

Popular-Intimist Portraits: Guillevic and Song

Aaron Prevots

Across the ages, song has enlivened truths shared. A few brief words on Sappho will shed light, by way of introduction, on Guillevic's own artful incorporation of song-based forms. Sapphic verse offered wisdom via public performance, whether by groups of singer-dancers or monodic poets accompanying themselves on the lyre. Direct contact with the audience invited contextual interpretation of formulaic statements and of character impersonations. Accentuation patterns within the brief, metrically consistent stanzas cadenced the maxims and stories, adding layers of meaning to necessarily condensed structures. The author's possibly private thoughts were framed by discourse practices and ritual, by aesthetic criteria related to texts, music, and dance, ensuring that life's bittersweetness would emerge as both personal suffering and a collective certitude (Sappho 2009). Self-awareness could express itself as a "double consciousness" (Winkler), a desire to progress toward understanding as well as to only set down selected impressions and to experiment with subtexts and communicative modes. Sappho's 7th-6th century BCE framework for writing and reception has parallels in the 20th-21st centuries, especially when considered as a template that by no means disappeared as cultural standards of readability ebbed and flowed. Related types of double consciousness exist in Guillevic's recourse to *chanson*. Viewing several volumes through the critical lens of song will demonstrate how he is a popular-intimist poet, an everyman interested in tradition who nonetheless pursues a forward-looking ontological *cheminement*.

Numerous approaches to song were likely extant in his formative years: the all-encompassing vision of Hugo's *Les Chansons des rues et des bois* (Hugo), the symbolist leanings of Verlaine's "sanglots longs" (Verlaine 58), the satiric side of Paris's Chat Noir poets (Velter), the imaginative flights of Apollinaire's *Mal-Aimé* (Apollinaire 17-32). When he identifies texts as chansons, Guillevic pares them down to essentials, preferring compactness, couplets, and careful control of register to enhance the accessibility of each page or two. At the same time, these popular qualities convey his characteristic inner ache of connection sought with the elemental world, his interest in emotions emanating from the self as it seeks ties to all that surrounds it. Enveloped in structures from chansons traditionnelles, including distinctively brief verse, his popular-intimist portraits of world and self propose interconnectedness as a vital social aspiration. Within an ethics of ontological receptiveness, his embrace of *chanson* imparts, with concision and purposefulness, innermost aims and feelings as collective truths. The following analysis will address song as a specific set of text types and subtexts in *Terraqué*, *Exécutoire*, and *Sphère*, while also noting key metadiscursive reflections in *Art poétique* and *Le Chant*. Its approach will initially be more global than chronological, in order to better capture what makes him in these works a poet reluctant to play the literary innovator, an innocent aware of suffering, a simple man among others conscious of finitude as what unifies beings and things.

*

Art poétique (1989) makes plain that originality is not a must and that borrowings are perfectly normal. As with La Fontaine, to whom it is dedicated, adaptation of preexistent forms parallels the self's ongoing adjustment to sentience and to social norms. *Art poétique* implies that, whether one draws inspiration from antiquity or children's rhymes, certain literary practices have a timelessness that lends them value when the individual must "[a]pprendre à se connaître" ("Le Juge arbitre, l'hospitalier et le solitaire," La Fontaine XII, XXIX, 415-17). One should write for diverse social types and voices, as this familiarity forges a path toward grasping the richness of activity in our microcosm: "Car tout parle

dans l'univers; / Il n'est rien qui n'ait son langage" (XI, Épilogue, 343). Featuring a relaxed, accepting persona, *Art poétique* prioritizes self-knowledge by affirming that it is incrementally attainable if we attend to the language of beings and things and their welcome presence. Whereas in La Fontaine the world's creatures make tangible archetypal attitudes and behaviors, in Guillevic it is particularly words themselves that make the world more present. Both writers inscribe a sense of melody into their writing, but the latter's more modern context frees him to distill the spirit of *vers mêlés* into, for the most part, series of distichs (multiple paired lines with each pair followed by a space; not the two-line poems in *Exécutoire* 206-09). This strategy isolates the various meditations, progressively telling stories in miniature, with each line or couplet potentially allowing in a "dose d'ombre, / De refus" (180).

Several poems in *Art poétique* strike a keynote of Lafontainean luxuriance in being one among countless creatures and elements. It is as if all things approached the speaker and took part in acts of self-knowledge, in a process of mutual self-discovery:

Quand j'écris,
C'est comme si les choses,

Toutes, pas seulement
Celles dont j'écris,

Venaient vers moi
Et l'on dirait et je crois

Que c'est
Pour se connaître. (149)

Apropos of song, "Quand j'écris" has several remarkable qualities that hold true for much of *Art poétique*. Read together with the *chansons* of *Terraqué* and *Exécutoire*, it can be seen as a continuation of their couplet forms. It is as if "Quand j'écris" were potentially meant to be sung, even without the word "Chanson" present as a title to announce how to read or receive it. The consonance, assonance, and rhyme – "écrivis [...] si [...]"

écris [...] crois [...] c'est [...] connaître" – connect *quanta* (cf. *Accorder* 249-54) with *comptines* as well as full-fledged *chansons*. The patterns of sound recreate the speaker's gleaning of the real, the fascination experienced when words bring things closer. The ambiguity of the phrase "Pour se connaître," as a reference to self-knowledge on the part of any of the various participants in this exchange between world and self, places us within the realm of traditional song by emphasizing universality. As in another poem on how "Comme certaines musiques / Le poème fait chanter le silence" (177), brevity, diction, and imagery make ontological and everyday interpretations intersect. Either analytical frame – the literary-philosophical or the musical – has validity.

Such intersections of interpretive possibilities extend to the idea of things in the elemental world "[qui] s'imposent" rather than being chosen by the poet (239). On the one hand, we could appreciate the gnomic formulas of the following excerpt as representing a spiritual-religious desire for rootedness, a longing for the fullest possible attunement to human dwelling amid the whole of creation:

Être dans le monde.
Fragment, élément du monde.

Supérieur à rien,
Pas à quiconque, pas à la pluie qui tombe,

Se sentir égal
Et pareil au pissenlit, à la limace,

Inférieur à rien,
Ni au baobab, ni à l'horizon,

Vivre avec tout
Ce qui est en dehors et en dedans,

Tout ce qui est au monde,
Dans le monde. (315)

We could consider these many images to have been chosen by a lone speaker silently contemplating and gathering unto himself the presence of beings and things, of creatures great and small as well as the trees, the horizon, the rain. This reading would accentuate our appreciation of poetry's prophetic or hieratic side, of unity insistently transcribed, each mention of the word "monde" serving as a hymn-like formula that calls forth the real. On the other hand, adopting traditional song as a critical framework, we could say that the speaker is imitating the way music often appears to composers, namely as melodies that precede the establishment of a text and that initially transcend explanation. We could observe how the repetitions and extreme simplicity of many phrases – "élément du monde [...] la pluie qui tombe [...] au pissenlit, à la limace [...] en dehors et en dedans" – bring the text's invocations to the level of popular improvisation on a memorable melodic theme.

Two leaps back in time, one to the Middle Ages and one to the century of La Fontaine, will elucidate how these interpretations merge. The Swiss writer Charles-Albert Cingria, whose *modus operandi* is to measure the world's voluptuous intensity and who celebrates in his research on medieval music a fusion of sorts with the cosmos, is one of the few modern authors to remind us that music was long integral to the fabric of daily life. Corbellari and Joris describe Cingria's study of medieval music – for instance how the monk Notker le Bègue (ca. 840-912) developed Latin hymnal sequences – in terms of a continuum that music encapsulates, a connection between all that is visible within creation and the numinous intuitively inferred:

Plus qu'un "âge de foi", le Moyen Âge, pour Cingria, est d'abord une période où l'homme a connu, à travers l'art, la musique en particulier, une sorte d'équilibre miraculeux dans sa relation à l'univers, qu'il est par ailleurs loisible à chacun de retrouver [...]. (Corbellari 64)

Microcosm and macrocosm are in this view richly, inextricably fused. Music makes connections between world and self more seamless. Through art and music, individuals are empowered to celebrate immanence, as well as, according to Levitin, to simply be:

Only relatively recently in our own culture, five hundred years or so ago, did a distinction arise that cut society in two, forming separate classes of music performers and music listeners. Throughout most of the world and for most of human history, music making was as natural an activity as breathing and walking, and everyone participated. (Levitin 6)

To engage in the transcription of the real through music-related forms as Guillevic does in *Art poétique* underscores this idea of always participating at some level in the wonder of creation, including by way of received, preexistent structures. The collection's final poem, simplicity itself as regards image and register, contrasts and unity, speaks to this popular, accessible, joyously open-ended communion that his texts embody:

Tu ne seras pas la rose,
Elle ne sera pas toi,

Mais entre vous il y a
Ce qui vous est commun,

Que vous savez vivre
Et faire partager. (317)

“[T]oi [...] il y a [...] vivre [...] faire partager”: what in one sense is philosophical discourse on human dwelling filtered through modernistic minimalism, from another perspective is an adaptation of popular song's compact rhythms and sounds that highlights individual awe at the flower as a daily presence and as a sign of future promise.

Our second leap back in time, to the 17th century, reinforces this hypothesis that an array of distichs with uncomplicated diction can exemplify song. Building on Guillevic's likely admiration of La Fontaine's conversational style and reliance on rhyme, it is useful to explore parallels between *chansons populaires* of the same era and Guillevician couplets. In Chauveau's *Anthologie de la poésie française du*

XVII^e siècle, four of the five popular songs cited have paired, straightforward lines as well as an emphasis on repetition, whether of the musical theme or of parts of the text: “Ma belle, si tu voulais,” “Auprès de ma blonde,” “À la claire fontaine,” and “Dans les prisons de Nantes” (401-10). As obvious as it can seem that a traditional song’s text or melody should be short, repetitious, and memorable, such qualities correspond to *Art poétique*’s poems. Viewed in this light, Guillevic’s ties to traditional forms are all the more apparent, including as to implicit functions such as sharing a story or lesson, identifying situations as timeless, enacting wisdom or folly, and recreating on a fairly literal level the rhythms of everyday life.

Guillevic’s popular-intimist portraits can have a dark side, but one that also invites contemplation of types of *chanson*. In *Terraqué* (1945), *Exécutoire* (1947), and *Sphère* (1963), we see him progressing toward understanding but also haunted, slightly hesitant, uncertain where his thoughts will lead, frightened because he knows their ways all too well, as when in *Carnac* (1961) exploding powder and “[l]e fragile violon” are juxtaposed (157). Mostly, use of the label “Chanson,” or related words like “Ballade” or “Berceuse,” softens poems’ tone to some degree by universalizing the emotions or dilemmas described. One of *Terraqué*’s first texts adapts formulaic statements as might be found in “Ma belle, si tu voulais” or “Auprès de ma blonde” – “Dans le mitan du lit, / la rivière est profonde” (Chauveau 403); “Tous les oiseaux du monde / y viennent faire leur nid [au jardin de mon père]” (Chauveau 405) – as if to limit personalized utterances and to mark the passage of time:

Un, deux, trois —
J’ai tué un roi.

Tournez hirondelles —
Mes filles sont belles.

Un, deux, trois —
Il est déjà froid. (*Terraqué* 38)

Laconic in the extreme, yet fostering ripples of meaning by incorporating both the numbering patterns of a nursery rhyme and the stock imagery of village life, this poem provides momentary respite from the obsessions that quickly resurface: “Tu n’as tué personne encore — / Tu pourrais être sans remords” (39). When he notes in a subsequent poem how “La terre avait dit amen — / Quand on l’y mit dans du chêne” (62), he conveys a committed if slightly detached opinion regarding how aspects of the elemental world interact. Depiction of “les oisillons” (67), a further echo of “Auprès de ma blonde,” reframes what could be a standard metaphor of life in a garden by according these inhabitants of “l’air” and “[le] feuillage” (67) an intense will to survive and by asking what motivates their actions. Song forms interspersed in *Terraqué* serve as interludes, as a chance to divert attention away from trauma and alienation. Though it would be too easy to equate the term ‘song’ with sudden happiness, an initial pattern emerges in *Terraqué* of somewhat more innocence and appeasement on the speaker’s part when it is used, including in a “Ballade” whose six-syllable lines reference “Auprès de ma blonde” in their diction, syntax, and imagery while offering affective and ontological reassurance in the closing couplet:

Tous les ruisseaux du sol
Penchent vers sa demeure.

Tous les cheveux des plaines
Montent vers sa fenêtre.

Tous les oiseaux des bois
Sont beaux de son bonheur.

Et les choses de peu
Lui gardent souvenir. (120)

In *Exécutoire*, song forms coincide with suffering. The macabre and a curious tenderness intermingle, in postwar, postsymbolist laments that foreground a lucid social conscience. The universalizing and intentionally formulaic structures heighten the poems’ impact, fusing

darkness and light, blood-soaked vignettes and implied uplifting melodies. Adaptations of patterns associated with *chanson*, in this case familiar words used repetitively and rhythmically in lines of four to eight syllables, wrap each vignette in a spirit of group song, edging almost toward prayer by offering posthumous blessings for beings who seem still of this world. As suggested by the collection's title, the poet is putting into effect a reconciliation of sorts, one meant to be valid or binding for author and reader, world and self. One series (197-201) uses couplets to recreate fables where a problem is resolved or circumstances dramatically change. Droll contrasts include grim realities and breezy refrains, for example laughter as a motif in ways that create a singsong effect, a *mise en relief* of the poet's rising and falling voice as emblematic of his coming to terms with horror, of what one might call hopeful resignation in the face of the atrocities brought by fate:

Fini de rire,
La fille, à tout venant.

[...] Un qui passait
L'a vidée de son sang.

[...] A la fenêtre
Elle est morte en riant. (197-98)

Misère et misère,
Trop longtemps misère
A qui dit: J'espère. (199)

Amid images of “charrois” and “métal” in the next poems that imply the Shoah and its various means of destruction, this “Chansons” suite's *mise en abyme* of motifs of singing and whistling reinforces poetic speech's absolute necessity as an act of basic caring and empathy for fellow beings no matter their circumstances, all within the realm of the elemental as a means of staying balanced and retaining childlike wonder and innocence: “Le gros soleil couchant / Lui fait un œil d'enfant. // Mais lui reste à son banc / Et siffle encore un temps” (200).

An implied motif of whistling or singing to oneself continues in the series “Fractures” (223-40), which testifies about personal and social pain in a voice tinged with songs’ popular accents, including a hint of the burlesque: borrowings from song in order to astutely modulate somberness, to bear witness to the evils of war and the constraints it imposed. To the possible question, How can one still sing after Drancy, where Max Jacob died, come the poised if brokenhearted retorts, How could one not remain fraternally bonded, and How could this chain of events have even occurred? To critics’ potential inquiries about the place of the seemingly neutral refrain “Il y a des tourterelles” in the poem dedicated to the memory of Jacob (223), might come the reply: What more straightforward way could there be to portray the brutality and emptiness of communal loss than through the shell of a folksong, about birds as a “viande” at a familial butcher stall, “des tourterelles / Qui n’ont plus à saigner” (223)? To borrow terms from another poem of this era with Jacob as an addressee, “L’étoile,” “Fractures” oscillates between speech acts such as “veill[er]” and “trembl[er]” (*Accorder* 233), “supporte[r]” and “s’y refuse[r]” (*Exécutoire* 225-26). It seeks to relearn a grammar of living – “Je — tu — il — / Et que reste-t-il?” – amid the frustration and perhaps shame of having “des poings vengeurs” (231). At one point, Guillevic gives voice to such extremes in pentasyllabic song, at once declarative and exploratory, about the grisly, terrifying crimes committed by “les meneurs du jeu” (238). This enigmatic *piéd de nez* at the enemy evokes pain through diction, as well as numerous “p” sounds and insistence on the means of destruction via the refrain-like phrase “Rien qu’avec” (238). It concludes somewhat neutrally, with use of the third-person pronoun “[o]n” and the proverbial line “Souffre qui pourra” (238). Together, such choices introduce nuances of either ‘putting up’ with one’s own pain or ‘shutting out’ the gruesomeness of humans turned to dust: “On n’a pas prié, / On a travaillé. // Souffre qui pourra, / Les voilà broyés” (238). In sum, these are poems about song’s impossibility and necessity, lyricism’s rent lexical fabric in the postwar period, fissures within everyday poetic discourse.

Pages 89-99 of *Sphère* counterbalance this difficult facing down of historical realities and introduce further formal variety. By turns effusive and restrained, deeply felt and more whimsical, paying homage to

courageous “passants” (89) as well as the repose of an “orphéon” (90), they include several texts with fuller stanzas of three or four lines each. The first in this series, direct in its premise of time passing for the common people yet allusively open-ended in its treatment of this theme, could almost be a marching or drinking song. Its octosyllables and refrain regarding a “carrefour des trois brouillards” (89) reconstruct with remarkable efficiency cycles of life and death amid the constraints of village life and more dramatic unrest:

Ceux qui ne doutaient pas d’eux-mêmes
Au carrefour des trois nuages
Gardaient le nom de leur village
Et leurs chants et leurs anathèmes.

The less voluble “Berceuse pour adultes,” nonetheless evocative of a lifetime’s actions and situations, juxtaposes a grown-up’s awareness of good and bad, of things that energize and fatigue us, with the idea of reassurance given regularly to a child that all will be well in the end:

A coups d’escalier,
A coups d’orphéon,
A coups d’horizon,
Dors et fais tes rêves. (90)

This motif of talking to fellow adults or to oneself as if we were each still a “[p]etit enfant sage” (94) then plays out within a modern-day hymn to the passing of days, in a set of pentasyllabic *versets* not unlike those of Marot’s *Psaume XXXIII*:

Ni brûlant le ciel,
Ni tâtant la route,
Ni moquant la lande,
Tu ne partiras.

Ce n’est qu’en passant,
A travers tes jours,

C'est à travers toi
Que tu partiras. (94-95; cf. Marot 300-04)

As in the first poems of *Art poétique*, the lesson is that one must look within oneself, more than to a watchful God (Marot 303), to learn with each new page what one can be and to locate an “ouverture” even if “un rideau” appears (*Art poétique* 147-48). This text sets aside the topos of “murs,” be it a matter of breaking or of traversing them (94), and posits instead a path of earthbound grace and inquiry into the self. Another “Chanson” anticipates the volume *Le Chant* (1990) in that its playful structure tells of joyful bonds between world and self expressed through song, of the daily comfort of “[le] chant” to which we all have access (*Le Chant* 349-50):

Apporte au crépuscule
Quelques herbes d'ici.
Quand le soleil bascule
Dis-lui, dis-lui merci.

Tends-lui la renoncule
Et le brin de persil.
Les choses minuscules
Il les connaît aussi. (*Sphère* 96)

Making use of song forms facilitates this optimism and legitimates such exchange. It encourages us, as in this poem addressed to the reader as well as to the scriptural self, to attempt intimist portraits of our own with the merest of elements – “[q]uelques herbes d'ici,” “le soleil,” “[l]es choses minuscules” – in order to be thankful for the outer world and for finitude. It defines a gradual process, a method for self-knowledge involving empathy, exchange, and fundamentals like light, shade, and color. Rhyme and everyday words underscore refreshing innocence while minimizing the risk of sermonizing.

*

Embedded in the long poem *Le Chant* are remarks on the duration of song and silence – their ongoing power as part of the world’s being and their strength to quietly last beyond our perception of them – that will help conclude this study while recalling Sappho’s historical significance. Sappho remains widely respected to this day for many reasons, including because she could make a few well chosen words affect listeners, who sensed their thematic unity amid semantic layers regardless of whether Sappho or acolytes spoke them. The word “sweetbitter,” moreover, is apparently Sappho’s own coinage: the four syllables of the Greek “glukupikron,” as applied within a paratactic stanza, exemplify her gift for inventivity and concision (Sappho 2002, xv). Guillevic likewise has lasting power as a poet for the people and a Poet for the ages, as one attuned to world, self, and other and able to subsume grand statements into wisps of lines with which we can all identify. In texts marked as *chansons* and in longer poetic suites, he shows that song is also Song: both the world’s poetic speech that enables human dwelling, and traditional *chanson* texts in their ability to let utterances linger, with slight modulations, across sociohistorical contexts. As an observer, he notes in *Le Chant* that “le chant continue / Comme dure la forêt” (342). As a workman attending to words, perhaps also a good doctor caring for their health, he finds cures for their ills, “[i]l reprend un chant / qui se fatiguait” (354). This awareness of words’ duration simultaneously brings forth subtle melody, harmony, and rhythms that, *mine de rien*, when the poet appears to be singing for himself, “ouvre[nt] pour les autres / L’espace qu’ils désirent” (381). Beyond the compelling problematics of how silence and song fit into literary, ontological or phenomenological frameworks, there is thus an accessible epistemology Guillevic suggests to us through song: “se mêler / Au chant universel” (395) while hardly noticing one is doing so, with a view to retaining and expanding the multidimensionality (393) that warms individual and collective souls: “Réchauffons-nous, / Vivons ensemble, / Et méditons” (*Euclidiennes* 157).

Works Cited

Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Alcools*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1998.

- Chauveau, Jean-Pierre, éd. *Anthologie de la poésie française du XVII^e siècle*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 2009.
- Corbellari, Alain, et Pierre-Marie Joris, éd. *Florides helvètes de Charles-Albert Cingria*. Gollion: Infolio, 2011.
- Guillevic. *Accorder: poèmes 1933-1966*. Éd. Lucie Albertini-Guillevic. Paris: Gallimard, 2013.
- _____. *Art poétique*, précédé de *Paroi* et suivi de *Le Chant*. Préface Serge Gaubert. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 2001.
- _____. *Du domaine*, suivi de *Euclidiennes*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 2011.
- _____. *Sphère*, suivi de *Carnac*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1989.
- _____. *Terraqué*, suivi de *Exécutoire*. Préface Jacques Borel. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1991.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Chansons des rues et des bois*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1982.
- La Fontaine, Jean de. *Fables*. Préface Jean-Charles Darmon. Éd. Jean-Charles Darmon et Sabine Gruffat. Paris: LGF, 2002.
- Levitin, Daniel J. *This Is Your Brain on Music*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Marot, Clément. *L'Adolescence clémentine, L'Enfer, Déploration de Florimond Robertet, Quatorze Psaumes*. Éd. Frank Lestringant. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 2006.
- Sappho. *Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Ed. Susan Warden. Intro. Pamela Gordon. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.
- _____. *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*. Trans. and ed. Aaron Poochigian. Preface Carol Ann Duffy. New York: Penguin, 2009.
- Velter, André, éd. *Les Poètes du Chat Noir*. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1996.
- Verlaine, Paul. *Fêtes galantes, Romances sans paroles, précédé de Poèmes saturniens*. Éd. Jacques Borel. Paris: Poésie/Gallimard, 1973.
- Winkler, J. J. "Double Consciousness in Sappho's Lyrics." *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*. Ed. Laura K. McClure. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. 39-75.