

Guillevic, Eugène

CARNAC

Trans. By John Montague

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The ninth in the Contemporary French Poets series, this volume presents the work of the post-War poet which was first published as a collection in 1961. Continuing the recent trend of enlisting working poets as translators, this parallel translation is rendered by Irish poet John Montague, who began and completed the project in a fit of passion, and then polished it for twenty years. Guillevic, who was born at Carnac, in southern Brittany, grew up at a time when standard French, not local dialects, was taught in the free public schools. The few words of Breton he uses deal with the prehistoric site at Carnac, e.g., “dolmen” (*table stone*) and “menhir” (*long stone*), words which have also entered English. Though an intellectual heir to French Surrealism and the post-War movements of Film Noir, Theater of the Absurd, Structuralism, and the dogmatism of the French Communist Party, Guillevic sets forth on his own tack, eschewing what are essentially urban artistic and ideological sensibilities in favor of the toughness and self-reliance which comprise the rural Breton attitude and which form the backbone of this work. As evidenced in *Carnac*, he is a pantheistic Romantic, a novice in a new pagan religion, once declaring that there can be “no poetry without sacredness.” But the homage Guillevic pays in *Carnac* is not to the megaliths and their human architects. It is to the monolithic sea that he addresses his verse. “Without you, ocean, they would have done nothing at Carnac.” At times humorous, at others solemn, the poet weaves his leitmotifs in language wholly appropriate to the task, in words both primitive and powerful.

This is a fine translation of a beguilingly simple work. The effects Guillevic achieves are cumulative—geologically slow, but also imposing.