

Mastering (Textual) Space : On *Euclidiennes*

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The speaker/subject's changing relationship to space(s) and to objects is a fundamental part of the overall evolution of Guillevic's poetics. In his early poems from *Terraqué* (1942), the spaces through which the speaker moves are menacing, frightening and unsafe. The objects which he encounters are generally ambivalent. They are linked to the same source of primal fear that seems to lurk in the landscape. Beginning with *Carnac* (1960), however, as Guillevic's critics have noted, the relationship to space(s) and to objects shifts. In *Carnac* and in the later collections, a relationship of dialogue and proximity predominates. Even though the basic otherness of space and of objects is maintained in those later collections, a new closeness and intimacy which had earlier been impossible are increasingly affirmed by Guillevic. In the final decades of his writing life, as the poet moved "vers la sérénité" (in Jean Pierrot's phrase), the spaces and objects addressed by the speaker often become familiar, even befriended, presences.

One of Guillevic's most ludic, surprising and charming collections of poems is *Euclidiennes* (1967). The poems of *Euclidiennes* feature lines of verse placed underneath drawn geometrical figures. In some of the poems, the geometrical figures themselves "speak" in the first person; in others, a speaker addresses them, using "tu". This is a gentle and whimsical collection. Nevertheless, the lightheartedness evident in *Euclidiennes* is frequently counterbalanced by a concern with the more serious issues characteristic of his other collections. Jean Pierrot interprets the geometrical figures of *Euclidiennes* as "autant de tests projectifs" which allow the poet to "mieux objectiver cette géométrie intérieure qui le hante" (135).

As one begins to read *Euclidiennes*, it quickly becomes clear that the poet has given individual personalities to these abstract geometric figures. Each figure is, or has, a problem to be solved. Each one becomes a kind of existential metaphor. For example, the parallel lines are bemused by their paradoxical togetherness and apartness: “En rêve on se rencontre,/ On s’aime, on se complete”(151). Elsewhere, the “losange”, which used to be a square, feels the irony of being like but unlike its past and future identities:

Losange maintenant,
il n’en finira plus
De comparer ses angles.

— S’il allait regretter
L’ancienne preference? (154)

Critics have pointed out that Guillevic tends to idealize particular geometric forms in his work. For him, vertical forms, such as the menhirs of Brittany which recur in his poems, are particularly valorized. Yet the most idealized geometric figures of all for Guillevic are round forms. Before *Euclidiennes*, he had devoted an entire collection, *Sphère*, to exploring and celebrating a figure of roundness. In *Euclidiennes*, he returns twice to this favourite form, through two poems on the circle (157-158) and two on the sphere (176-177). To him, the circle or sphere is a metaphor for plenitude, comfort, self-possession and self-sufficiency:

En toi j’ai place,
En toi je suis,
Je me bâtis.(176)

The circle or sphere encompasses all of time:

En toi silence,
En toi le temps
Que je recueille, je résume (176).

Much like La Fontaine contemplating the contrasting pairs of animals in his *Fables*, Guillevic draws life lessons from the contrasts, from the similarities and dissimilarities which both separate and conjoin several of the pairs of figures which he presents. In one case, he shows us two triangles: the “triangle isocèle” and the “triangle équilatéral”. The two triangles are almost, but not quite, the same. The first of the two triangles has achieved a personal sense of order and is, consequently, pleased with itself. The second triangle, by contrast, has taken this concern with achieving order too far: “Je suis allé trop loin/ Avec mon souci d’ordre.// Rien ne peut plus venir” (175).

Guillevic finds a kind of classical wisdom through the discovery of unexpected and apt metaphors in each of these abstract figures. Each poem behaves like a riddle to be solved and understood. Each geometrical figure seems to ask itself — and the reader — “Who am I?”, “What is the principle and purpose of my existence?”

Because of the prevalence of verbs of movement in the collection, Jean Pierrot describes *Euclidiennes* as “un ballet de figures ... au cours (duquel) chacune d’entre elles, tout en évoluant devant les yeux du spectateur, essaie de se faire voir à son avantage” (139). « Tout donc ici est mouvement, » he concludes, « leur vie est une aventure » (139).

In presenting these geometrical figures on the page, creating a personality and existential dilemma for each of them, the poet becomes a ventriloquist or puppetmaster. At a more profound level, he also claims possession of (textual) space in *Euclidiennes*. In *Terraqué*, his liminal collection, the spaces outside the self manifested a threatening presence. On the contrary, a sense of pleasure and joy defines *Euclidiennes*, in spite of touches of existential malaise.

WORKS CITED

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