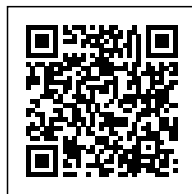


# TOCSIN OF THE ABSOLUTE: ARMEL GUERNE

*Posted on January 1, 2023 by Henri Rosset*



Armel Guerne (1911-1980) was a French poet and translator. A friend of Mounir Hafez, Georges Bernanos and Emil Cioran, he is the author of numerous translations, including those of Kawabata, Hölderlin, Novalis, Woolf, *The Book of a Thousand and One Nights* and *Moby Dick*, to name only the most famous. The fame of his work as a translator has somewhat obscured his own immense poetic work. Yet, according to his own admission, he had no other ambition "than to be welcomed and received as a poet, to be able to count myself one day among the holy number of those divine ruffians of love."



In the midst of an indigent modernity, dominated by the "absurd and monstrous accumulation of the things without souls," Armel Guerne knew how to tear open an irredentist breach—a breakthrough "against the world" to sound the tocsin of the Absolute. From his first arrow to his final salvo, his work never deviated from its outgrowth—all were charitably oriented towards a poetic star, the only herald of a "truth that lasts, that begins at the ground level and goes to the sky, and that remains." And as a cliff carries its other side, his work as a translator and poet are rooted in the same mythical [Vale of Tempe](#)—that land of the German Romantics, on which they silently set the "very seal of eternity" on poetry.

Of Armel Guerne's critical writings (collected in *Le Verbe nu* and *L'Ame insurgée*), chanted at the edge of inner constellations, one could say what [Bettina von Arnim](#) said of Hölderlin's poetry: they are "in the eternal fermentation of restless poetry." Without ever feeding on any "flavor of the day"—whose constant frenzy is only a proof of its latent paralysis—Armel Guerne watched over a branch of speech, which it is up to each generation to revive in a "grace of living charity" (*Lettres Dom Claude—Letters Dom Claude*). Like a guardian of the Pyrenees, like the crypt where the Mazdean priests maintained a sacred fire for a thousand years, Armel Guerne praised and preserved this heritage of "incessant orations"—thus re-establishing the preeminence of the poem, this "brazen shaft of all words, this axis around which all the worlds revolve and all the ages turn." (*La Nuit veille—Night Watch*).

In fidelity to this stellar decree, one finds in each of Armel Guerne's poems the destined reflection of the "infinite Silentiary" (*Journal—Diary*), which gave his poetry a vesperal and definitive character—in the image of the burnt sky which culminated above Tourtrès, where Guerne [sat with his mill](#), like a

watchman on an inalterable Acropolis. It is from this "[mill of miracles](#)," rooted in "the mineral of the wind and forgotten times" that Armel Guerne wrote his greatest poetic work, including *Les Jours de l'Apocalypse* , *Le Jardin colérique* , or the *Rhapsodie des fins dernières* .

In spite of the overwhelming confidentiality in which [his work](#) remains walled up, Guerne remains a sentinel in our night, reminding us of the imperative necessity of poetry, this "Ravenous hunger of the Holy Spirit" which never gives up its weapons to any world, and only gives its eyes to the expectation of a Word—without ever dimming its "purple wing" (St. John of the Cross).

If the poets are immutable and that they alone "found what remainsm" as Hölderlin said, the conservation of their voices seems however to be endangered by the modern pandemonium, which does not cease to reduce the range of their insolent brisures. Guerne hurled in particular violent anathemas at the prolific critical logorrhea which, contrary to its initial mission of "passer-by," is now happy to palaver blissfully, by assembling and disassembling the great texts upon a mechanical and inert frame. In this necropolis of the word, erected by these merchants of contraband, we find "Nothing true. Nothing alive. Nothing lived. Death put in tomes. Death. Easy to recognize: it cannot be silent, since it exists only in its chatter" (*Le Verbe nu*). By thus spatulating its plaster of quibbles, this "necrophilic literature of professors, doctors, commentators, exegetes, analysts, biographers, historiographers, anecdotists, nomenclators" proves in the same gesture that it does not actually reside in the poem—its learned objectivity was thus only a scarecrow, upon which it leaned its disarmament—its escape before a sovereign Word. According to Guerne, this denial is the very sting of this pantomime modernity, which, by fear or by cowardice, gesticulates ceaselessly on its own rubble: "For there is a modern thought... clothed in a barbaric or zany language, caught in a corset, a thought without breath; its circle has been reduced to the dimensions of a tiny circus... without ever risking a glance outside" (*Le Verbe nu*). From then on, we have to consider, following Guerne, that this tropism to the dismantling of the poets is only an umpteenth modality of the "technical Moloch" demystified by Bernanos—this specter of orphaned ashes, which voluntarily forgets as its corruption of the world advances, the vital ferments which made it get born.

Drained and brutalized, the modern soul—whose each edges seems dedicated to the countable osculation of the world—does not know how to measure itself with this sibylline and elusive truth deposited by poetry. It is against this seated deciphering that Guerne crystallizes his rock of insurgency: his anger has no other aim than the fight against all these debilitating deadlocks—tightened every day by the modern dementia, "whose characteristic is to never think, but to turn in circles, faster and faster,

in the sawdust and the dung of the time, with the other civil servants, without ever risking a glance outside" (*Le Verbe nu*).

It is thus against the grain that Guerne reveals to us the dawn of an interior *vox cordis*, that of poetry—since it is "the only language still alive enough, still armed enough, still powerful and whole enough, close enough to the mystery also of the word, to carry away the fortresses of the inertia and to burst the concrete of the lie, carrying in it a grain of human truth which can still germinate, a seed of beauty which will bloom in the hideousness" (*L'âme insurgée*).

### **"All true language is silence"**

In response to this deadlocked language, padlocked in its own corrosion, Guerne enjoins us to scrutinize the incandescent hearth of poetry, where only "silence" crackles—this pneuma of an unconquerable breath that whispers its "Unavowable absence impossible to grasp" (*Le Jardin colérique*). This absence—unavowable because unforgivable—is not this withdrawn mutism that a certain poetry obscure to itself claimed in a self-sufficient glory. On the contrary, with Guerne, silence is an immemorial tear to be safeguarded, a mythical Palladium which guarantees to the world the perpetuation of an island of freedom: "Silence is not what one believes, an extinction, an immobility, a not closed in a yes wide open. Silence is a movement that contains itself, of such power and intensity that to move beside it becomes a grotesque caricature, a stunning simulacrum. The movement of movement, the universal source... The hand of all caresses, of all pains, beyond evil and good, of all acts" (*Fragments*).

To be disposed to this poetic grammar, it is necessary to imagine that poetry shelters in its torn center a baptistry of silence, where is imperially maintained the forefinger of [Angerona](#), that ancient goddess whose finger affixed to lips—symbol of an ordered silence—is an insolence opposed to all the noises of the world, be they the sweetest. And it is from this preserved archipelago—where the eternal and the temporal intersect—that Armel Guerne composed his Adamic alphabet, wherein culminates in its summit "the unique human voice that stands behind the words and that resounds, mysteriously, each time man reaches out to himself... Sometimes open to the heavy night and echoing in the depths of the abyss, sometimes torn by supernatural gleams, this authentic voice of man, which reappears suddenly at the crucial hours, pierces and disperses his languages" (*L'Âme insurgée*). For Guerne, perhaps even more than an inapparent heart or a founding axis, silence is the very strength of the poet—indeed, the only one he truly possesses. .

And to connect the corolla of the diamond cutters, who set poetry with an aura of silence, it is appropriate to quote Max Picard and his *Monde du silence (World of Silence)*, in which he writes that "Poetry comes from silence and for the nostalgia of silence." This echo without return acts thus in the manner of a liturgical screen, by which the poet sifts the relics of a word which precedes the creation, to collect the deposit of a new clarity—opened in the immobile one. This is what Guerne's poem *Le Poids vivant de la parole (The Living Weight of the Word)* evokes, in which he dips his hieratic blade, ever more deeply into the "amassed" powers of silence :

You can write, and you write;  
 You can be silent, and you are silent.  
 But to know that silence  
 Is the great and only key,  
 One must pierce all the symbols.  
 To devour the images,  
 To listen in order not to hear,  
 To undergo until death  
 Like a crushing  
 The living weight of the word.

It is thus about poetry as about an asceticism: a constant and heroic "mine of will" which arms itself in a column of silence. In these two secret nobilities, the same language of oracle is whispered: an awakener of the Spirit who goes "to seek behind the noise; who picks it up and who collects it for all those who are exiled from it. In such a poetic alchemy, there is no place for embellishment or ornament: each word, however simple, is chanted at its "[maximum flavor](#)"—thus crystallizing this concretion of the poem into a secret pearl, which testifies before its living weight: "The silent meditation of the most silent of monks is, in this sense, a listening of the word until the finest of the ineffable. Almost perfection" (*Fragments*).

## The Abyss of Time

For Guerne, much more than a simple aggregate of captious and scattered words, the poem is a tension—torn at the two points of the infinite, between the previous Word and the words that seek it. This caesura of abyss, as violent as a "silent storm," reminds us of the famous letter of the American poet William Carlos Williams , where he, after having written that " Now life is above all things else at

any moment subversive of life," indicates that it is the same for the poem: "Verse to be alive must have infused into it something of the same order, some tincture of disestablishment, something in the nature of an impalpable revolution." With Guerne, it is a question of the same perseverance of the poem in a stellar conatus, of the same light accentuating itself in a coruscating force—all these ardent powers concur to this "oxidation of the infinite, of the eternity or of the things" carried by the poetry.

Detecting then a "source of all fires," the poet fans the mythical remains of it to the point of setting his own word ablaze in a burning firebrand—to be able to welcome "the deposit of a truth" which is not his own. It is this lightning rearrangement that the poem *Soudain* encloses, spurring even more deeply this "[urge for renewal is gaining ground in the aftermath of monstrous destruction](#)," of which the poem is only one meteor:

Words, just to put them down  
 One next to the other,  
 That say more and go further  
 Than we go; words  
 Suddenly no longer ours  
 And stand so close  
 Close to a supreme truth.  
 Words that cease to be said  
 To better come, suddenly, to become again.  
 Words of the word.  
 (*Le Poids vivant de la parole*)

And if "the ark of the world is on the waters of time," as Guerne writes in his *Jours de l'Apocalypse*, it is because it is the poet's responsibility to go up the tubular corridors of time—themselves linked to the "pillar of Eternity"—to ring the bell of the unalterable. Split between these two temporal poles, his own and that of the word, the poet condenses a "hurricane above the deserts" and breaks the anthropic bodice by a ray of lightning—such as the "interior blood and its irrevocable mystery, until then contained in the night of the body" (*La Nuit veille*). For, contrary to a modern taxonomy, which requires of the poet a hectic inventiveness turned towards artifice or imagination, Guerne teaches us that the "clairvoyance" of the poet is above all an inclination of the soul towards itself—a sovereign expectation of the living Weight of the word: "The true mystery of all poetry, it is that the poet is in us; the other one, the one who speaks, doesn't speak; it's not true: it's not him, it's just the Word. Thus, it is by an august

gesture of allegiance that the poet makes himself Sphinx, by putting himself in tune with an anterior sovereignty—being able thus only "to give his voice—even if it is breathless—to the voice which calls" (*Au bout du temps—At the end of time*).

And it is in this beginning of a rediscovered word that we detect the first strain of Guerne's thought—the vital point from which all its foliage branches out. It is based on the intuition that poetry should not "second the world" as Kafka said about the novel, but that it aspires to be a mirror of the Apocalypse, taken in its primary sense of "revelation" and "unveiling": "We have passed the threshold of the Apocalypse and, in my opinion, we are mistaken when we want to look at or read the Apocalypse as a prophecy. In reality we should read and understand it as a lived history, already past in part, and in the depths of which we are charitably engaged. This is what is happening every day. It is more than at our doors; it has entered our lives, we are living it, absolutely." This apocalyptic bottom generates a deep caesura in his poetic thought—it calls him to a conversion, which carries the word on the imperious way of necessity. As if, by the tear that it would impose, the Apocalypse definitively breaks the vitiated fabrics of the babble, so that poetry finds its innocence of the aerolith. It is with this breaking star that Armel Guerne hoped to hang poetry, as shown in one of his confessions, written in the beating of a revealed abyss: "About poetry, I have ambitious and clear ideas which put it a little higher than the ditty: I want to say, today, vigil of the end time" (Letter to his editor).

## The Open Palms

"On a sinking ship, panic comes from the fact that all the people, and especially the sailors, obstinately speak only the language of navigation; and no one speaks the language of shipwrecks. Only prophets and poets know how to use this language of meltdown panic, according to Guerne. In a disoriented universe, where dissolution and siltation seem to be the only avenues of the future, these two passers-by of the absolute raise the lost by only their glances "turned right side up." It is one of the multiple possible meanings that we give to the Apocalypse evoked by Guerne—beyond a material state of the world, it is an interior accentuation by which the poet does not write any more for himself, nor for the others, but in front of the end of times. Howling thus his *Rhapsodie des fins dernières*, under the porch of the agony of the world, his verses are consumed in an irrevocable detonation, which tremble with equal intensity with all the "revelations"—"For the poet, the universe is an incandescent drama. Its tragedy enlightens" (*Fragments*).

Guerne initiates us then into a blessing by the desert—understood as the voluntary desiccation of the

poet where the waiting and the attention become his only prayers, his only consoling sources. In these latitudes—dug in an unfathomable abyss that summons all the chasms of silence and night—the freedom of the poet is strangled by the very power of the word: "The word speaks; and I listen to it speak. It sings; and I listen to it sing. It commands; and I listen to it obey and I see it obey. This is the School of the Seer." And it is from these specular sighs, which reflect even more deeply the received light, that the poet abandons his lower maneuvers to receive the break of a superior verb: "The writing is only a bark of which one makes a divine cup; remains the One who fills it and the one who is thirsty and who takes it to drink. Begging before the one and begging before the other, the poet is between the two " (*Rhapsodie des fins dernières*). It is this hieratic snatch of which each poem is the palpating witness that makes Guerne's poetic thought so necessary. It reminds us that beyond the dislocation of the poet, between supplications and thundering, it is the simple word carried by poetry which bequeaths to us an effulgent crystal—"The poet did nothing but open his blood, source of word" (*Le Verbe nu*).

It is up to the poet alone to hold out this open palm of the beggar—whose bruised phalanxes are only the pulverized reflection of his own charity—to pick up this immemorial tear of the word. Like a herald, the poet then remembers this mythical needle by affixing it on all the ruins of the world—and carries in front of a new Axis Mundi, like an Atlas armed with the sword of the Archangel: "All set their traps for you, scholars, politicians, bankers; the traps in which they themselves are caught. The poet holds out to you his buoy, and if he can, his hand". (Preface to his translation of the *Disciples at Sais, Hymns to the Night*, religious songs of Novalis).

---

Henri Rosset writes from France. "Everyone wants to own the end of the world." This articles through the kind courtesy of [PHILITT](#).



