

Guillevic and the journal *La Grive*

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Guillevic entered the national literary scene with the publication of *Terraqué* in 1942. In the 1930s, he strived mostly to establish his career as a functionary in order to provide a viable living for his growing family. However, during this time, he also nurtured his literary interests and aspirations. From this period, texts of varied form have been published, notably the texts, poems and prose pieces, taken from Guillevic's seventeen "Notebooks" in *L'Expérience Guillevic*¹, the prose writings and various anecdotes related by Lucie Albertini in *Vivre en poésie*², and the posthumous publications of *Proses ou Boire dans le secret des grottes*³ and *Lieux communs suivi de Van Gogh*⁴. Although these texts give us a tantalizing glimpse into his early writing activity, this period remains largely a dark and amorphous area for critical commentary.

I propose, in a modest way, to spur interest in this area with a series of short studies which explore Guillevic's relationship with various literary journals. These studies will hopefully reveal unknown or very little known texts that will document further his genesis as a poet, as well as his development as a political and social activist. Moreover, in tracing stages and aspects of this early literary history, I will invariably also attempt to define the function of the literary journal in encouraging and fermenting literary activity. How does a journal contribute to the formation of a writer? In turn, how does a writer who has acquired prominence impart a new importance on a journal which had first provided a forum for his expression? These seem to me to be very worthy considerations, especially as related to Guillevic, a writer whose literary beginnings are rooted in small journals and who, as a recognized writer, always

responded with generosity to requests from literary journal editors, even in faraway lands⁵.

*La Grive*⁶ was the major and, for a time, the only literary and cultural journal of the Ardennes region, one of the cradles of modern French poetry. It was directed by the energetic and visionary scholar Jean-Paul Vaillant; 148 issues appeared with remarkable regularity, mostly four times-a-year, between 1925 and 1978. In the early years, the journal also distributed, as a supplement, the *Bulletin des Amis de Rimbaud*.

The literary and cultural society which sponsored the journal *La grive* met regularly and organized literary and social events for the community, especially to promote writers and historical figures native to the region of Charleville-Mezières. Guillevic attended, for example, a banquet at the Hôtel du Nord on October 22, 1934, on the occasion of the the Assemblée générale des Écrivains Ardennais.⁷ He was then a young civil servant, married in 1930 and appointed that year as “receveur” in Rocroi, not far from Charleville: “Un pays très froid, ingrate, non sans beauté sauvage. Un pays de schiste, un pays de gris.”⁸ Living in these austere surroundings, and having fathered his first daughter, and moreover daily overworked with semi-juridical issues at the office, he welcomed the infrequent escape into a more agreeable social scene concerned with literary and cultural matters, mostly local, but, increasingly, in the awesome shadow of Rimbaud.



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Here he published his first poem in *La Grive*:⁹

Si j'ai mangé à vos rateliers, il le fallait—
Mais je venais m'abattre sur eux de très loin,
Ainsi que les pigeons qui ayant survolé le lac,
Tombent dans les cours et confondent le monde.

Il est d'autres festins qui sont fermés pour vous.
Il est un lait qu'on boit dans le secret des grottes
Tout près du ciel, le corps à l'aise:
Seul avec son âme confiante
Et le silence de l'univers,
Ou avec les petites filles mortes aux mains fines
Qui savent sourire:
Reines de la vie, cygnes du ciel.

This poem signed, “Eugène GUILLEVIC”, must have indeed “confounded” the readers of *La Grive* as they may well have asked: who is this strange bird fallen and croaking in our midst? The voice, harboring a distant, lofty and somewhat contemptuous tone, seemed new but also familiar in that it echoed Mallarmean elitism and the decadent aspirations of Symbolist poets. Longings for rare and sumptuous meals and libations alone in grottos or in the company of “smiling little dead girls” seemed to be motifs resurrected from a past era. The poem, however, also looks forward in that the modern reader recognizes other longings, closely related to Guillevic’s identity, such as the quest for solitude and silence in wanting to penetrate and embrace the universe. We hear in this early poem the voice of *Du silence*: “le total silence en ma vie”.¹⁰ Its timbre struck newness; its clarity was pleasing and its control surprising, the articulation balanced carefully and pleasingly between emotional retention and effusion, between structural simplicity and rhetorical baroque tendencies.

There are also signs in this first publication of a poet mature beyond his years and practice. We see his skill with versification in the subtle manipulation of parallel structures (“il est...il est”), in the use of alliteration combined with complex rhetorical structure (chiasmus): “filles

mortes aux mains fines” (fm/mf), and in the skilful interspersing of traditional verse form within a free verse sequence, such as the beautifully equilibrated last line (decasyllable): “Reines de la vie, cygnes du ciel”, where the parallelism is again reinforced by the use of alliteration and contrast.

In 1934 Guillevic publishes again in *La Grive*¹¹ two short poems simply titled “Poèmes” and signed “Eugène GUILLEVIC”:

I

L’azur me sourit — et dans l’azur
Je te salue toi que j’aime.
Tu es partout. Ta face
A les dimensions du monde.
Partout où je suis
Je t’embrasse dans toute la terre.

II

J’avais des oiseaux sur toutes mes branches.
Des gouttes d’eau et le soleil sur toutes mes feuilles.

Le vent qui descendait vers la vallée
Passait par moi.
C’était moi qui sonnais les cloches des villages
Et qui faisais frémir l’étang.
Mes doigts montaient dans les sapins:

Je sentais grandir la forêt et le mystère.

The first of these two short poems reveals, perhaps for the very first time, that familiar, colloquial mode of address which is so characteristic of Guillevic’s poetry. Also first expressed here is the motif of embracing, fusing oneself with the universe, a longing which is pervasive in some of his last titles such as *Du silence* and, especially in the sequence “Vieillir” in *Présent* (2004). Of note also is another early manifestation of young Guillevic’s dexterity in manipulating poetic rhetoric: the exquisite example here of a chiasmatic structure (“Tu es partout...partout où je

suis”), which creates a spatial omnipresence and bonds earth and sky, man and otherness, in a serene unity or correspondence. The azure here is a benevolent, smiling space, not the cold, dark and threatening Mallarmean void.

In reading this poem, one is also struck by its inherent ambiguity, designed to entice the curiosity of the reader: who is the “tu”? The sun, a loved woman, an all-encompassing deity? Perhaps all three? In some of his later poems, Guillevic exploits ambiguity or mystery, in order to engage the reader, but also as a technique to safeguard his expression, the integrity of his writing. I have argued, for example, that the title of the collection *Maintenant*, is not a temporal adverb but the present participle of *maintenir*, expressing on the part of the aging poet that desire to maintain, “to hold on to”, personal and writing freedom or autonomy, perhaps as a means of self-preservation in the face of diminishing functions and the necessity of reliance on others.¹² This ambiguity also manifests itself in some of the poems of the Resistance period, as well as in texts of the late 1950s, such as the poem “Elle” and the sonnet “C’est ma vie” (see below). In 1933, however, Guillevic is still a fervent and practicing Catholic believer. It seems more than likely then that the “tu” here is for the poet a clear affirmation of his belief in a universal and eternal presence, around which his life gravitates.

Awe and mystery are central motifs of the experience related in the second poem in which the poet evokes a childhood memory: the thrill and challenge of climbing trees. The poem is composed of three parts, separated by an integral and signifying white space. In the first part, the first two lines, the climber seems to have become the tree, grown branches and leaves. He has acquired as it were an arbor-essence which permits a closer interrelationship with nature: birds, sun, and rain.

The motif of metamorphosis, in the Ovidian sense, is resumed in the second part as the boy embodies the wind and, in this form, expands his space of action, descending the valley, ringing the village bells and rippling the pond. Then, the last verse depicts the climber hugging the tree as he ascends vertically to the top. The colon, at the end of the line followed by a blank space, marks and indicates the horizontal space that opens before him from his perched view.

The single line which constitutes the third part expresses, in a beautifully condensed form, his awe before the expanse of the forest, as he contemplates and is filled with a sense of “mystery” at the grandeur of creation. In later poetry, this feeling of an awesome presence accompanies and fills the poet whenever he relates his encounters with nature in an open space, as in cathedral evocation in the poem “Élégie de la Forêt Sainte-Croix”.

A dozen years later, after the War, Guillevic contributes again two poems to *La Grive* simply titled “Deux poèmes”.¹³

The first expresses an aborted passionate encounter, a desire which has been suppressed and remains “secret”.

Si l’orage avait gardé
Plus longtemps son pouvoir,
Le bois serait traversé
Des rumeurs que nous portons.

Mais le bois dort sur un secret
Et par ses multiples couches

Saura bien peu de nos deux corps.

Two lovers, caught in a storm, have taken refuge in the woods. The storm ends before they can fill the space with the sounds of their bodies, with love-making. “Nous nous regarderons comme font les orages,” writes Guillevic in the 1955 sonnet “Ecrire”,¹⁴ expressing the pent-up energy between two attracting young bodies, alone in a closed space. Here, too, he expresses a similar emotional tension in juxtaposing the external energy in the storm with the internal rumblings, “rumeurs” of the two individuals. With the storm over, the forest finds again its deep sleep silence. The hypothetical opening, “Si l’orage avait gardé...” followed by the “mais...” opening of the second stanza, just as in the first poem quoted above, sets up a contrasting discourse of thesis and antithesis, a dialectic which often gives form to Guillevic’s “ruminations”.

The second poem evokes another type of encounter, the camaraderie or fraternity of men harboring an ideal, “la fête”, the belief in a cause:

On venait de loin
Pour croire à la fête

Or ce n'était,
Après les landes, après les mares,

Après les pluies, après les nuits
Et l'eau étale sur bien des terres

Qu'un peu de feu éclairant des hommes
Qui ne parlaient plus.

Et cependant des jours s'ouvraient
Dans l'étendue.

The series of couplets, without rhyme, but with almost regular rhythmic patterns of eight and four syllables, evoke the, the clandestine meetings, in the night, of Resistants come separately from afar, but joined by a common cause. The spacing between the two line verse and the repetition of the iambic “après” at the beginning of each four syllable rhythmic segment give, on the page, a physical or visual representation of the spatial and temporal movement of these men. Likewise, their silence around a fire is marked by the onomatopoeic “p” in “peu”, “parlaient”, and “plus“. Their action must remain covert; there is danger in making noise, in speaking. One senses the tension between the retained emotions aroused by the future “fête”, cradled in the belief that days would be “opening up”, and the real present danger of talking in the silence of the night. Of course, just like later the word “Bonheur” in *Terre à bonheur*, here “fête” and “jours” are code words for the social ideal the communists hope to realize by means of their sacrifices in united action. Again, as in the previous poem, the discourse is structured as dialectic of thesis and antithesis, marked by the “or” of the second couplet and the “cependant” in the closing couplet.

Guillevic’s final contribution to *La Grive* is the sonnet “C’est ma vie”,¹⁵ which redefines, and “reconfirms” as it were, his adherence to or belief in a fundamental and enduring essence of being.

J'ai souvent cheminé par des sentiers brûlants.
Je jouissais du ciel, du soleil et des pierres,
Je touchais en passant une herbe ou la bruyère.
Je les regardais vivre et vivre était violent.

Et puis j'ai vu souvent voler le goëland
Sous le soleil constant et sur la mer entière
Et je ne savais plus d'où venait la lumière,
Tant la terre et la mer se fondaient dans le blanc.

Je te connais, soleil, et je te suis fidèle
Et peut-être sais-tu que je veux parler d'elle
Quand je t'évoque ici, quand je parle de toi.

Je vous ai confondus, elle et toi. C'est ma vie.
Et je vais avec vous, allant dans votre loi,
Et je veux que le temps jamais ne m'en dévie.

Guillevic is 49 in 1956. He has entered the season of maturity, that of “l’âge mûr”. Written at the beginning of the New Year, the sonnet expresses his “fidelity” to his way of living and to his rural origins in Brittany. In the two quatrains, he returns to the past, to his beginnings, using the traditional metaphor of life as a journey, “j’ai cheminé”. His being is defined again with the motifs that constitute the “terraqué” metaphor which titled his first major poetry collection, *Terraqué*, that fusion of land and sea and the natural elements that compose their surroundings: *ciel, soleil pierres, herbe, bruyère, goëland, lumière*. In the tercet, in the present tense, the poet rededicates himself to the mode of life of his beginnings. The motif of union of land and sea is extended to the sky through the use of the apostrophe (“Je te connais, soleil”), a characteristic rhetorical device in Guillevic, and the familiar *tutoiment*. “Confondus”, at the beginning of the second tercet, denotes a joining, or blending together, but also a mental confusion, not so much in the poet as that created by the poet, playfully and intentionally I think, in the reader as he attempts to resolve the rebus posed by the sudden intrusion of a female

figure, with the reference to “elle”. This pronoun refers to his “life”, surely, but also to “light” and, perhaps, also to a loved woman that guides his being like the sun, a kind of Beatrice?

This sonnet also exemplifies Guillevic’s dexterity in manipulating, with great ease, traditional versification. He makes poetic language seem colloquial — simple and easy — while exploiting, in a subtle way, various stylistic and rhetorical devices to express meaning and music. Such, for example, is the placing throughout the poem of words containing the letter “v”, especially in the alliteration sequences, as in the last line of the first quatrain or in the poem’s closing two lines. Of note is also his skill in underlining a theme by repeating a word from the first hemistich of the alexandrine line, at the beginning of the second hemistich

Je les regardais *vivre* et *vivre* était violent
Et je *vais* avec vous, *allant* dans votre voie;

and thus continuing as well a fluid rhythmic movement. Finally, we can admire the rhyme scheme in the tercets: the poet’s use of a traditional structure: a rhyming couplet followed by a *rime croisée*, thus joining musically the two tercets but also, at the same time, exploiting this arrangement to reinforce the major theme of unity, fusion, and continuity.

Guillevic’s poems in *La Grive* trace the poet’s evolution from obscurity, with his first publication in the early 1930s in the Ardennes region, to national prominence by the mid 1950s. In studying these poems as a group, we can note an admirable and marked continuity in theme and style. It becomes especially plain and clear that the poet’s modernistic tendencies rest on a foundation of traditional poetic practice which seems to be always a point of departure, and at times of return, for all his poetic efforts. These poems also demonstrate how a literary journal, however small and local, can give impetus to a literary career; and how, in turn, in a kind of osmosis, the writer having acquired a certain literary celebrity, confers on the journal a degree of importance and renown. The editors of *La Grive* are conscious of the role they played in launching Guillevic’s literary career. Now and then they note for their readers, the strides in renown made by the poet in Paris, noting his publications, and referring to his success as an ascension: “ascension de Guillevic”¹⁵ and “ascension

continue...de Guillevic”.¹⁶ In 1953, they write: “... à Guillevic, ce Breton jailli du sol de Carnac, qui a découvert la poésie entre les remparts de Rocroi et a publié ses premiers poems dans *La Grive*.”¹⁷ Finally, in 1955, they note: “Nous n’avons plus de nouvelles de Guillevic dont *La Grive* a publié le premier poème. Signalons cependant son dernier recueil qui a paru en 1954 à la N.R.F. sous le titre: *Trente et un sonnets*, avec une préface d’Aragon.”¹⁸ The tone is overtly congratulatory and there is a sense of pride expressed for the success of the young poet they had launched. In reciprocal appreciation, perhaps, Guillevic sends them the sonnet “C’est ma vie”.

Notes

¹ “Carnets 1923-1938”, in *L’Expérience Guillevic*, recueil fondé par Jean-Louis Giovannoni et Pierre Vilar. Paris: Deyrolle/Opales, 1994.

² Guillevic, *Vivre en poésie*, entretien avec Lucie Albertini et Alain Virondelet. Paris: Stock 1980; Pantin: *Le Temps des Cerises*, 2011.

³ Guillevic, *Proses ou Boire dans le secret des grottes*. Paris: Fischbacher, 2011.

⁴ Guillevic, *Lieux communs* suivi de *Van Gogh*, édition établie et présentée par Michael Brophy. Halifax: Éditions VVV, 2006.

⁵ Guillevic always responded with generosity whenever I requested a text for my journal, LittéRéalité:

<http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/litte/article/view/29369/26966>.

⁶ *La Grive*. Revue Ardennaise de Littérature et d’Art. Jean-Paul Vaillant, directeur-fondateur, 1925-1978. I have consulted the holdings at York University in Toronto.

⁷ *La Grive* 23 (janvier 1934): 37.

⁸ Guillevic, *Vivre en poésie*, op.cit.

⁹ *La Grive* 23(janvier 1934): 16.

¹⁰ Guillevic, *Du Silence/ On Silence*. Trans. Sergio Villani. Woodbridge (Ontario), Les Éditions Albion Press, 1995: 2. “Du silence” in *Possibles futures*, 163-194.

¹¹ *La Grive* 25 (juillet 1934): 27.

¹² Sergio Villani, “Guillevic: L’Audace du *Maintenant*,” in Michael Brophy et Bernard Fournier sld., *Guillevic Maintenant*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2011. 151-159.

¹³ *La Grive* 48 (janvier 1946): 4.

¹⁴ *La Grive* 89 (janvier 1956).

¹⁵ *La Grive* 53 (avril 1947): 36.

¹⁶ *La Grive* 60 (janvier 1949): 41.

¹⁷ *La Grive* 76 (janvier 1953): 37.

¹⁸ *La Grive* 87 (juillet 1955): 32.

Poème II (*La Grive*, janv. 1934)

