

## Communion in Guillevic and Levertov: Connecting to Others, Centering the Self

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Communion permeates Guillevic's oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> From *Terraqué's* inaugural dialogue with objects<sup>2</sup> to the nature poems from 1997 that close *Présent*, Guillevic immerses us in the mysterious yet assured communication that can occur between people and things, their sharing of thoughts and feelings through silence and caressed textures as well as sound and intent listening. Shared presence implies coequal participation. Words articulate the cries—of joy, of woe—that characterize various realms. Endowing the outer world with consciousness and receiving its ongoing grace anchor the speaker, who only exists fully when open to wonder and to possibilities for continued exchange, attuned to being and becoming, aware of what lies outside the self and the materiality that he poetically inhabits. To venerate the outer world is to celebrate its inherent sacrality reaffirmed, its timeless web of connection rather than any divinely bestowed blessing. To explore this web's functioning is often to revel in a magnetic pull of teeming life, without neglecting death's menace or the play of opposing forces. Quanta's compactness and syntactical assurance invite reflection on this pull, engagement with these forces, ambition tinged with humility when entering this fray, as in the brief lines "On n'a jamais vu / Un champ de blé / Vaincre l'orage"<sup>3</sup> that highlight frank recognition of fragility even as they suggest a good-natured, conversational bon mot.

Parallels to Denise Levertov (1923-1997) are numerous as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bernard Fournier, "Terraqué ou l'armoire inaugurale," *Guillevic: Les chemins du poème*, SUD 17 (1987): 75-85.

<sup>3</sup> "On n'a jamais vu," 31.01.97, *Présent* p. 197.

surprising, in that this renowned Anglo-American poet so often evokes communion, so readily conveys fascination and wonder, so proudly and tenderly bears the poetic mantle of turning connections between inner and outer worlds into evocative song. If scholars are detectives, then Levertov’s variegated works—tracking her life, loves, family, friendships, teaching, activism, conversion to Christianity in 1984, focus on interconnections—may have distracted those curious about comparisons with Guillevic. Despite her translation volume *Selected Poems*,<sup>4</sup> similarities of vision were for many years little examined,<sup>5</sup> except for example in Leonard Schwartz’s “Guillevic/Levertov: The Poetics of Matter,”<sup>6</sup> which considers this volume’s topical focus on objects and temporal presence, as well as both poet’s ability to discern what is “ineluctably sacred”<sup>7</sup> and to make the natural world “the site of the unconscious,”<sup>8</sup> albeit an unconscious realm possibly darker in the Guillevic poems selected for translation, “a place of hiding and crouching” rather than of “glory” as in Levertov.<sup>9</sup> The following analysis will depart from Schwartz’s by examining communion as an often joyous organizing principle in Guillevic and Levertov alike, and by exploring poems of various eras.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing somewhat more Guillevic and *Du silence* (1994), it will underscore connections to self as well as to people and things, how innocence and experience help establish empathy, and how poetic form and vision shape passing epiphanies that color life’s fabric, enabling further alliances and daily growth.

Examples from *Du silence*<sup>11</sup> will highlight our dual themes—

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<sup>4</sup> Eugène Guillevic, *Selected Poems*, trans. Denise Levertov, New Directions, 1969. Levertov also translated Jules Supervielle (1967), Marina Tsvetayeva and Boris Poplavsky (1969), and Jean Joubert (1984, 1988, 1990). See the bibliography in Greene.

<sup>5</sup> A noteworthy recent study is Christy Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor*, U of Chicago P, 2016. See ch. 2, “Roots and Transcendence,” on Ponge, Celan, Guillevic, and Levertov. P. 9: “Guillevic [...] finds in the root’s diligence a model for humankind”; “Levertov depicts humans who try to reroot themselves in the environment.”

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Schwartz, “Guillevic/Levertov: The Poetics of Matter,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 38.3 (1992): 290-98.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>10</sup> Similar to Lucie Albertini-Guillevic’s assiduous preparation of posthumous anthologies is the availability of *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, ed. Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey, intro. Eavan Boland, New Directions, 2013. Though Guillevic’s posthumous works will not be cited hereafter, in both cases the reader gleans a cogent vision of the poet’s abilities and aims.

<sup>11</sup> *Du silence, Possibles futurs*, préface Michaël Brophy, Gallimard, 2014, p. 163-94, henceforth *PF*.

connecting to others, centering the self—while noting that the word “communion” weaves in and out of these narrative threads. We will see that writing poetry is intrinsically a path to the sacred, a communicative act that opens an inner space of alliances and understanding as well as reflection and contemplation.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that any of us can put pen to paper and feel connected to the universe, but rather that Guillevic serves as our guide, exemplifying how thought carefully directed and words well chosen become healing forces, spiritual balms, signposts in the everyday urge toward wholeness and clarity. He also helps us tease out the subtext that connecting to the self and to others can be a proverbial good thing, despite potential critical resistance in France to poets expressing sentiment or describing interpersonal relationships. His later poems become moreover a lens through which to critically read his earlier works, in view of limiting discussion of biographical dramas and instead pointing up an overall limpidity, a purity of expression wed to osmosis with his environment, a quest narrative whereby intersubjective relationships with realities large and small are more fully assimilated.<sup>13</sup> Especially intriguing in these respects is the commingling of directness and depth, simplicity and spirituality. Incrementally, we see not only a speaker embracing abstractions and acceding to personal joy, but also a conversational dialogue that illuminates this process, a kind of accessible how-to manual through which the reader can benchmark her or his embrace of the sacred within the everyday.

Signal aspects of this quest in *Du silence* include a sexualized or animalistic initial thrust aimed at pushing beyond ordinary limits; entry into an inner space of reflection that encompasses the whole of life; revelatory discovery facilitated by faith in a poetic process; letting go of inhibitions so as to be immersed in this space and this process; communion with world and self that resembles a rebirth, a reawakening to personal desire within the broader context of the outer world’s metaphoric breath or movement; a resulting contact with being, in its fullness and immediacy; and a sounding of the soul

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<sup>12</sup> Aspects of these and subsequent analyses of *Du silence* draw on the lucid introduction and the author’s notes included in *On Silence / Du silence*, trans. and ed. Sergio Villani, Albion, 1995, henceforth *OS*.

<sup>13</sup> *OS* iv: “Especially significant [...] is the underpinning metaphor in this volume, that of a voyage, with its subtexts of adventure, quest, exploration, conquest, discovery.” Regarding osmosis, limpidity, and assimilation into oneself of outer realities without asserting God’s presence, see Thierry Orfila, “Le désir quotidien de bénédiction dans l’œuvre de Guillevic,” *Guillevic: La poésie à la lumière du quotidien*, éd. Michael Brophy, Peter Lang, 2009, p. 95-106.

that allows fuller understanding of love—for oneself, for others, for the time and space within which it flows and unfolds. The lyrical I, present on most every page, advances step by step. The stanzas’ brevity, silences, and lexical resonances recreate the author’s experience of communion. “Auscultez,” for instance, in the lines “J’ausculte / Un présent sans frontière,”<sup>14</sup> carries forward the poem’s physicality while also evoking, as if in a fable, a wise and godlike good doctor checking from the heavens the world’s pulse, attesting to the health of its heart and lungs, ensuring the smooth functioning of the human soul as a cosmos. Because Guillevic identifies for his translator this “présent sans frontière” as a present participating in “l’éternité,”<sup>15</sup> we grasp the depth of the speaker’s inner silence, accept that it can be traversed by time and space. As in the Psalms but without reference to the Creator, we see the eternity of this “présent sans frontière” as the enigmatic yet unmistakable presence of all of creation there in the speaker’s soul, independent of a chronological past.<sup>16</sup>

Selective mention of communion reinforces these various threads. A first reference relates it to matter and breath, the sexual and the cosmic, creation of space and gifting to oneself greater contact with the self. Space and time are provisionally experienced as unbroken and flowing. Metaphorically, silence represents at once the space within oneself that welcomes the outer world; the peaceful rediscovery of an innocent, untrammled self within this space; and the adventure of reestablishing such a space, within oneself but as if radiating outward to surround the self and connect to further nourishment. Keywords such as “donner,” “teneur,” and “sève” remind us that reciprocity occurs. Despite the risk of abstractions clouding this picture, for example “la sphère de silence,” “les bruits,” “mon être,” and “le royaume,” the quanta sculpt a progression of ideas that moves us toward the spiritual truth of contact with silence’s essential, material, sustaining aspects:

Je me vis au plein  
De la sphère de silence

Que je parviens

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<sup>14</sup> PF 170.

<sup>15</sup> OS 72: “Un présent sans retour en arrière, sans projection, un présent qui participe de l’éternité.”

<sup>16</sup> OS 70: “Comme on touche une pierre, un tissu, on tente de toucher son âme.” The soul, though not mentioned in the poem, can be referred to for interpretive purposes via the author’s notes.

Même parfois dans les bruits,

À créer autour de moi  
Tellement mon être

Sait donner de lui-même  
Pour créer le royaume

Où je communie  
Avec la teneur de ce silence,

Avec sa sève  
Qui est aussi la mienne.<sup>17</sup>

The speaker here is not isolated in a bubble of tranquil quiet, but rather in harmony with what connects outer and inner worlds. We recognize the underlying vision that traverses Guillevic’s oeuvre, of carving out through words a place where one is calm, connected, collected, and thus receptive not only to the ‘sap’ of existence, but also to the intersubjective bonds that help us flourish. Guillevic flags the din the ocean makes in search of its silence,<sup>18</sup> depicts silence encouraging exchange as a friend or companion might,<sup>19</sup> and portrays “[s]a femme, / La dame du silence”<sup>20</sup> as an equally meditative seeker—and ruler of her respective kingdom—who enables integral self-possession for all involved, each individual as well as the personal and collective realms of silence.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas American poetry often embeds a quest narrative into a single poem,<sup>22</sup> *Du silence* favors a sequential approach that nuances the phases of

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<sup>17</sup> PF 171.

<sup>18</sup> PF 172.

<sup>19</sup> PF 173.

<sup>20</sup> PF 175.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. OS 73: “The reflexive form [in the line ‘Le royaume se rêve’] [...] suggests the intimate communion of the couple, the wholeness, the integral self-possession of the kingdom itself.”

<sup>22</sup> The argument here regards frequency; in French poetry today, any single poem is less likely to lyrically foreground a personal epiphany. Cf. Levertov’s comments on what she perceives in American life as a “constant need for self-definition” that, conversely, was never a preoccupation among those she had met in England, France, Italy, or Holland, in “Williams and Eliot” (1989), *New and Selected Essays, op. cit.*, p. 59-66 (59). Additionally, William Carlos Williams’ injunction to Levertov, noted by her in a diary

communion with world and self. The darkness of which Schwartz speaks does surface, but mainly as a passing contrast to silence's beneficence, to a flower's exemplary metamorphosis,<sup>23</sup> to the patience and strength that can prevail in making communion central to a life well lived, a purifying renewal of a harmonious accord.<sup>24</sup> Two more references to communion make clear both why a poetic sequence is needed to frame what is said and how Guillevician sequences form a path to the sacred. Time and space must be found in order to center the self. "Totally giving / Oneself to the self"<sup>25</sup> is no easy task, requiring stillness and solitude as much as silence. Love and respect for the self can then be communicated to others. As empathy develops, it becomes a practice endlessly renewed. Centering the self facilitates connection to an endless array of specific others. As a result, one learns respect not just for the cosmos, but for the entities that form its fabric. Appreciating each aspect of the living order inscribes us in rituals whereby we welcome and praise the sacred.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, one could read *Du silence* as metacommentary on poetic vision, a sequence on getting to the point where each type of object or flower or insect takes its place within poetic silence.<sup>27</sup> Thus the following lines: "Tout ce que je fais apparaître / Dans mon silence // Est prêt à se donner"; "Le bonheur / Dans mon royaume de silence // C'est de communier / Avec soi-même / En toute chose"; "C'est comme si ma joie / Délivrait chaque chose / De sa pesanteur"; "[T]out le souffle qui cherche / À faire vivre le monde / Je le retrouve ici / Où toute chose / Avec moi communie."<sup>28</sup> The core of beauty, truth, and strength that the poet locates within himself becomes a 'sanctuary'<sup>29</sup> as he settles into mindfulness and engages in dialogue. Joy emerges as things find him and seemingly speak. Through his joy, he better recognizes how each corner of creation becomes a fulfilled, self-possessed entity, a relatively 'pure'

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entry and implying that she should directly and emphatically reach the reader, bears mention: "[T]he poem is no place for diffidence! [...] Ya gotta go WHAM!" (ca. 1960-1961, in Christopher MacGowan, ed., *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams*, New Directions, 1998, p. vi).

<sup>23</sup> PF 176.

<sup>24</sup> PF 177-80.

<sup>25</sup> OS 39; cf. PF 181, "Le don total / De soi-même à soi."

<sup>26</sup> Cf. OS 75: "C'est dans le respect de l'ordre du vivant que se situe pour moi le sacré."

<sup>27</sup> Cf. OS 74: "Pour moi tout mot en poésie est vécu. Quand je me vis violette, je ne me vis pas iris, pissenlit, orchidée, etc."

<sup>28</sup> PF 182, 183, 185, 186.

<sup>29</sup> PF 184.

space.<sup>30</sup> In short, tracking communion in Guillevic provides a window into his poetic process and a useful means of synthesizing its key traits. *Du silence* shows us that the parts add up to a remarkable whole, a sum of contemplative gestures ultimately bathed in light, seen as itself a fraternal companion that carries us and brings continued joy.<sup>31</sup>

Levertov speaks in her poetry and prose with equal generosity and humility, joy and awe, vividness and vitality, as of her teens and throughout her later years. Communion is so much a thread of her poems that we shall limit ourselves to representative excerpts that echo Guillevic's notes to *On Silence / Du silence* regarding being "*conscien[t] du peu que je suis dans l'univers*" and poetically childlike, "*celui qui sait qu'il ne sait pas*."<sup>32</sup> Centering the self via watchful observation of the outer world characterizes much of her oeuvre. During her home schooling as a child in Ilford, Essex, she roamed nature freely with her older sister Olga and absorbed their parents' love of language, not least when their mother read literary classics aloud. Though in 1948 she moved to the United States with her husband Mitchell Goodman and developed friendships with fellow poets, of central interest is the poetics of presence to the world that she refined over the next decades, especially her singular openness, attentiveness, reverence, and receptivity,<sup>33</sup> as well as the peripateticism that—as with Guillevic—immersed her in landscapes of various kinds and adds breadth and depth to her writing.<sup>34</sup> To borrow a title's metaphor, Levertov often depicts "A Pilgrim Dreaming," an individual looking inward and outward—in hopes of "giv[ing] light"—at the "Self" that "Imagination"

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<sup>30</sup> *PF* 190, 191, 192; cf. *OS* 79 regarding a lake's waters as "[m]etaphors of unity: self-possession and fulfillment."

<sup>31</sup> *PF* 193, 194.

<sup>32</sup> *OS* 78, 79, commenting on "Dans mon royaume..." and "Comme tous les royaumes..." *PF* 186 and 190.

<sup>33</sup> On parallels between receptivity and Keats's "Negative Capability," see *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, *op. cit.*, p. 70. "Negative Capability" relates to the present analysis in that intuition and poetic exploration facilitate communion and connection, what Keats calls "being in uncertainties, Mysteries"—rather than in the realm of fact and reason—and thus being better able to reach for "Beauty." Cf. Keats's letters, "To George and Tom Keats [December 21-27, 1817]," David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers*, Harcourt, 1967, p. 1209.

<sup>34</sup> Biographical essentials here draw on Denise Levertov, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker, UP Mississippi, 1998; *New and Selected Essays*, New Directions, 1992; and *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov*, ed. Paul A. Lacey and Anne Dewey, intro. Eavan Boland, New Directions, 2013, henceforth *CP*. See also Dana Greene, *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life*, U of Illinois P, 2014, and <poetryfoundation.org/poets/denise-levertov>. As to "reverence" and a "poetics of presence and orality," see Lacey p. 1014-16.

reveals in the “water-mirror” of poetry and places.<sup>35</sup> One could cite any number of influences or friends, from Goethe and Rilke, to Emerson and Thoreau, to Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Carlos Williams,<sup>36</sup> to Muriel Rukeyser and Adrienne Rich, but again, as with Guillevic, what any given text of hers reveals about a lifetime’s quest for “fusion”<sup>37</sup> with self and others matters most, for example what one poem calls the human “journeyings” that solemnly thread us into the “dark cloth” of time as “Majestic insects buzz through the sky / bearing us pompously from love to love, / grief to grief.”<sup>38</sup> Levertov keeps us richly within life’s pageant while attending to bonds that must not fray, to ties between world and self that must remain ‘majestic’ however much trouble we might have recognizing their worth and finding our way.

When comparing Guillevic and Levertov, similar lessons and a similar voice often reveal themselves. Her preoccupations can be comparable, her tone just as varied when one considers Guillevic’s evolution from *Terraqué*, to *Trente et un sonnets*, to *Du silence*. Emblematic of the interplay between connecting to others and centering the self are the following lines from “Holiday,” which resemble Guillevic’s emphasis on communing with one’s inner silence to better give to others and as a step along a path to love and light:

No one confirms  
an other unless  
he himself rays forth  
from a center.<sup>39</sup>

Readers focused on Levertov might notice the idea of ‘confirmation’ and recall that, much as her father had Russian-Jewish origins yet actively helped the Ilford community as an Anglican priest following his conversion to Christianity, she herself ritually convenes beings and things in view of collective well-being, in a spirit of inclusion and equity not unlike Thoreau’s injunction to nourish the self by loving with great appetite every portion of “*the*

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<sup>35</sup> CP 588-89.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Christopher MacGowan, ed., *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams*, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> PF 192.

<sup>38</sup> “Journeyings,” CP 450.

<sup>39</sup> CP 645. “Holiday” [for K.] has five parts: “Postcard,” “Meeting Again,” “To Eros,” “Love Letter,” and “Postcard.” The passage cited is from “Love Letter.” The sequence opens “The Acolyte,” section IV of the collection *Candles in Babylon* (1982). Cf. OS 76, “*savoir s’aimer pour savoir aimer l’autre*”.



*earth on which you dwell.*"<sup>40</sup> "Holiday" urges its addressee to become "real / as earth itself" by loving a woman the way one loves blackberries, strawberries, onions, a hawk. Reiterating the creed of countless thinkers and artists including Thoreau, Rilke, Hölderlin, and Guillevic, Levertov recommends loving all manner of things, spaces, and places, convening within one's heartscape what the Breton poet might call "Toutes les provinces de silence,"<sup>41</sup> weighing what becomes weightless when borne as a gift to others and uttered "upon the airy spaces where it's / so hard to find a foothold."<sup>42</sup> In this same spirit of appreciating spaces literal and figurative, large and small, is mention in "Holiday" of "our fragile shifting molecules" as entities that strive in their way to speak, to "utter" a grand "design,"<sup>43</sup> an idea resembling Guillevic's admiration for each parcel of existence within and beyond him that makes silence a kingdom.<sup>44</sup> Readers focused on Guillevic will of course spot reference to "a center" and to "ray[ing] forth," images that recall the closing quanta of *Du silence* as to arriving at a center, a vantage point where restfulness and clarity coincide with seemingly infinite light. In this respect, we should observe a general difference between the writers, namely the compact, condensed, elliptical aspect of Guillevician quanta, in contradistinction to Levertov's more Anglo-American penchant for concrete detail that readily alerts the mind's eye and coolly trips off the tongue in streaming lines.

Indeed, complicity often surfaces in Levertov thanks to story frames and precise imagery. The narrative arc of her journeying that draws us back and forth in time, especially as life changes spark memories, brings out potential cohesion within the world and the author's inimitable compassion. In "The Communion," where the speaker becomes a "pondering frog" able to look intently and sing without knowing "anything about anything," colorful details and lively sounds form an "accord" between the observer and what is observed, a "dance without moving" described as a "burden" yet clearly also a blessing.<sup>45</sup> In "The Wife," a frog "ready to leap out of time," a dog "snuffing"

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<sup>40</sup> Epigraph to the poem "Joy," CP 246-48, which begins part three, "The Crust," of the collection *The Sorrow Dance* (1967). Reference above to joy and woe draws on 247: "I looked up 'Joy' / in *Origins*, and came to // 'Jubilation' that goes back / to 'a cry of joy or woe' or to 'echoic / *iu* of wonder."

<sup>41</sup> PF 190.

<sup>42</sup> CP 645; cf. PF 185, "Rien ne me pèse / Mais tout a son poids."

<sup>43</sup> CP 645.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. PF 185 and CP 77 as to each thing being "un cadeau / Que me ferait l'espace": "*Il s'agit de l'espace interstellaire, de tout espace, de l'infiniment petit à l'infiniment grand.*"

<sup>45</sup> CP 104, from *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1959).

as it seeks “an idea unformulated,” and a husband “plucking / truth from the dark surrounding nowhere / as a swallow skims a / gnat from the / deep sky” are what bring joy, as well as laughter.<sup>46</sup> Loving, reciprocal exchange are implied by the poetic particulars, the beings and things in their messy, mundane, delightful presence. In “Looking, Walking, Being,”<sup>47</sup> somewhat as in *Du silence*’s first lines,<sup>48</sup> the speaker’s eyes “dig and burrow into the world,” as if to open what Levertov calls elsewhere the poetic gates that will let us “inside / the kingless kingdom”<sup>49</sup> and reveal surrounding presences. Contrasts, however, are striking: though gaining sustenance is a goal, and “echo and interruption” will lead us there, we savor not so much a centering eternal present, but rather “[w]orld and the past of it” as the eyes “touch / fanfare, howl, madrigal, clamor.” In a poem on being and becoming, each word uttered adds to the noise necessary for insight. To be “in it,” in the world and not merely passing through, requires here something of the energetic grimace close to Guillevic’s heart but not apt in his sacred sequences such as *Du silence*. Another poem of somewhat epic scope, “The Ache of Marriage,”<sup>50</sup> portrays communion as “leviathan,” as what is sought in matrimony and intimacy but not easily attained. Insistent, alliterative sounds and an implied story highlight “the ark of the ache of it,” the challenges of “looking for joy, some joy not to be known outside [this biblical leviathan]” despite being already “two by two,” passionate, compassionate, “beloved.”

And yet, in a study aimed at understanding Guillevic, we would be remiss not to return to simple gifts, which for both writers abound. This is, moreover, ultimately our aim: to demonstrate that alliances are formed regardless of context or diction, provided the poet can seek them out and be receptive to their crystallization. A poignant poem by Levertov, “First Love,”<sup>51</sup> leans in both directions as Guillevic might, toward a depth of connection that brings out the world’s *épaisseur* while greeting beings and things with a gentle, innocent caress.<sup>52</sup> “First Love,” about a flower sparking a “Now” that is

<sup>46</sup> CP 115-16, from the same collection.

<sup>47</sup> CP 954-55 (954), the opening poem to part VII of *Sands of the Well* (1996), “A South Wind.”

<sup>48</sup> PF 165, “Je fore, / Je creuse.”

<sup>49</sup> “Growth of a Poet,” CP 487-93 (489), from *The Freeing of the Dust* (1975).

<sup>50</sup> CP 184, *O Taste and See* (1964); cf. Lehman, David, ed, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, Oxford UP, 2006, p. 687.

<sup>51</sup> CP 981-82, *This Great Unknowing* (1999).

<sup>52</sup> As Levertov’s “First Love” addresses childhood, landscape, and communion, a useful comparative resource showing landscapes is Paul-André Picton, réal., *Guillevic ou l’épaisseur des choses*, Émission

“Forever,” deepens our empathy via detail, whereas *Du silence* does so by means of its sequential stanzas, quanta, and visions, all of which welcome each part of time and space described. In both cases, modest things become beings with which we devotedly commune, as when in *Du silence* a leaf is a leaf, a small entity reminiscent of how what is holy ensures harmony.<sup>53</sup> “First Love” mirrors the quantum in *Du silence* that evokes ‘living’ a flower and being ‘fortified’ by it—choosing it, yet perhaps then feeling chosen to participate in its blossoming, to confirm through patient waiting that tangible renewal is possible.<sup>54</sup> “First Love” narrates an invigorating drama—that of discovering for the first time through a “[c]onvulvulus” the “endlessness” of being a flower “brimful of rain.” Following recollections of, as an infant, “an obscure desire” for connection, Levertov recounts how, when she was a young child, “the flower, face upturned,” looked into her eyes and shared “that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness / of that attention” to which she realizes she may have subsequently desired to return.

From a Guillevician perspective, the reader’s takeaways are many. First, we might surmise that this was not really what the final lines of “First Love” call a “once-in-a-lifetime / secret communion,” but rather a seed sown for communion in other forms, through other companions of numerous kinds across the years, within the self, beyond the self, and where these realms fuse. Two sequences by Guillevic among numerous instances of communion, “Conscience,” *Sphère* (1963) p. 58-80, and “Encore,” *Étier* (1979) p. 80-86,<sup>55</sup> chosen somewhat at random, will provide further points for comparison and reflection by way of conclusion. “Conscience” features the often cited “Ouverture,”<sup>56</sup> dedicated to the poet’s daughter Simone, concerning each day, hour, or instant potentially leading her to “le champ de gloire.” Read with and against the closing section of “First Love” as to “that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness / of that attention,” its incantatory distichs remain quite powerful yet relatively abstract. Time and space will carry the addressee

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*Caractères*, 20 avril 1976, France Régions 3 Rennes, <ina.fr/video/RXC00001229>, where he discusses with Pierre Jakez Hélias poetry and his childhood in Carnac.

<sup>53</sup> *PF* 186; cf. *CP* 825, “Complicity,” *A Door in the Hive* (1989), regarding a leaf as hummingbird and as companion to “not betray.”

<sup>54</sup> *PF* 176; cf. *OS* 74 as to the speakers “*prescience*” of a resurrection.

<sup>55</sup> *Sphère*, suivi de *Carnac*, Poésie/Gallimard, 1989; *Étier*, suivi de *Autres*, Poésie/Gallimard, 2006, henceforth *S* and *ET*.

<sup>56</sup> *S* 62. Note also that Levertov translates this text, as “The Task,” in *Selected Poems, op. cit.*, p. 137.

forward, yet without quite being rooted in particular actions, in distinctive instances of reciprocal exchange. This brings us, however, to a fundamental Guillevician strength that also characterizes Levertov, namely the structural weft of sequences through which the warp of individual poems are drawn. A poem several pages later, “Tenir,”<sup>57</sup> expresses feelings similar to those of “First Love”: the value of having held in one’s hands a pebble, grass, an insect, talking to them as friends “Pour s’en aller ensemble // Au long de ce moment / Qui n’en finissait pas.” What hands hold remains in the heart, as if in endless thanks and prayer, bestowed with “un poids / De confiance et d’appel.” In “Encore,” a suite of unnamed quanta, alliances and personal growth are likewise foregrounded, again in a spirit of evolving, meditative reflections and against a backdrop of seeming *mésentente* and *désaccord*, of ‘hypocritical’ shadow that cannot bring uplifting light,<sup>58</sup> much as in “First Love” the infant other described in the poem’s first part “left no face, had exchanged / no gaze.”

Lines in the last quanta of “Encore” provide a fitting close to our comparison: “Tant que tu pourras, // Tant que la lumière / Te portera.”<sup>59</sup> The ebb and flow of experience allow innocence and wholeness to surge forth. Light evinces a form of glory. It is as if one could unquestionably wed deep spatiotemporal moments, let one’s own inner seas merge with “l’eau de l’instant,”<sup>60</sup> provided one opens one’s hands caressingly, much as in “First Love” the flower and the child exchange gazes. Guillevic and Levertov speak to us because, across their respective lives, they take the trouble to pause, to restate, to revisit poetic saying as if entering a temple or sanctuary in which to dwell. They develop empathy within themselves, gain a foothold within language’s spaces, and guide the reader toward equivalent gestures. Similarities of approach imply methods for connecting to others and centering the self. Voice—English, French, concrete, abstract, cascading, concise—matters less than intention. Mindfulness—accepting and surpassing difficulties by being more in the present moment—informs each pilgrim’s progress, however much popular culture might make us think of this contemplative strategy in terms of minutes, not years. Openness, ripeness, love, compassion, perseverance, and watchful attention very much come into play. In sum, the

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<sup>57</sup> S 67-68.

<sup>58</sup> ET 80, 86.

<sup>59</sup> ET 86.

<sup>60</sup> ET 86.

complementarity of our two poets' form and vision conveys the value of communion as an organizing principle for understanding a shared spiritual élan. Their words and way of breathing bring us renewed breath, make things as plainly obvious as flowers and light integral to our individual quests, acknowledge and proffer the "open secret"<sup>61</sup> of language as a path to the sacred, preparing us as well to 'dare' contemplate weightier matters such as the truths of seas we might face.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Everyman's Land": Ian Reid Interviews Denise Levertov" (1972), *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, *op. cit.*, p. 68-75 (71): "The poet sees, and reveals in language, what is present but hidden," what Goethe ("or was it Carlyle [...]") called "the *open secret*."

<sup>62</sup> *ET* 83; cf. 86.

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