

## *L'Homme qui se ferme: The 'OPEN' and 'CLOSED'* Dialectic in Guillevic

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The poem *L'Homme qui se ferme* first appeared in a small edition<sup>1</sup> in 1949 and that same year was included as the penultimate text in *Gagner*.<sup>2</sup> It is dedicated to Jean Marcenac, poet, participant in the Resistance and intellectual Marxist. *L'Homme qui se ferme* is very personal as it reveals, like no other text of this period, the poet's mental and emotional turmoil, as well as his ethical and social turpitude in this post-war period and at his mid-point lifespan. The title of the poem is not "l'homme fermé", shuttered, closed in, but "qui se ferme", a reflexive verb in the present tense, indicating, not a static state, but an intermittent, progressive and willful action. The poem transcribes this mental and emotional churning as a character vacillation, a tendency to either clam-up, shut himself in from the outside world and others, or the opposing desire to open up, engaging in the social sphere. The self-analysis, a ruminating trait in Guillevic, is punctuated with philosophical and existential questionings, such as

Qu'est-ce que c'est:  
Etre sur terre?

or

Si vraiment elle s'arrête  
Cette boule.

as he also wonders about the reception and efficacy of his poetic voice and social message:

Reste à savoir ce qu'on en fait  
De ce qu'il dit.

This dualistic, an almost schizophrenic attitude, is also reflected in the poet's changing versification and artistic association with contemporary painters. The short, abrupt rhythms of the free verse as in the one, two, three-line sequences in *L'homme qui se ferme*, give way, -- as the poet opens up and becomes more militant politically, -- to more lyrical flowing verse structures in *Terre à bonheur* and to rigid versification and fixed forms such as the sonnets of the 1950s. The poet adopts traditional forms of versification to accompany and support the reconstruction period of the Republic, and then reverts to free verse in the 1960s. Paradoxically, at the same time as he expounds the virtues of the alexandrine and the sonnet, he remains partisan of modernistic painting and collaborates with several abstract painters, especially those who display socialist and communist leanings.

This ambivalent attitude finds a graphic illustration in the cover of *L'homme qui se ferme* by the Marxist painter Edouard Pignon.



Pignon sketches a window with two shutters ajar, uncertain as to whether closing or opening. Two staves with entwined serpents cross each of the shutters diagonally, one on the inside, the other on the outside, suggesting

danger in either space or, perhaps, as the serpent on the rod of Asclepius, a healing prospect.

Since its publication, *L'homme qui se ferme* has received scant critical attention. It is not mentioned at all by Pierre Daix and Jean Tortel.<sup>3</sup> In fact, strangely, in these two commentaries, there is little reference to *Gagner*. Jean Pierrot is the first to note the importance of this poem in 1984, stating that Guillevic portrays here “un autre soi-même”, torn between his old anguish and fears and the desire to free himself from these obsessions, “peur de l’espace et celle de la claustration.”<sup>4</sup> However, In his 1991 thesis on Guillevic, Gavin Bowd, identifies a difference in “tone” in this series of “discontinuous micro-texts”, suggesting through negatives, questions, formal, and linguistic oppositions “an openness to an uncertain world.”<sup>5</sup> There is indeed formal discontinuity here but it figures forth the very nature of his existential rumination, halting, hesitating, fearful and uncertain. And there is a unified image of an emotional and mental state created through the discontinuity. As for the “openness”, Guillevic himself seems to consider this cloistering tendency as a past anxiety which he has been able to transcend. He attributes the “openness” which he enjoys to the relationship he has with Colomba Voronca, as he reveals in the dedication he writes in the copy of *L'Homme qui se ferme* he offers her:<sup>6</sup>

Colomba, la bionée,  
Ce fut ton regard.

L'HOMME QUI SE FERMAIT,

L'homme que tu as fait s'ouvrir,

L'homme qui, maintenant, est digère de vivre,

qui vit, responsable et heureux,

il t'obéit et n'en finira pas de lire:

mon amour, mon amour, ma Bitza,

9

This same “openness” he praises in the dedication of the copy he sends to the poet Charles Dobzynski who also participated in the Resistance and wrote for several Marxist publications:<sup>7</sup>

L'HOMME QUI SE FERME,  
ce n'est pas toi, Charles Dobzynski,  
poète, mon camarade, dont les  
vers comme le regard chantent  
la joie de l'ouverture sur le  
bonheur  
et que je salue ici, pour  
prendre date,  
Guillevic  
10 avril 1950.

Of course in 1950, Guillevic writes this homage in the elation of his forthcoming *Terre à bonheur*. Dejected, he will re-enter a shuttered phase in 1956, following the occupation of Hungary by the Soviet Union.

The Guillevic reader is familiar with the various motifs and rhetorical devices (negatives, questions, oppositions (ouvre/ferme, fermés/ouverts, remonte/descend, blancs/noir), repetitions, etc.) he exploits in this poem to characterize the man's inner turmoil, his malaise in whatever location or circumstance. What is striking here, however, is especially the use of imagery to give a visual and concrete dimension to the emotional and mental state. Right from the opening, the image of a messy household defines the disorderly state of the shuttered/shuttering Man:

Ce n'est pas un ménage bien tenu,  
L'homme qui se ferme.

There is possibly here an allusion to Claudel's fifth Great ode *La Maison fermée*, where Claudel argues that one's being, the poet's language, the Church/cathedral, and the Universe must be "closed" in order to contain and sustain a spiritual progression. Guillevic, in contrast, will argue that a house, cathedral and poetry must be without walls in order to achieve communion and a movement towards a temporal future, "la voix du présent allant vers l'avenir."<sup>8</sup> He doesn't negate however, his opposing tendency to close-up, to "dig" deep into the self in order to reach a center of light and peace.

The image of the mouth also defines the shuttered/shuttering Man, a mouth swallowing everything outside. Strangely, this man also resides in a bigger mouth, so that he is also being swallowed, suggesting a materialistic struggle for survival. The shuttered/shuttering Man is also designated as a sucker, "suçoir", a parasite plant that feeds itself on another plant. Both images have negative connotations and suggest a contested and transient living space.

Recurring in the poem, is the use of Euclidian geometry to characterize the constant mental ruminations of the shuttered/shuttering Man:

Il calcule.  
Il a inventé bien des façons  
De calculer.

Il remonte et descend  
Le long de ses calculs.

Toujours il se retrouve  
Au même endroit de la spirale.

These mental acrobatics, "escalades", lead nowhere. Other geometric terms (plat, rond, ligne droite, centre, cercle) complement this vocabulary to suggest a sterile activity. The rationality and practicality of Euclidian geometry is used to describe a reasoning which is irrational and even destructive. Guillevic has already used this imagery to reveal the absurdity of Nazi ideology and the horror of its concentration camps:

Et ruminant toujours  
De nous ensorceler dans leurs géométries,

Ou les lignes sur tous les plans  
S'en vont buter sur le plus rien,  
Ne se rencontrent qu'à la mort.

Et n'évacuent qu'aux verticales  
Des crématoires.<sup>9</sup>

The “camps” are also a closed and enclosing space.

No doubt Guillevic fought for and aspired to create an “open” social environment, devoid of restricting walls. Thus Lucie Albertini-Guillevic aptly named *Ouvrir* the third posthumous Guillevic collection. Quoting the verse “Combat pour l'espace ouvert” from *Paroi*, she writes: “un combat mené au jour le jour par celui qui engage totalement sa vie pour qu'advienne l'oeuvre qui le tenaille sans réserve et qui n'aboutira que lorsque s'ouvriront en lui et l'espace du dehors et l'espace du dedans.”<sup>10</sup> True, but one must also recognize that opposing tendency in him to seek and create a closed space, away from others, where to cultivate whoever is intimate and where, at the innermost abode of his being, he can experience that silence that brings peace. That desire to create an enclosed space of simplicity and silence evokes a kind of monastic vocation. Appropriately, Brother Bernard-Joseph Samain, has seen in Guillevic the quest for what he calls a “moine intérieur” and he has used his poetry to animate the spiritual retreats at his Cistercian monastery in Orval, Belgium.<sup>11</sup> *Du silence*, published in 1994, marks the realization of this poetic and spiritual quest:

Le silence, ma lumière,  
Est devenue joie.<sup>12</sup>

Guillevic becomes again “l'homme qui se ferme” and the “architect of silence”:

A tout ce qui m'entoure  
je donne mon silence. Et le temps  
est suspendu,<sup>13</sup>

and, like Claudel, structures his own "maison fermée."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Guillevic. *L'Homme qui se ferme*. Paris: Réclame 1949. Cover illustration by Edouard Pignon. 1075 copies printed: 1000 "sur vélin", and 75 "sur Montval" containing a numbered etching, the first 15 also containing a series of refused engravings, perhaps by Pierre-André Benoit.

<sup>2</sup> Gagner. Paris: Gallimard, 1981: 161-173.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Daix. *Guillevic*. Poètes d'aujourd'hui. Éditions Pierre Seghers, 1954. Jean Tortel. *Guillevic*. Poètes d'aujourd'hui. Éditions Pierre Seghers, 1962.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Pierrot. *Guillevic ou la sérénité gagnée*. Seyssel: Éditions du Champ Vallon, 1984: 107-108.

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Bowd. *The Poetry of Guillevic*. University of St Andrews, 1981. On line, Proquest: 88-89.

<sup>6</sup> Copy sold on line.

<sup>7</sup> Copy sold on line.

<sup>8</sup> Guillevic, "Art poétique" in *Gagner, op.cit.*: 183

<sup>9</sup> Guillevic. "Les camps" in *Gagner, op. cit.*: 73-74.

<sup>10</sup> Lucie Albertini-Guillevic. "Combat pour l'espace ouvert," in Guillevic. *Ouvrir, poèmes et proses 1929-1996*. Paris: Gallimard, 2017: 15.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard-Joseph Samain. *Le moine intérieur. Lecture du poète Guillevic*. Orval, été 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Guillevic. *Du silence/On Silence*. Trans. Sergio Villani. Illustrated by Mark Filipiuk. Woodbridge (Ontario): Les Éditions Albion Press, 1995: 68. Guillevic. *Du silence*. PAP, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> In a letter, 1996, to the artist Robert Clévier who illustrates his prose poem *Dits de la jeune fille et de l'homme*. On line.