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INTRODUCTION TO ROBERT GUIETTE:

“Formal Poetry in France in the Middle Ages” and “The Adventure of Formal Poetry”

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This introduction offers a brief overview of the life and work of the early twentieth-century Flemish medieval studies scholar Robert Guiette, and presents two of his most influential pieces, “L’aventure de la poésie formelle”, and “La poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age”, in which he presented his ideas about a medieval poetry based on a formal esthetic.

Robert Guiette was born in Antwerp on July 6, 1895. He began his university studies at the Institut Saint-Louis in Brussels and continued them at the Catholic University of Louvain where he received a *licence* in Romance Philology in 1921. He then spent two years in Paris where he attended classes at the University of Paris, the Collège de France, and the École pratique des hautes études, and formed friendships with Fernand Léger, Blaise Cendrars, André Salmon, Jules Romains, Max Jacob.

Guiette returned to the Catholic University of Louvain in 1923 and completed a thesis on *La légende de la Sacristine* (a legend, first recorded in the thirteenth century, of a nun who leaves her cloister and is replaced by the Virgin Mary until she returns). The thesis was published by Honoré Champion in the *Bibliothèque de la Revue de littérature comparée* in 1927 and Guiette was awarded a doctorate from Louvain in 1928. At the same time as he was working on his

thesis, Guiette continued to interest himself in modern literature, encountering authors like Michaux, Goemans, Purnal, de Boschère, Hellens, and de Ghelderode, and continued to write his own poetry, publishing his first two collections of poems the same year as his thesis (1927).

After working briefly at the Royal Library of Belgium, he began to teach at the University of Ghent in 1929 and remained there until his retirement in 1964. He published editions of medieval texts (1940-1951, 1964), a number of translations of medieval Dutch texts (1948, 1974), essays and critical works on modern literature (1948, 1955, 1976), and eighteen volumes of his own poetry.¹ He became a member of the Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde (Leiden) in 1949; was elected to the Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises in 1954; and was awarded the Grand Prix de poésie Albert Mockel in 1968.

Guiette died in Antwerp on November 8, 1976.

Thirty-six years after his death, Guiette is probably most remembered for a series of articles, lectures and essays written between 1946 and 1970, mostly on medieval literature, that he brought together in two volumes of the Romanica Gandensia series under the title of *Questions de Littérature*.² Perhaps the most influential of these pieces were two lectures Guiette gave at the beginning of 1946 entitled “D’une poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age” (“Formal Poetry in France in the Middle Ages”) and “Aventure de la poésie formelle” (“The Adventure of Formal Poetry”) (1960, 9-23; 24-32).³ Guiette’s ideas about a poetry based on a formal esthetic fit in well with the structuralist ideas of the 60s and 70s, even though they had very different origins, and had a strong influence on scholars like Roger Dragonetti (a student of Guiette), Paul Zumthor, and Daniel Poirion, and numerous scholars in subsequent generations. As Poirion wrote in his review of the second volume of *Questions de littérature*, the question at the heart of Guiette’s work – and these two lectures – was: “how can we read the works of the past in such a way as to grasp their soul?” And Guiette’s answer, again in Poirion’s words, was that “we cannot let the erudition required to read them efface the immediate feeling that is the source of the pleasure of reading.”⁴

Notes

1. Guiette himself edited his collected poetry: *Poésie, 1922-1967*; his last volume, *Cailloux*, was published in 1973.

2. A selection of articles from these two collections was published under the title *Forme et sénéfiance*, ed. Dufournet et al.
3. These two lectures were later printed separately under the title *D'une poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age*.
4. Poirion, 163. For biographies of Guiette, see Piron and the page devoted to Robert Guiette on the website of the Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, online: <http://www.arllfb.be/composition/membres/guiette.html>. A bibliography of his works on medieval literature may be found in *Forme et sénéfiance*, 267-271.

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