

Imperfection Revisited

Guillevic, *Carnac*. Trans. John Montague, Bloodaxe, £8.95

Given his half-century publishing career, it is easy to understand why many of Guillevic's works have reached the stage that Walter Benjamin identified as "fame", a point at which the work's potential for an eternal afterlife is developed, and where the work most naturally lends itself to translation. Between the appearance of his first book in 1945 and his last in 1996, this mononymous French poet produced more than twenty volumes of poetry on subjects ranging from the overtly political to the geometrically abstract; his works have been the subject of major critical interpretations and anthologies on modern French poets; and a number of interviews have recently been published. Just three years after Guillevic's death in 1997, John Montague produced a new translation of *Carnac*, one of the most "famous" of all the poet's works.

As Adam Czerniawski recently noted (*Metre* 5), a given translation could be judged quite differently by a bilingualist, a bilingualist who is also a poet, or by a monoglot reader in the target language; the questions facing a translator—those of how much of the original to change, what sort of idiom to evoke, and what aspects of the original work must be preserved—might not be answered in the same manner by a poet, scholar, or "average" reader of the translated text. In the case of this translation of *Carnac*, such questions do enter into play:

Il y a des hommes
Qui ne voient en toi que la nourricière

"Nourricière" meaning something akin to "that which nourishes" or "she who provides or procures foodstuffs," is rendered here as

*There are men
Who see in you only the fish harvest*

What is missing in the citation above is not the original's poetry, nor its greater meaning (a "fish harvest" is certainly part of that) but simply the maternal connotation brought about by the word

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“nourricière,” used most commonly in the French expression *mère nourricière*, “adoptive mother.” This maternal comparison is continued (or presaged) throughout the poem by the homophone pair *la mer*, “sea,” and *la mère*, “mother”—*Carnac* is, after all, an ode to Guillevic’s Brittany, its prehistoric stone arrangements, coastline, and above all, sea.

Et quand je dis la mer
C’est toujours à Carnac

*And when I say the sea
It is always at Carnac*

It might seem like the hair-splitting of a bilingualist to insist upon this missing allusion, but the poet’s abusive mother was highly important for his life and his work: Guillevic dropped his Christian name because it was Eugène by which his mother called him; as noted in the introduction to this edition, the poet’s first memory was “a memory of guilt, in a police station, under a tyrannical mother.” This makes certain evocations of the *mer-mère* stand out:

S’il est vrai qu’en toi
Commença la vie,

Est-ce une raison
Pour que tu nous tiennes

Comme des complices?

*If it is true that in you
Life began*

*Is that any reason
You should keep us*

As accomplices?

Among many examples, including later references to an “out of control,” “revenge-seeking” sea-mother.

It is of course possible that the cigar here is simply a cigar: in any case, the missing maternal echoes are the fault of language, not the translator, as there is no English word for “sea” which sounds exactly like “mother,” and there is no way that a translation in English could convey the subtle gender war Guillevic evokes when he describes the antagonistic relationship between *la mer* (female) and *le soleil* (male). From a broader perspective, this translation often works quite well as

a near-direct transliteration:

Que dis-tu de ce bleu
Que tu deviens sur les atlas?

What do you say of this blue
You become on the atlas?

Which, at the poet-translator's discretion, is only missing the second "que" (this time a relative, not interrogative, pronoun) and the necessary inversion of the original ("what say you of this blue"). For the bilingualist, this facing-page bilingual edition at its best can evoke a feeling of *déjà vu*—at some moments it is like reading the same poem twice, as if someone nearby is whispering the poem's next lines, or the ones from a minute back.

The wording of the original occasionally requires Montague to step in and impose his own sense of meaning when a transliteration would fall short of the original's intention:

Le désert et toi—
C'est le sable.

La montagne et toi, la haute montagne,
C'est le vent.

The desert and you—
The domain of sand.

The mountain and you, the high mountain,
The domain of wind.

The original, of course, does not have a literal reference to any "domain," though one senses that the translation here might be closer to the intention of the original than the too-direct transliteration "It's the sand... It's the wind."

Carnac, in this Bloodaxe edition, functions as a good introduction to Guillevic's work: one finds examples of his particular observation of "things," of exterior objects, that owes a bit more to the influences of the poet's German idols (particularly Rilke and Trakl) than to his French contemporaries. Stephen Romer's informative introduction is to be lauded for covering the greater themes of Guillevic's work (including a brief mention of the later-embarrassing sonnets of 1954, written in praise of Communism and "comrade" Joseph Stalin). After his recent death, interest is accumulating in Guillevic's work as a whole; *Carnac*, this ode to the poet's Brittany coast, serves as a means to approach the origins of the man once referred to as an *authentique poète*

NOTES

¹ Easy is the descent to Hell.

² "Would that Mangan had exercised such strength of soul!" Meehan's note.

³ The eternal Female lifts us up.

⁴ "The exact extent of Mangan's dominion over the world's languages living and dead, will remain forever a mystery." Meehan's note.

⁵ "This occurrence is complete conjecture on Mangan's part, his brother living for many years after the aforesaid time. Already we observe the unsettling of his mind, no doubt the result of intemperence." Meehan's note.

⁶ "Alas, it is to this infernal medicine we owe the destruction of the poet's imagination! Let this confession stand as testament." Meehan's note. Mangan's confused denial here reflects linguistic practice of the day, where opium "eating" for recreation is distinguished from the medicinal application of laudanum—opium dissolved in alcohol. Editor.