaration 'I am not the stuff of dreams', which contains an unmistakable Anglophone literary allusion to Prospero's famous speech. The use of colloquial idiom, as when Pyramid asks 'Who in fact/Is not something/Of a copy-cat?' or Perpendicular complains 'If I'm so damn upright/Why can't I get//The other one/Out of my mind?' inflects the poems with a distinctly English voice. Nonetheless, I would argue that, in a holistic sense, *Geometries* gives a more 'authentic' representation than a close translation can. It reproduces the clarity of Guillevic, and its

inventiveness is in keeping with the ludic spirit of *Euclidiennes*. Further, it penetrates beyond the literal meaning of the French to engage more profoundly with Guillevic's poetics. This can be seen in lexical choices such as in Circle (I) where Sieburth opts for the word 'friend' for 'frère' instead of 'brother'. Besides considerations of which word works best in Sieburth's verse, it could be said that this is closer to Guillevic's concept of fraternity.

A brief examination of Sieburth's rendition of the first of the *Euclidiennes* will illustrate further the deeper underlying affinity with Guillevic.

Droite	Line
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<p>Au moins pour toi, Pas de problème.</p>	<p>As far as you go, No problem.</p>
<p>Tu crois t'engendrer de toi-même A chaque endroit qui est de toi.</p>	<p>You persist In the belief</p>
<p>Au risque d'oublier Que tu as du passé, Probablement au même endroit.</p>	<p>That the future Is conceived</p>
<p>Ne sachant même pas Que tu fais deux parties De ce que tu traverses,</p>	<p>By every point You supersede.</p>
<p>Tu vas sans rien apprendre Et sans rien donner. (p.149)</p>	<p>You cross the world Without suspecting You cut it in half.</p>

At first glance one might note certain obvious divergences; the title, Line, allows for a range of potential new associations: stand in line, line up, draw a line... Then there is the increased number of rather shorter strophes, and the emphasis carried by the word ‘proceed’ at the end of the poem. These modifications enhance the clarity and flow of the English, and enable the translator to reproduce something of Guillevic’s playful, tightly knit sound patterns. In doing so, Sieburth has succeeded not only in conveying Guillevic’s humour, but also in transposing is something of the meaning to be found in the texture of the original. Guillevic’s poem is replete with a complex interplay of rhymes, alliterations and puns, and here is not the place to attempt to unravel them. I will confine myself to highlighting the embedding of the word ‘poème’, first on line 2 ‘Pas de problème’, then at the end of the third strophe, ‘Probablement au même endroit.’ Sieburth’s Afterword stresses the obsessional quality of *Euclidiennes*; quite so, but it is also, I think, fundamentally another Guillevicien *art poétique*, a reflection on the poet’s experience of the *poiein*, an interior dialogue in which poet and poem seem to merge into a single entity. Isn’t the poem, in its basic materiality, a combination of geometrical forms?⁸ If *Euclidiennes* is, as Sieburth states, the working through of an obsession, the poem itself is that obsession, caught in an inexorable cycle of trying to be its own catharsis. Like other liminal poems of Guillevic, ‘droite’ depicts an incipient genesis, a moment of coming into being. Sieburth’s verse conveys something of this self-reflexivity through the playful alliteration of *belief*, *conceived*, *supersede*, culminating in *proceed*, for this accented phoneme is itself suggestive of the Line. Moreover, ‘You proceed’ evokes at once the poet embarking on the act of writing, the poem itself beginning to take shape, as well as the reader embarking on the volume.

Another notable feature of Sieburth’s Englished variations is a re-imagining process that consists in adding visual pictures that are not explicit in the original. His Hyperbola describes its shape ‘...a dart/Towards a target’. His Losange is ‘Lying there now/Like a slab’, his Circle (II) has ‘Each point/Holding hands/In your bottomless/Round dance.’ Similarly, his Irregular line transforms Guillevic’s ‘mixtiligne’

‘On veut ... parfois/Te ramasser//N’être plus qu’une seule histoire’ into an encounter more resembling a social event: ‘For an occasional/Gathering//To tell/A single story.’ This visualization corresponds to the truism of comparative rhetoric that English tends to be less abstract than French. But it also points to the importance of visual imagination not only to the translator’s task, indeed to any reading of poetry.

The primary purpose of translation is to make texts accessible to people who do not have (sufficient) knowledge of the source language. I subscribe to the view that another purpose of a literary translation, given the minute scrutiny of the original required, is one akin to that of literary criticism. For a translation has the potential to open up different perspectives on a work, stimulating others to reassess their own readings of it and experience it in new ways. Sieburth’s translation has certainly made me reconsider, and enhanced my pleasure in *Euclidiennes*. In short, *Geometries* is a fine version for the English reader encountering Guillevic’s poems independently of the original; it is also valuable in terms of contributing interpretative insight. For this I am doubly appreciative, and conclude by quoting in full Sieburth’s Circle (II), which I feel offers the Anglophone reader as ‘authentic’ an experience of Guillevic, something of the core of Guillevic as one is likely to find.

Your surface
Depth,

Your depth
At the rim
Of surface.

Not a single leak
Into volume.

Full,
Fathomless,

Fed

By the stillness

With which
You come
And go.

Each point
Holding hands
In your bottomless
Round dance.

A miracle
Of overcome
Boredom.

Notes

- ¹ Guillevic, *Geometries*, Englished by Richard Sieburth, Brooklyn, New York, Ugly Duckling Press, 2010, ISBN: 978-1-933254-72-2.
- ² Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1999. Introduction by Stephen Romer.
- ³ Black Widow Press, Boston, 2007. Introduction by Monique Chefedor, Foreword by Lucie Albertini Guillevic.
- ⁴ Black Widow Press, Boston, 2009, with Lucie Albertini Guillevic.
- ⁵ Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2002.
- ⁶ *Du domaine/Euclidiennes*, Paris, *Poésie*/Gallimard, 1967.
- ⁷ Unicorn Press, Greensboro, 1975.
- ⁸ Guillevic's sense of the form of letters is clearly manifest in "Qui":

Quand il écrit le pronom: Il
Au début d'un vers,
On dirait assez souvent
Qu'il a fait un Je,
Car le I devient grand comme un J
Et le l petit comme un e. (RL, 321)