

**“Les embruns de la mer”:
Frailty and Strength in Last Poems by Guillevic and Reverdy**

Aaron Prevots

What wisdom if any does age bring to contemporary French poets? Are artistic refinements noticeable, for instance greater clarity, simplicity or truth? If so, does the reader notice parallels between their poems and the restrained, sometimes decentered lyricism of today (Cressan)? Answers to these questions vary, including as society evolves and can attract interest (*Ville*; Deguy). Regarding Guillevic, they are generally straightforward. Even when his works from the 1960s onward feature unusual tensions, they are conversational, uncluttered, unburdened by elaborate rhetoric as they unfold, whether as collections or “livre-poème[s]” (*Présent* 205n3).

This appraisal reflects longstanding critical perspectives and centennial colloquia (Brophy; Montier; Pierrot), including as to shifts noticeable since the 1940s (Bertelé in Giovannoni). Interview volumes share Guillevic’s personal history, clarifying for example how, following retirement from *l’Inspection générale de l’Économie nationale* in 1967, as well as departure from the *Parti communiste français* in 1980, he enjoyed emphasizing direct and intimate communion with the real, while also feeling increasingly at ease with himself as the decades passed (Lardoux; Lejeune; Raymond; Vircondelet). At various points in his lifetime, he shows a penchant for lighter verse and a range of tones, from lilting song to an “[e]xaltation de la vie” (“Chant d’un mourant,” *Accorder* 17, 4-21 March 1933). Since his passing, poems and notebooks published illuminate aims and affinities (*Accorder*; *Ouvrir*; *Présent*; *Relier*; *Écrits intimes*). Moreover, the casual reader could pick up *Art poétique* (1989) as an overview volume and grasp his acute yet accessible vision. The following analysis sheds light on artistic evolution by exploring frailty and strength in poems written late in life by Guillevic and by Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960). It examines poetic vision as a means of looking within and beyond the self, and

thus explores both poetic dwelling and writing as a craft.

It is important to first consider the relevance of Reverdy. Comparisons with him are fruitful because he struggles with personal and sociopolitical dilemmas similar to those present in Guillevic; writes passionately about art's role in giving us purpose as human beings; shows verve in experimenting with poetic structure; looks to the real and to language in order to express and continually define the self; and can be considered outside surrealist contexts as a searcher quite like Guillevic—emotional, earthbound, truth seeking, life loving, somewhat minimalist, establishing contact with his surroundings as best as he can. Reverdy is especially germane as a point of comparison because *Sable mouvant*, completed in 1959 and ultimately published on its own as a chapbook in 1966 alongside an illustration by Picasso, is his last work and represents a “bilan d'une vie d'homme et de poète” (Hubert, *OCII* 1579-81). There is an almost humorous side to considering Guillevic and Reverdy in tandem, in that Guillevic takes stock of himself at all times, and thus makes attempts at direct parallels as to a “bilan” perhaps critically less precise. Nonetheless, two specific objects of study invite comparison with *Sable mouvant*: “Ciels du quotidien” (*Accorder* 283-89, 1996), a series of dated poems from 1995-96 presented in Lucie Guillevic-Albertini's words as a single “pièce de la demeure Guillevic” (293), and the five final poems labeled 1997 (*Présent* 195-99) that he was in fact too weak to write down himself (15).

The title and last lines of *Sable mouvant* are a useful starting point for a comparison with “Ciels du quotidien” and 1997. Aspects of life and death are creatively imparted, for instance by the image of shifting sand as a metaphor for poetry and for the real as a foundation on which to stand, an emblem of forces in the outer world with which to develop a relationship. Whereas Guillevic describes poems as a “bulletin de victoire,” a creative act that keeps “le néant” at bay (*Présent* 205n1), *Sable mouvant*'s closing lines evoke the world's dynamic energy as a purifying force but also as a disturbing reminder of personal instability, even bitterness and trouble:

je prie le ciel
Que nul ne me regarde
Si ce n'est au travers d'un verre d'illusion
Retenant seulement
sur l'écran glacé d'un horizon qui boude

ce fin profil de fer amer
si délicatement délavé
par l'eau qui coule
les larmes de rosée
les gouttes de soleil
les embruns de la mer (*OCII* 1414)

Here we have an initial answer to questions about form and function, perhaps even a moral lesson. If Reverdy suffered during his lifetime, and isolated himself from society by retreating in 1926 to Solesmes (Caws xxi), then the renewed creative élan he experienced shortly before passing away did not suddenly bring reassurance as to feeling more comfortable in his own skin. Rather, it lent urgency and immediacy to the verse itself. These lines feature his inclination to depict an outer world so personified as to become equal parts companion and menace. They exemplify how emotions seem to swirl and rise inside him when projected onto elemental backdrops, as well as to break free and disperse like “embruns.” Perhaps more traditional than Guillevic, Reverdy delights in sound textures and sets of metrical patterns—the consonance of [R] and [l] sounds the mouth pronounces in opposite ways and the lines of four, five, six, or eight syllables—that underscore how his relationship with his surroundings at once challenges and energizes him. There is a pervasive sense that the speaker needs to hide inside the “illusion” the poem creates. The sea spray depicted in the last line might normally suggest lightness, but words such as “écran” and “embrun,” “amer” and “la mer” echo against each other to invoke all that weighs on him, in a poem about feeling adrift as birth recedes and death approaches:

Je suis sorti du port
Par un étroit passage
Et je rentre à la mort
Démuni de bagage (1407)

Reverdy’s sardonic view of his diminishing vigor—“ce fin profil de fer amer / si délicatement délavé”—contrasts with Guillevic’s relative strength. Guillevic likes to immerse us in philosophical dialogue, with himself or a being or thing in the outer world as interlocutor. The dynamic of establishing via

poetic language that the real exists is less prioritized. Rather, Guillevic looks to the real to confirm aspects of existence, for example a specific relational fact that a quantum establishes, and thus often to find reassurance. The poem “Autrefois, / Quand j’étais gamin” (*Quotidiennes* 63, 5 May 1995) bears mention in this respect, and points to later texts as standout “bulletin[s] de victoire”:

Autrefois,
Quand j’étais gamin
Je me sentais étranger au monde,
C’était
Comme si je n’en étais pas —

Et je me suis appliqué à m’incorporer à ce tout.

[...]

Maintenant
Je n’ai plus d’effort à faire
Pour sentir pleinement le monde
Seconde après seconde.

Il est là, je suis en lui,
Je suis à lui.
En lui je me plais.

The comparison with Reverdy shows striking differences. Poetic space at this point in Guillevic’s life is less a construct than an embodiment of contact with the outer world. The register is familiar, yet also bridges onto sexual as well as religious ecstasy. Images are few. Where Reverdy turns to poetry to enter again an elemental fray as death approaches, Guillevic makes each quantum he writes a meditation on a given moment. His habit of dating poems reinforces a movement toward incorporation and fullness, toward spatiotemporal union achieved gradually with time. His desire to express love of self and other imbues his poems with warmth, even when he addresses uncertainty, deception, or relational plenitude that has diminished.

“Ciels quotidiens” and the 1997 poems foreground the elemental world’s presence, as well as differences in tone stylistically when it is depicted. The second 1997 poem, which is especially compact, depicts the sea in far different terms than *Sable mouvant*. Whereas Reverdy navigates in longer, more elaborate episodic accounts the soul’s dramas as it seeks out “une réalité absolue” (*Les épaves du ciel*, OCI 1281), Guillevic asserts a certain strength as well as humility. He uses quanta as tightly bundled units of energy to emphasize, with a nod to physics, forces in the world with which to make a pact of sorts, so that human and elemental energies become aligned and complementary. A mix of devotion to the sea, interest in its capabilities, fear of its power, and stoic forbearance characterizes the following text:

Regarde la mer
Mais ne lui demande rien.

Tout ce que l’on a d’elle
Doit lui être arraché.

Sois-lui reconnaissant
De ne pas t’attaquer. (*Présent* 196, 30 January 1997)

Similarities and differences with Reverdy include tone, style, and structure, for instance how each writer finds ways to make a poem breathe so that it rings true and reflects thought born “aux plus intimes lieux de la conscience” (*Les épaves du ciel*, OCI 1281). Guillevic’s train of thought is measured, intense, resembling a proverb, psalm, meditative reflection, or short prayer, perhaps even a koan that takes for granted a close interpersonal relationship with the sea and its tremendous force. Certainly we must not forget that the author spoke rather than wrote this poem (*Présent* 15). Still, there are striking resemblances to the above-mentioned “Chant d’un mourant.” If we were to change the punctuation of the following lines from “Chant d’un mourant,” three of the four would fit surprisingly well with the 1997 text, as regards determination despite solitude, awareness of vast spaces, a concern for feeling centered, and poetic vision that is urgent yet restrained:

Tout seul — environné de la terre étalée

Sans appui — centre d'un monde immense
Où les yeux fouillent —
À peine un homme... (*Accorder* 16, 4-21 March 1933)

In terms of artistic refinements, one conclusion we could draw along with Guillevic-Albertini is that Guillevic's distinctive voice emerged quite early through his inner gaze, attunement to present moments, and "constant qui-vive" whereby he readied himself as if daily for deep dives into what he called his "espèce de mer intérieure" (*Accorder* 293-95).

Guillevic's ongoing urge to commune with the real makes his relationship with the sea quite different than that of *Sable mouvant*. Reverdy's view of the sea anchors him in the real, yet recalls as well his own relationship with life—perhaps equally poetry—as often a "sinistre labyrinthe / Plein de broussailles et d'épines" (*Sable mouvant*, OCII 1407). The wisdom of age might remind him of an essential frailty, an "amour insensé, excessif" that alters and exhausts him (*Cette émotion appelée poésie*, OCII 1291). *Sable mouvant* shows him true to his voice, obsessed with life's haunting inner secrets whose enigmas cannot quite be known, with poetry as more glowing "aspiration" ("Notes sur la poésie," 1942, 1077) than means to any satisfying end. The poetic equation, as it were, is more weighted toward revealing what is hidden, preciously personal, or "indicible" (*Cette émotion appelée poésie*, OCII 1287, 1291) than toward treading paths to joy. Having found relatively early, like Guillevic, his particular way of expressing emotions that we all share (1287), his strength lies in keeping alive his poetic voice even as death approaches, tapping into his own "labyrinthe[s]" (*Sable mouvant*, OCII 1407; *Accorder* 294) and into a universal—albeit more imagistic—flow. Taking a cue from Guillevic-Albertini, we could note in the 1997 poem Guillevic's self-awareness and humor (*Présent* 15-16; cf. Lardoux). To be glad the sea does not attack when you dive into its metaphorical waters as a seeker of truth and vigor is a playful notion, especially given how weak Guillevic was at the time.

"Ciels du quotidien," by its very title, likewise brings out the importance of spatiotemporal relationships with the outer world and of strength shaped by recognizing human frailty. It compares well with *Sable mouvant*'s opening lines. The ten quanta of "Ciels du quotidien" have a universal quality, honed by their brevity, directness, and references to the outer world as an abode. Initial parallels between the two poems' first lines suggest shared

preoccupations at life's far threshold, concerns about how difficult it can be to feel at home within the real. At the same time, the respective tensions, tone, and images resemble those in countless other poems by each author. Guillevic laments a lack of access in "la pleine nuit" to the sky as an "espèce de plafond," a pervasive sense of absence that feels personally diminishing (283), perhaps humorously yet also menacingly:

Ce qui dans la pleine nuit
Te manque
Ce n'est pas que la lumière,

Mais cette espèce de plafond
Qui dans le jour forme le ciel.

[...]

Te voici fourmi
Sans fourmilière,

Égaré comme dans le néant.

Guillevic and Reverdy seem almost to be channeling each other's concerns. The one is "[é]garé," a "fourmi / Sans fourmilière" (283); the other is "perdu," a "Cheval [...] Après la cavalcade" (1407). Night and lostness in "Ciels du quotidien" are not so different from the desert, woods, and indeterminacy of the various images that open *Sable mouvant*:

Cheval perdu dans l'air
Après la cavalcade
Mirages du désert
Oasis ou cascade

[...]

D'un regard clair et sec
J'observe la dislocation de la parade

La débâcle
La débandade
des troupeaux fauves dans les bois

The rhymes, alliterations, and sound textures— “cavalcade,” “cascade,” “parade,” “débandade,” “bois”—make tenacity, fading activity, and disorientation intermingle. “Ciels du quotidien” achieves similar effects, for instance through the words “nuit” and “néant” that resonate together, the carefully modulated pace with which lines appear grouped together or alone, and the indirect object pronoun “Te” that makes the speaker a definite if embattled presence. As in Reverdy, there are curious tensions between the profound and the everyday, the elements and human failings, which we feel through the poems’ titles and the indications of dramas unfolding. The shared message is one of unending struggle and search.

Like “communion,” another central keyword to apply as a critic is focus. A Reverdyan trademark is the ability to embrace as if at once through unexpected groupings of images vast swathes of the real. In colloquial terms, we could say he seems to lack focus. This differs from the Guillevician attention to more literal apprenticeship, to uncovering “une nouvelle ouverture sur la vie, en ne cessant pas d’apprendre à vivre aussi bien que le fait l’enfant” (*Présent* 206). Whereas Guillevic intently seeks innocence and fresh initiation, Reverdy weds the ache for poetry to constantly renewed flow and highly rhythmic cadences, within texts that reflect a continual surge of conflicting impulses. Contrasts between the psychological and the overtly spiritual in the two authors correspond perhaps to generational differences, insofar as each one writes from a vantage point influenced by the era in which he came of age. Expansiveness and ingenuity may have ebbed and flowed as literary priorities in the roughly twenty years that separate the two authors’ *venue à l’écriture*. Guillevic speaks of his own “romantisme dompté” (*Écrits* 100). Temperament surely plays a role too, for example Reverdy’s melancholy and individualism (Caws xiv, xxi). One could also point to cultural and class differences: Reverdy as a southerner with sufficient financial means to retreat from Paris to Solesmes, and Guillevic as a northerner who adapted culturally and linguistically during his Alsatian adolescence, then as a civil servant with a kind of dual identity, private-poetic and public-republican (cf. *Accorder* 294). In sum, the intent, focused gaze Guillevic brings to writing as a space in which

to explore intersubjective relationships becomes all the more noticeable with passing years.

This focus is particularly apparent in Guillevic's two final poems from before his death on 19 March—texts dated 17 and 23 February 1997 (*Présent* 198, 199). In reducing description to essentials and avoiding resolution, they set forth a full, patient, far-reaching relationship with poetic horizons. The reader must contemplate with care potential meanings. Perhaps even more so than Reverdyan images, Guillevician rhetorical structures and cadences invite keen attention. We attune ourselves less to the unending flow of the real as it makes itself felt in human consciousness, and more to perspectives on everyday as well as ontological situations and dilemmas, as if contemplating the interactions of meditative thought—rather than of the human psyche or the unconscious—with the cosmos. There is emotion, but it is contained and redirected into reflective statements. Guillevic-Albertini calls this process of exploring poetic instants “délivre[r] les possibles de l'être” (14). The penultimate poem has extreme focus and a generous sense of these “possibles de l'être,” thanks to mostly tetrasyllabic verse, a question posed, and a premise in the opening distichs that is simplicity itself:

J'ai vu l'oiseau
Qui m'enchantait

Tout en sifflant
Autour de moi.

The speaker asks what kind of bird it was, explains he would not really know, and asserts, through the play on words “s'enchantait [...] chansons” and the lilting triplets and rhymes of “s'enchantait [...] revenait,” that his musical ‘passages’ made the bird want to ‘pass by’ and ‘pass into song’:

Il s'enchantait
De mes chansons

Et revenait
Me les chanter.

These tightly focused lines convey mutuality and reciprocity. Even as the subtext is the speaker's readiness for death, he delights in dialogue with and participation in the rhythms of nature, in an absolute and unfailing presence to life in the here and now (cf. *Quotidiennes* 63). In *Sable mouvant*, the speaker likewise expresses joy and wonder, seeking out poetic treasures of light "[c]omme une abeille d'or" (1411), but there is cold, danger, dysfunction, imprisonment, death having taken "presque toute la place dans la page" (1409). The final stanza suggests ideas similar to those of the 1997 poem, for example "Ce qu'il faut pour pleurer / Ce qu'il faut pour sourire" (1413), but also a kind of helpless abandonment to destiny, a willingness to all but disappear while watched "au travers d'un verre d'illusion" (1414). Poetry brings forth not so much melodic, conversational song as body and soul worn down by contact with the elements, "les gouttes de soleil / les embruns de la mer" (1414).

The poem that closes *Présent*, conversely, indicates growth and strength. Dialogue with the world continues—and the world appears to listen. Potential solitude cedes to sensuous immersion in nature's cycles and a desire to continually discover and engage:

Si vous aviez goûté
Au petit fruit

Qui pend aux branches
De l'arbre devant vous,

Qu'auriez-vous découvert?

Et maintenant,
Qu'en diriez-vous?

The speaker feels abundantly active and alive, present to himself and the beings and things that encompass him. There is wisdom and love as in the following stanza by Reverdy, but of a different sort. Reverdy proves less philosophically and ontologically amorous. He implies that he feels poetically and psychologically muddled, "[e]mbrouillé" (1412):

Et le chanteur d'amour

Embrouillé dans les feuilles
Roucoule pour l'oreille sourde qui l'accueille
La chanson d'un cœur d'or
Plus lourde que du plomb

These metaphors for poetry tell a tale like Guillevic's. They evoke traditions regarding life and love, the human and natural worlds, thought and writing. They imply an interlocutor's presence. However, the speaker depicts disengagement from the human and elemental worlds, where his heaviness of heart sets him apart no matter how true his feelings might be. Each of Guillevic's last five poems likewise mentions processes of flowering and growth in people and in nature, but with a subdued array of emotions and calm acceptance of what must be, as in the following haiku-like text from 31 January 1997:

On n'a jamais vu
Un champ de blé
Vaincre l'orage. (197)

In sum, Guillevic's possibly greater strength relative to Reverdy is his embrace of fragility. Moreover, this poem's remarks are as proverbial as they are humorous, implying not just life and death, but his frequent modesty and affability.

What can we glean by way of conclusion from the other nine quanta of "Ciels du quotidien"? Ultimately, in the case of Guillevic as well as Reverdy, stylistic refinements we might hope to find likely took place decades previously. It is difficult to discern innovative twists or turns, other than as to how death's approach resonates. Perhaps noteworthy is the aforementioned notion of "livre-poème[s]" (*Présent* 205n3) as it applies to these writers and their lives. Each of them reprises the poetic search at length, rather than appear to devote great effort to perfecting any one brief text. Similarly, as regards themes and imagery, overlap in the two poets' works alerts us to timeless concerns about self and other, about poetic vision as a means to make the world our home. Indeed, "Ciels du quotidien" mentions sentiments that closely match those of *Sable mouvant*: "Tu es étranger" (*Accorder* 284); "Et pourtant je persévère" (285); "je vis maintenant / Ce qui sera la fin / De mon rayonnement"

(286). We see writers as individuals who must keep going in spite of it all. However, Guillevic remains far more optimistic as he keeps trying, doing his level best to ask the right questions and find food for thought. One strong marker of this optimism and audacity is his use of the subject pronoun “Tu” and fondness for direct address: “Crois-tu / Être le bienvenu[?]” (283); “Laisse-moi tranquille, ciel, / Ce matin!” (284). The tone leans toward familiarity, pragmatism, groundedness, common sense: “Ce n’est quand même pas moi / Qui fais ce matin / Trembler le ciel / Enfin devenu ciel” (288). Conversational, tongue-in-cheek irreverence of this sort does not feature in Reverdy’s tonal repertoire, perhaps all to the better as it makes Reverdy’s style uniquely his. We should probably leave the last word in this comparison to Guillevic, not least to answer the trailing question posed at the start as to whether there are parallels between these works and lyricism today. Regardless of individual opinions on lyricism we might have as critics, in Guillevic there is undoubted acknowledgment of the self’s role as a voice with which to reckon, including in terms of the turmoil and struggle with limits that characterize Reverdy:

Va savoir:
Tout va peut-être brûler.
Moi aussi. (289, 6 November 1996)

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