

Claudél, Guillevic and the City

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One doesn't usually associate Claudel and Guillevic, the former best known as a Catholic poet and dramatist; the other as a poet and left-wing social activist. Yet the two writers share a common poetic tradition especially that of 19th century poetry, and they share as well a religious formation and frame of reference. If Claudel converted to Catholicism after a religious experience at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Christmas Eve of 1896, Guillevic, a devoted Catholic, abandoned his faith in the mid 1930s in order to pursue the social ideals of Marxism. The young Guillevic admired Claudel. It is said that, in the early 1920s, he sent Claudel a poem inspired by the Virgin Mary. This poem remains unknown and there is no evidence that Claudel even received it. More tangible literary correspondence is evident in the works of the two writers; for example, their use of religious language and symbolism; their use of the image of the cathedral of the wall, and most of all their literary exploitation of the image of the city. Claudel writes two versions of the play *La Ville* (1893 and 1901).¹ Guillevic writes a collection of poems which he titles *Ville* in 1969.² Claudel represents the city as an ethical and moral space; Guillevic, on the other hand, conceives his city as a social structure. For Claudel, the city is shaped by the energies and drive of strong and powerful individuals; for Guillevic, the city is a space defined by collective action and values. Two divergent images shaped one by a religious faith, the other by a political ideology.

It is said that Claudel's image of the city destroyed by insurrection and fire was inspired by the events of the Commune. This influence is quite plausible since during the gestation period of the play there were still visible signs of the destruction and burning of Paris during the Commune. For many it was still a vivid memory. It seems to me, however, that his representation in

La Ville, especially in the second version, corresponds more to Biblical images such as that of Sodom and Gomorra in the *Old Testament*, cities that had lost their faith in God and were steeped in moral corruption. During the closing years of the 19th century, in the spiritual zeal he experienced following his conversion, Claudel read avidly the Bible, as well as texts of Church luminaries, such as St. Augustine's *City of God*.

The city he portrays is designated mostly in negative terms, its character marked by moral turpitude. In the first version of the play, the reference to the city are almost curses "Cette rambleur inique" (309)⁴, "Ce lieu maudit" (346), "ce lieu détestable" (351). As the wrath of God destroys by fire and brimstone the biblical sinful cities, Claudel's city is razed by fire by the vengeance of an angered individual. "Je t'ai détruite" (372), cries Avare, moved by a spirit of anarchism. Ivors, the soon to be king, praises this individual zeal and accomplishment "Quand tous les homes se mettraient ensemble, il n'en ont pas plus de droits, contre un seul" (372).

After his victory, Avare refuses to remain in the city "Je ne veux plus de communauté" (379), states Avare, as he departs alone from the city. Other individual efforts take up the task of rebuilding the city "Faisons une race d'hommes" (373) cries Graillard (to the victorious army). And Pasmé echoes the call for reconstruction "Formons une ville et qu'elle existe comme une fête" (383). It is under the leadership of the new and just king, Ivors, that this ideal city will rise from the ashes.

The second version of the play also emphasizes the moral turpitude of the city, a corruption that justifies its destruction. The city is referenced as "ce lieu de mensonge", "cette habitation de corruption" (422), and "ce lieu méprisable" (472). In his disgust of this state of affairs, Avare describes it as a kind of pigsty.

Ça bouge, ça vit! Ces longues lignes de lumière
En long et large indiquent les canaux où coule la matière humaine. Ça
parle! Ils grouillent ensemble, âmes et membres,
Confondants leurs haleines et leurs excréments.
O Ville! O Ville! (421)

This disgust explains his victorious cry, after the city burns “comme une vieille paillasse” (421):

“Je t’ai détruite, Cité”

The urban space is restored and purified by fire. “L’eau et l’ardeur du ciel ont nettoyé les latrines et les théâtres” (471). Like in the ending of the first version, the task of rebuilding and restoring civil order is given to the new king, Ivors.

Pour nous, nous établissant dans la ville, nous
Constituerons les lois” (490).

With this ending, Claudel suggests that the city as a socio-political structure is maintained orderly by laws enacted by the strength and vision of a morally sensitive and idealistic individual.

Guillevic writes that the city is like a word that he doesn’t know.⁵ And yet, during several years, and in many places during his travels, he meditated, “ruminated” the idea of the city. The result was *Ville*, one of his major collection of poems. He also relates that the city had been for a long time an “obsession” and that in writing *Ville* he experienced a kind of catharsis, a sense of “deliverance”. This seems to contradict what he states much later in the 1990-91 poem “*En ville*”; namely that he writes always to “possess”, but what he has retained in this particular poem is only the “silence” of the city at night: “c’est comme si je le mangeais.”⁵

Writing on *Ville* some years ago,⁶ I noted, in particular, that in this volume of poems, as in earlier ones, to some degree, in *Carnac* (1961) for example, Guillevic is invigorated by his social activism. After all, published in 1969, *Ville* could be considered a by-product and, perhaps, even a reflection of the social unrest of May 68. The major stylistic aspect of this poetic meditation is Guillevic’s use of the city as a trope, indeed as an exercise in writing. The image of the city is elaborated as an extended metaphor, as a figure with anthropomorphic qualities: it has a skeletal form, sinews and blood flowing in

sinusoid arteries. It is a living organism. This metaphor gives unity to the sequence of poems which, individually, could stand alone as integral poetic pieces. This sequential composition, many forming one, is essentially the structural newness of this volume, a composition which Guillevic later adopts in several other publications, (such as in the volume of his “quanta” sequences.)

A great poem never stops generating meaning and new associations. Such is Guillevic’s *Ville*. Some time ago, I came across what is, perhaps, the first commentary of the poem: a short review written by René Lacôte in the left-wing journal *Les Lettres françaises*.⁷ Lacôte notes the abundant vegetation, mostly a variety of trees, in Guillevic’s urban landscape. This green matter is evident in Guillevic and no surprise for his reader. However, I was especially struck by the tension Lacôte identifies between the city and the outlying open fields, “campagne”, and also between the city and the people “qui sentent en eux des dimensions qu’elle n’a pas.” This idea of an individual human presence as a different entity and reality, even antagonistic to the city, which denotes essentially a collectivity, intrigued me and brought me to read again *Ville* and even to reconsider as a whole Guillevic’s writings after 1960. If there is in *Ville* this tension or antagonisms, then Guillevic reiterates here that notion central to left wing ideology of collective values and interests at odds with individual ones. The book, then, is not simply an esthetic exercise in poetic writing or a necessity to free himself from an “obsession”, or a self-appropriation of the city by the “enfant de la côte bretonne”, as designated by Lacôte; rather, it is a reaffirmation of a political credo that underlies and motivates his social activism.

Indeed, what is remarkable in Guillevic’s writing post-1960 is the quasi-absence of individual human beings. If one peruses the volume *Relier*, for example, that includes texts from the late 30’s to the late 90’s, one encounters the familiar self-ruminating voice of the poet sometimes tender, sometimes humorous, sometimes ironic, sometimes angry, addressing in everyday language, stones and birds, flowers and trees,” brother oak tree” (780), musical instruments, insects and heavenly bodies etc. However, Guillevic’s poetic space is starkly desolate, devoid of human presence, of otherness or of seeking the Other. There is, of course, the occasional reference

to a human figure as a type, never as an individual. In the poem *L'hôpital*,⁸ for example, we find reference to vague human forms such as “le voisin” and “l’infirmière”, and to groups such as “médecins”, “visiteurs”, and the indefinite “beaucoup”, their *presence* seen as a part of the general letargic atmosphere of “lenteur” which reigns in the hospital.

In *Ville* individuals are also absent. The inhabitants are only represented as a collectivity, joining together in order to redress common injustices as in the evocation of a protest march along the avenues of Paris.

Ils sont ensemble. Ensemble, ils vont,
Savent pourquoi. C’est par exemple
De la Bastille à la Nation.
Milliers, longtemps. Largeur du ciel.

Ils chantent, crient, se fraternisent.
Ils ont, d’espoir ou de colère,
A crier lourd, à dire haut.

Parfois silence,
Longue montée.

Car les morts du métro Charonne
Ne peuvent pas se délayer.
Ont irrigué la ville
De leur meilleur.

La foule est veuve,
La ville est respect. (*Ville*, 114)

The repetition of “ensemble” puts emphasis on the collective action of the inhabitants, not only to redress inequities but also to bear witness to the martyrs of social injustices, such as the victims of the massacre at Métro Charonne.⁹

One image, the city; two divergent visions. In the 1940's, Claudel writes odes in praise of individual agents of social change, to builders of cities and nations, namely Petain and De Gaulle. In 1968, Guillevic marches together with other writers, students and workers to condemn inequalities, but also to demonstrate strength and compassion in solidarity. One, Claudel exemplifies civil an moral rectitude in the figure of powerful individuals;the other, Guillevic, advocates for social justice through collective solidarity and action. For one the city is essentially a moral space,erected and sustained by faith; for the other it is fundamentally a social structure cemented by solidarity.

Notes

¹ Claudel, Paul. *La Ville*.

² Guillevic. *Ville*.

³The page references are to the Pléiade edition of the Claudel's plays, vol.1, 1969.

⁴ “mais la ville est comme un mot/ que je ne connais pas”. *Relier* (Gallimard , 2007): 501.

⁵ *Relier*, 501,502.

⁶ « Autour de *Ville*: poésie urbaine, poésie cosmopolite.» *Guillevic: la passion du monde*, sld. Jacques Lardoux, Angers: Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 2003., 313-321

⁷ René Lacôte, “Chronique de poeesie.” *Les Lettres françaises* 1280 (29 avril, 1969): 10.

⁸ *Relier*, 417.

⁹ Paris massacre (17 October 1961) during the Algerian war, ordered by police préfet Maurice Papon.