

“Rond” and a Poetics of Roundness, within and beyond *Sphère*

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The title *Sphère* (1963) makes plain Guillevic’s desire to contemplate his surroundings, situate himself, take stock. It suggests measurement and harmony, movement and relationships, immediate perception and the complementarity of earth and sky. We sense the author’s wish to feel centered in time and space and duly note his perceptions, as well as to artisanally remove rough edges from his lines. Skipping forward several decades, we might note implicit parallels to the active verbs chosen as titles for his posthumous volumes *Relier* (2007), *Accorder* (2013), and *Ouvrir* (2017). Ties to the notion of communion are particularly strong. Nonetheless, *Sphère* expresses emotional highs and lows. Its value as a poetry collection lies partly in its journey toward wholeness, in the movement it expresses toward plenitude and in the poise and empathy, imperfections and sense of togetherness it emphasizes along the way. One profound if playful stopping point on this path is the poem “Rond,” which features dialogue regarding the metaphorical, metaphysical roundness of apples. The following analysis will study “Rond” as an emblematic poem where roundness is process and product, aim and experience. Taking “Rond” as its starting point, it will explore joyous communion with the real, related tensions in *Sphère*, and thematic and structural shifts in Guillevic’s oeuvre that this poem reflects. It will consider how Guillevic’s interest in roundness highlights his own sensuous immersion in creation, the intersubjective exchange necessary for this immersion, and an overarching, slowly developing curiosity about longer poetic forms as a means of self-expression.

“Rond,” at once meditative and good-natured, drops us in medias res

into friendly dialogue. Amicably argumentative, it settles an imagined dispute on roundness—at first, a seemingly insignificant topic, perhaps one raised while passing time. What starts out as a fairly innocuous rhetorical question develops into a nugget of wisdom, a near-proverbial assertion. Hexasyllabic for the most part, “Rond” succeeds by rhythmically embedding philosophical truths within the framework of familiar exchange. Its tone and diction provide a bridge between the everyday and a poetic statement of intent, between boisterous, animated talk and an underlying message about certain forms and themes of *Sphère*:

— Qu’est-ce qu’il y a donc
De plus rond que la pomme?

— Si lorsque tu dis: rond,
Vraiment c’est rond que tu veux dire,
Mais la boule à jouer
Est plus ronde que la pomme.

Mais si, quand tu dis: rond,
C’est plein que tu veux dire,
Plein de rondeur
Et rond de plénitude,

Alors il n’y a rien
De plus rond que la pomme. (45)

The poem’s effervescent exchange establishes a mood within *Sphère* and underscores this vignette’s moral about the merits of each *poème-pomme*. The opening gambit “Qu’est-ce qu’il y a [de]” is a perfect setup for a bon mot, for the eventual display of profound, thoughtful esprit. The adverbs “donc” and “Alors,” the shorter opening and closing stanzas, and the conventional verbal form “il y a” enrich this framework, while an array of sounds and repetitions mirror the apple’s fullness, sensuousness, and power to impact the palate. From the reliance on plosives to the unabashed insistence semantically on the words “plus,” “plein,” “plénitude,” and “pomme,” there is much that reinforces the apple’s particular “rondeur.” The vowel “i” adds tension throughout, while the

line “Vraiment c’est rond que tu veux dire” knowingly—conspiratorially—sets up the initial assertion about “la boule à jouer” and its accompanying counter-truth.

Moreover, we are undisputably made to understand that the process of gathering and savoring sweetness is what counts, not perfect unity. The poem’s contrasting elements convey the importance of immersing ourselves in matter, welcoming light and warmth, awakening to realizations regarding fullness, depth, immediacy, and imperfection. “Rond” makes clear that roundness is approximate, relative, relational. The speaker takes pleasure in presenting his opinion, and does so in accessible terms that make sound central to its truths, as with the lively opposition between “plein” and “rien,” or the visual and vocalic chiasma “plein [...] rondeur / [...] rond de plénitude.” Etymologically, one could say much about the use of the word “rond,” repeated so often that it can signal, variously, the curve and flow of a poem’s surfaces, the mellowness of its sounds, the complementarity of slight faults to which it refers, and the frank good humor with which roundness is discussed. If we cannot exclude the hypothesis that “Rond” also refers to what people say after one too many drinks, such a reference would in fact reinforce the idea of savoring life’s sweetness in all its forms. The key phrase “Plein de rondeur / Et rond de plénitude” speaks volumes about the sustenance that the things of this world provide us, the delight they themselves likely take in their very materiality, and the joy to be had in experiencing through the senses their tangible and palpable as well as ontological qualities. As we look beyond the poem’s casual—yet carefully constructed—dialogic presentation, to deeper levels of dialogue including contact with the earth and how in bearing fruit it achieves fullness, we enter the realm of sacred ritual. By thrilling as the speaker of “Rond” does to ubiquitous possibilities for communion, we learn to live poetically, according to the ritual that each of us “se sera créé, inventé” (VP 160). Though our reason makes us use rhetoric to do so, “Rond” shows how such ritual also involves emotion and the senses, contact with matter and the development of convictions that surpass surface truths.

A similar *modus operandi* takes shape as *Sphère* progresses, via reference to materiality, communion, alliances, expansiveness, approximate completeness, unrepentant smiles. Hints of a shift in attitude occur, of

reconciliation with the past that enables a caressing gaze in the present (cf. Vray 257; *C* 197). Guillevic's poetic song 'sings' more relative to prior volumes, becomes more often open-hearted and continuous (cf. Fournier, *Cri* 13). Spatial and temporal limits can revive and replenish him, especially as, while writing *Sphère* and *Carnac* contemporaneously, he more fully embraces *le dehors* as a space of invigorating warmth and duration (cf. Pierrot 119-34). The speaker can seem to situate himself more inside a metaphorical sphere: full of its lived and accumulated moments of time (*S* 128), less on the outside looking in, more apt to find his way, as in *Paroi* (1970), toward a harmonizing of opposites, an easing of constraints. Gathering, building, and calm focus increasingly characterize his writing, as do the curves and voluptuousness of quanta themselves (*EU*, 1967: "Sphère," 176; "Parabole," 184). The tone subtly shifts toward a quickening and lightening of the senses, an ability to express duration as part of a dynamic forward movement even in stillness, of a three-dimensionality coinciding with that of the self as center. Regarding poetic form, "Rond" and its statement on being "Plein de rondeur / Et rond de plénitude" provide a window on lyricism. Guillevic does not necessarily want to sound expansively emotional, yet at the same time continually expands—à la Follain, via condensations and brevity—the emotional scope and ontological depth of poetic song. We see him continuing to develop his "nouvelle rhétorique" of repose amid broken form, of observations on world and self, disaster and its more hopeful horizons, reconfigured into quintessentially vital, contemplative lines (Fournier, "Avant textes" 23-24).

A few examples will reinforce both the idea of roundness as a critical notion and the seminal nature of *Sphère* as a poetry collection emblematic of Guillevic's evolving poetics. From the outset, via the several pages of "Chemin" (9-16), we learn to value space as a framework for time, much as the apple might tell of the processes that contributed to its genesis. Witnessing the flow of water in a stream suggests the cumulative presence of "[l]a douceur" (9). "[B]uissons" are not just visual landmarks, but entities joined that pass time as a group (9). Light and sound reverberate, be it in the emotions expressed by "la lune" toward the "les puits" or in the cries emanating from "[l]es prés" (9). The images in and structures of these first quanta exemplify ties between space and time, as well as the speaker's steadfast frankness in recognizing "cris" (9; cf. 16) as well as "[l]a douceur." Phenomena and forces

in the outer world are set into play. Notes on space immerse us in the fullness of time and of human experience. Within and among quanta, isolated phenomena are parts of a greater whole. Imagery reinforces their visual quality, underscores how the mind and gaze perceive unity in complementarity. To observe, touch, interact with, and empathize with things figures into an overall ‘measuring’ (10) of the cosmos. Materiality is savored, but so too is the “longue mémoire” that gives shape to it, the “souvenirs des corps qui s’aimèrent” that lingers in the space between “la lune et les buissons” (11). Beings as well as things bring out the ‘glory’ (13) of inhabiting space and experiencing its relationship to time. As with the apple, glory and fullness cause a tender kind of mutual exchange and ‘trembling,’ but also lighthearted laughter and smiles “[a]u milieu des gens du pays” (14). As the poem closes, the ‘cries’ of men and fields seem to denote fullness rather than just fear, loving and not just being ‘cold’ (16), gratefulness for the moon that keeps watch and the headway made along life’s path. Guillevic incorporates these many emotions and sensations in order to show the roundness and fullness of a life well lived. However halting the lyricism, it sets forth an embrace of time as well as space, matter as well as underlying patterns and processes. We can speak of a poetics of roundness in relation to the exchange and activity observed and the ways in which they make us more joyfully full, ‘round,’ complete. His poetics’ modernity lies in how it weds antiquity’s interest in the cosmos and in its many aspects’ cyclical return (cf. Fetzer 151) to condensed, tonally varied, ever-evolving verse, and to late 20th-century perspectives on intersubjective exchange with the cosmos as a source of renewed stability.

Such ambitions are not always easily achieved. Guillevic also succeeds in drily showing the effort involved in striving to occupy a center and luxuriate in the resulting roundness. It can take some doing to be together as a set of allied forces, and to accept that only relationally can a center hold (cf. *EU* 176-77). “De ma mort” (*S* 17-28) takes a sometimes humorous look at this interplay in relation to outside forces, including how they can have a will of their own. Another of the handful of longer poems in *Sphère*, it initially makes reference to the elements indirectly, as that which will ‘close’ him (17). The wry, familiar, matter-of-fact tone of its opening lines mirrors that of “Rond.” As in mid-century American poets such as Auden, Roethke, Jarrell, and Lowell, its plain speech implies that being “Plein de rondeur / Et rond de plénitude” (45)

involves knowing well one's own frailties while also having one's sights set, periscope-like, on other, more profound and invisible obstacles:

Ce n'est pas moi
Qui fermerai,

Pas moi qui crierai
Pour la fermeture.

C'est qu'on me fermera. (17)

This quantum corresponds to Guillevic's sense that laughter keeps us aware of opposing forces, "harmonisé[s] à la nature" (Lardoux 25). As he pokes fun at his doom, the refrain "pas moi" adds a conversational note of guilelessness, helplessness, surrender. Space, again, connects to duration, in the comic sense of closing like a pub or restaurant. The poem's next parts continue in this vein of being attuned to nature's opposites, by allowing vignettes of various kinds to commingle, from haiku-like lines where sensations of gratefulness or regret drift by, to more talkative ones where plenitude comes from the gestures of dialogue:

Je m'étais endormi
Dans les destins de l'herbe.

Je n'en avais plus. (18)

*

Je t'écoute, prunier.

Dis-moi ce que tu sais
Du terme qui déjà
Vient se figer en toi. (20)

*

Il faudrait accepter

Pas la mort,
Mais la mienne. (20)

Much of “De ma mort” implies that to be round with plenitude is to always keep trying (cf. 22). As with accepting one’s own death, it means openness renewed each day as obstacles and reminders recur, from wind and rain to the death of others (19). As in *Paroi*, there is a general urge to come to terms with duration itself, to learn to be more receptive and malleable, “Car difficile / Est la leçon” (25). Guillevic focuses in these quanta not so much on death itself as on a shift necessary in his affective outlook, a transition to fuller awareness. The sustained interest in an abstract topic, similarly, anticipates his eventual facility with poetic suites, particularly concerning the outer world’s *épaisseur* (cf. 135) as a guiding idea. It is possible that, for the moment, he remains too aware of himself, and must, as in the mystics, continue brushing away the weight of the self to become more alive as a subject. This is what the last few quanta convey: that attending to his own presence has unexpectedly diminished that of other beings and things, lessened contact with “une vie qui vivait” (28), made it difficult to genuinely establish a sensual, ‘epic’ alliance with the real.

A handful of other poems in *Sphère* also speak to roundness as an aspect of Guillevician poetics. For the most part, they address the depth of the outer world’s energy, the value of immersion in its surge, and the need for alliances to be able to maximize its beneficial effects. In “Arbre l’hiver” (37), for instance, it is the second half of the maxim “Plein de rondeur / Et rond de plénitude” that draws attention. As passing commentary from the section “Choses” (32-57), “Arbre l’hiver” depicts things’ hidden potential, via correlations between the tree and “un oiseau figé debout” (37). Amid stillness, we directly experience the tree’s materiality, its presence as bare wood “ici, maintenant, debout.” We are given to understand that movement could occur should it, metaphorically, raise its head and change position. Inner potential comes particularly to the fore in “Rocher” (50), for example in the couplet “Besoin que nous soyons / Complices dans la veille.” Such assertions are common fare to the reader familiar with Guillevic, but especially direct and

impactful as a reflection of how his poetics develop over the decades (cf. Vray; Havir). Like other statements on being a center, it flags a core dynamic of intimacy in mutuality. As in the couplet “J’ai besoin d’être dur / Et durable avec toi,” the speaker partners with space and time, and communicates through concision his firm intent. The role of time in his poetics, and of lessons learned along his path, emerges with acuity when applied to the human realm in the isolated closing stanza of “Élégie” (100-105):

J’ai appris qu’une morte
Soustraite, évanouie,
Peut devenir soleil. (105)

Roundness, often playfully expressed, is here profoundly apropos, from death’s transposition into being a part of elemental cycles, to its helpful weightlessness, to its depiction as a sun. As in a prior couplet, “Ensemble nous avons / Fait s’épaissir le soir” (105), there is a fusion with the outer world, a complicity on several levels, that eases burdens and brings plenitude. To borrow a previous metaphor, moreover, the speaker achieves clarity after considerable effort by finding the apple-like sweetness within himself that corresponds to a loved one’s companionship: “C’est dans mes joies / Que je t’ai trouvée” (105). The communion ubiquitous in Guillevic sparkles thanks to this roundness, fullness, and sweetness periodically foregrounded in *Sphère*.

By way of conclusion, two poems merit discussion concerning the fullness of time as a component of our personal and collective human journey: “La flamme” (51-52) and “En cause” (111-39). Each one in its unique way communicates fundamental ideas about inhabiting time intersubjectively—what Yves Bonnefoy would call possessing ‘ripeness’—that instruct us on Guillevician poetics and resemble themes outlined in Bonnefoy’s 1978 essay “*Readiness, Ripeness: Hamlet, Lear*” (*Théâtre* 69-86). Bonnefoy argues for ripeness, exemplified by Lear, as a twofold form of spiritual progress: “retrouv[er] le chemin d’autrui, et [...] s’oublier désormais dans la plénitude de cet échange” (82). In Bonnefoy’s view, awareness of self and gestures toward the Other make us more ethical, and make beings and things more present to us. As regards poetry, this raised consciousness sparks exploration of truths untainted by established systems of thought and heightens our sense

of responsibility toward fellow beings (85). Written as a preface to two of Shakespeare's famous tragedies, the essay invokes societal hope as an aim, the reparation of "un désastre" (86). Guillevic, for his part, addresses the ethical side of ripeness modestly, cautiously, with less recourse to a grand design, preferring to point now and again to song as a way to, for example, "savoir qui nous sommes" (S 138). As noted above, "Rond" embeds not dissimilar notions of plenitude in lively casual talk. It implies rather than asserts a need for ripeness, by discussing "la pomme" and its status among things round and full. Along with Guillevic's interest in poetic song and in the outer world's materiality, it is invaluable to consider further his pursuit of what Bonnefoy calls "le chemin d'autrui."

Much of the present analysis sheds light on self-acceptance and ways in which to better harmonize with space and time. In *Sphère*, Guillevic shows himself to be partway along this path and making significant strides. He emphasizes simplicity, poetic song, and refinement of an everyday gaze, perhaps his own humble variation on Bonnefoy's poetic theme of escape from conceptual thought and accession to "la pensée de la Présence" (*Théâtre* 83). Above all, the roundness to which *Sphère* points reflects Bonnefidian ripeness in terms of continually fine-tuning an ever-present fascination with the Other, often expressed as immersion in the outer world's mystery, radiance, and cyclical unfolding. *Sphère* particularly involves entering into fuller alliances, even rapturous exchange. It is this rapture, often framed as a desire to welcome and even coincide with time's passing, that sets Guillevic apart. If he aims to affect others in *Sphère*, it is primarily by exemplifying a potential for communion and thereby bringing joy. We watch expectantly as he gathers time, reorients himself in space, finds new relationships that, one could argue, make his world more full and round. The broad scope of certain sequences mirrors this desire for always improved relationships, including between world and self.

Despite the risk to the critic of mixing metaphors, "La flamme" highlights how the world could be called pleasingly round and full because of the abundant activity within it, inscribed in intimacy and mutuality, relation and process. In a register different from Bonnefoy's, but with semantic threads that can recall Presence, it portrays interaction with a flame that is everywhere,

enriching the gaze and accentuating the materiality of objects of all kinds, as well as of the human body in its own unique carnal presence, its folds and “lieux plus cachés” (51). The poem’s closing stanzas indicate a resemblance to the qualities of the apple, in terms of the flame creating a fleshly place for itself amid the obscurities and imperfections of time, pursuing its work obstinately, generously, happily, with near-spiritual verve:

Ailleurs, tout comme d’autres,
Elle cherche sa place,
Elle cherche son chant,
Dans la chair du silence,

Brûle du temps qui vient,
Refuse le sommeil,
Fait son travail de flamme,
Nous sauve et veut sourire. (51-52)

A central objective in Guillevic in the 1960s is to function like the flame: “Brûle[r] du temps qui vient,” “Fai[re] son travail de flamme,” to situate the self and find a way of singing while offering an example to others along the way.

“En cause” (111-39) heads in this direction, notably by taking the time to explore time and space, as Guillevic avidly takes to doing in longer, book-length poems beginning with *Carnac* (1961). Relative to Bonnefoy’s essay, it reminds us that what we think is the fullness of exchange with the Other always invites reappraisal, reevaluation, a fresh perspective. One approach to “En cause” is to see it as a companion piece to “Rond” and “Durée” (72). As an elegiac look at a relationship, “En cause” portrays that relationship as a deep moment in time, a tender mutual inhabiting of space. By writing about the relationship at length, Guillevic makes it what he calls in “Durée” an “instant [qui] s’allonge”:

Courte encore est l’heure.

Mais l’instant s’allonge

Qui a profondeur. (72)

Our days together may be short, but take on new dimensions when we adjust our perception and see their depth. This idea can be applied to “En cause,” where openness to the Other proves to be a path toward such depths, almost an exchange of vows—now hopeful, now fragile—with time itself. As in *Sphère*’s other sections, elemental ties to the earth remind us of its exemplary companionship, its sensual fullness, its promising “battement[s]” (55). As in “Rond,” imperfections and an evolving relationship to space and time—as well as to self and Other—are the true measures of depth and plenitude. This dynamic is reflected in the wording and familiar register of the opening phrase, “Où être bien?” (111), and in the closing verb, “ten[ir]” (139). Despite how much we savor instants of time in Guillevic, “En cause” shows how these instants must gather together to form a whole greater than the sum of each part, a “sphère / Pleine de tous les temps” (128). It shows attitudes we might have when we face time, whether of patience, stubbornness, or earthly grace (130, 137), but also points to space and time as the Other that guides our days, as far more the source of roundness and song than our own mutability. Its contrasting quanta can be likened to a prayer book such as the Psalms in their generous variations on togetherness and on the yearning to authentically explore each day a shared cosmos, “la moindre flamme” (129).

In sum, viewing *Sphère* in relation to a poetics of roundness—and, potentially, ripeness—adds to our understanding of Guillevic’s personal trajectory and poetic aims. Where would we be without his earthiness? His humor? His quest for fuller contact with world and self? His desire to feel immersed in duration as the Other’s companion, within the outer world seen as a unifying sphere? In relation to semantic fields such as materiality and communion, notions of roundness and fullness add further three-dimensionality to critical appraisal of Guillevic, while underscoring a progression toward more developed formal patterns and reinforcing time, space, and song as central themes. The spatiotemporally oriented poems of the early to mid 1960s—*Sphère*, *Carnac*, *Euclidiennes*—reveal affinities with Cézanne, for example regarding the latter’s sensuous portraiture, natural subjects, warmth of color, focused *tableaux*, and depth of field. Within French poetry, *Sphère*’s laconic, quantic *poèmes-pommes* recall somewhat the

earthiness and immersion in the everyday of, for instance, Follain and Ponge, while developing and distilling an ontology not unlike Bonnefoy's. One takeaway from *Sphère* in these respects is Guillevic's conversational tone. Sensing that the author is more at ease in his later decades, the reader is only too glad to accompany him given how roundness and plenitude feature increasingly in his collections, generously and genuinely informing our own vision, our contact with "la terre" (122-23, 133-38).

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