

The Poetic Surge: Ties to the Real Reimagined in *Paroi*

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Paroi (1970) both marks a transition in Guillevic's oeuvre toward self-assured communion with the real and echoes the events of May 1968.¹ Its statements on removing barriers to authentic perception can recall graffiti from Julien Besançon's anthology "*Les murs ont la parole*": "Cours, camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi"; "Les armes de la critique passent par la critique des armes"; "Il faut porter encore en soi un chaos pour pouvoir mettre au monde une étoile dansante (Nietzsche)" (115). Whereas such slogans encourage dynamic action, *Paroi* as a whole balances rather more meditatively hope and caution, action and lucidity, collective daring and considered rapports. An important backdrop to this stance is Guillevic's personal history as conveyed in interview volumes (Vircondelet; Raymond; Lardoux; Lejeune). He had grown as a poet and person by confronting war's inhumanity—felt directly during the Occupation—in volumes such as *Terraqué* (1942), *Exécutoire* (1947), and *Terre à bonheur* (1952). However, following retirement in 1967 from *l'Inspection générale de l'Économie nationale*, he responded to social issues less than he previously had through institutional scaffoldings such as the church rituals of his childhood, militant activity within the *Parti communiste* (1942-1980), and traditional verse as a salve (*Terraqué* 247; *Vivre en poésie* 119-32; cf. *Sérénité gagnée* 119). Instead, direct and intimate communion with the real became a principal means to attain self-awareness and effect social change. In its contours and broader context, *Paroi* shows that locating a new tomorrow can be quite personal and time-intensive. It exemplifies calm yet determined exploration as a step toward the kinds of horizons implied by Nietzsche's "étoile dansante" and Deleuze and Guattari's "possibilité d'autre chose" ("Mai 68" 23). The following analysis will discuss poetry's role in political engagement by

describing this modest struggle to rethink subjectivity through language. It will foreground reimagining ties to the real as a cyclical process and emphasize potential obstacles as a path to fuller perception. The focal points will be the poems of *Paroi*, Deleuze and Guattari's essay "Mai 68 n'a pas eu lieu" as a comparative critical lens, and, in closing, context provided by Guillevic's interviews.

Paroi highlights a multifaceted *devenir*. Its portrayal of poetic becoming is composed in quanta, the uniquely Guillevician reflective bursts of energy crafted as paired or grouped short lines. It weds optimism and self-doubt, joyful immersion in language and the inquisitiveness of a Montaigne or La Fontaine. It includes letters to an unidentified addressee that underscore the value of dialogue and mutual longing. Its one hundred and twenty pages explore metaphorical spaces while delineating obstacles to perception and communication. Because a quest narrative underlies these quanta, moreover, we haunt the hallways of May 68. An urge to break free is accompanied by persistent actions and traversal of a metaphorical space. As a central metaphor, "la paroi" relates time and space to perception's ebb and flow. By continually inscribing the word "paroi" in these quanta to denote what potentially resists him, Guillevic develops a methodology of interacting with perceived barriers in order to attain communion with the real as a sacred space. In traversing the "paroi" (74), he reflects on its myriad forms and aspects and ultimately merges with it (142). He reconfigures perceived boundaries between world and self while asserting that writing is a fundamental tool with which to shape identity.

As with the Paris uprisings in spring 1968, this "paroi" presents literal and figurative obstacles to a fully lived life. Furthermore, it is at once autobiographical, phenomenological, and ontological. As Jean Pierrot reminds us, Guillevic's interest in walls evolves from everyday life. Describing what he calls "allégorisation," Pierrot explains that walls as metaphors accrue deep meaning only after their initial anchoring in the real. As the poet's vision lends the places and things of sensory experience abstract qualities, they start to represent the fullness and intensity of experience itself, its evident and potential "plénitude" ("L'univers naturel" 218). For instance, walls are seen and felt in his oeuvre via Carnac's megaliths and granite-walled homes, as well as Brittany's imposing "rochers" and the lesser "murets"

visible along properties and paths (218-19). The poetry collection *Paroi* deepens discussion of walls by moving from the particular to the universal, from images and emotions that have accrued in the poet's mind over time to the abstract linguistic reality of a "paroi" as a "séparation sans épaisseur déterminée" (219). Christine Chemali sums up the "paroi" as first emblematic of concerns about adequate relationships to the self, to space, and to intersubjective communication, then gradually a means to improved perception, through which one can abandon such worries and envision victory over separation, pathways to true interrelationships including between self and self (333).

Indeed, the Guillevician "paroi" as a spatial and interpersonal metaphor implies breaking through or breaking free, even as only partial detail about related victories is conveyed. Guillevic keeps the reader ever curious to know more. Often, it is as if we were leaning into an overheard conversation never quite revealed. What attaches us to the real is not just the play of opposites between high and low, inside and outside, present and future, front and back (*Paroi* 74), but also a communicative interplay between the speaker, a companion, and inner and outer worlds as addressees. This interplay is the poem's initial keynote, sounded by the use of the word "Lettre" as the title of several initial pages. The questioning, halting, earnest yet uncertain tone of the dialogue addressed to a "tu" with whom the speaker spends time brings out the quieter, more intimate side of engagement. The frustration of encountering a "paroi" is thus first identified as a shared battle ruminated in private:

On se cogne
Tous les jours

À cette frontière
Dont tu sais l'importance.

On s'en revient
Et on en parle. (22)

Relative to May 1968, it is important to note this modest backdrop. *Paroi* as

a set of quanta can seem visionary, but here the poet is a companion, an ordinary restless soul. The pronouns “on” and “tu” connote a shared struggle and invite the reader to take part in these conversations. The verb “cogner” and the line “Tous les jours” evoke this struggle as ongoing, requiring unremitting effort to accept and confront. The remarkably brief lines reinscribe the daily back-and-forth between recognizing what limits us and looking beyond our limitations.

The quest narrative regarding a “frontière” proceeds in phases. Encounters between world and self lead to questioning and dialogue, but also to sensual contact, wherein perceived obstacles provide healing “caresses” (27-28). In confronting what metaphorically hinders his progress, the speaker sees the wall become a personified being, able to unexpectedly reach its hands across distances and take an interest in him:

Et si un jour le flasque
Avait gagné le mur?

Tu vas par habitude
Pour cogner sur lui,

Et voilà que te caressent
Comme des mains. (27)

The perceived gesture on the part of this “paroi [...] [e]ntre plus loin et toi” (28) inspires a response. The speaker is not just a sentient being preoccupied with language, but an explorer keen on mutual exchange, eager to respond to the outer world’s call (cf. 59):

Allant le long de la paroi,
Toujours et n’importe où,
La caressant parfois.

Et toujours pas question
De la franchir, d’entrer. (31)

Despite its resistance, the “paroi” invites creative exchange, initiating what

Deleuze and Guattari might call an interiorized “ouverture de possible” (“Mai 68” 23). This space of possibility has added ‘thickness’ or depth in terms of intimacy, companionship, and collective spirit. At one juncture, the imperfections of the “paroi” become the site of a near-human embrace. The speaker curls himself up within these imperfections, hears a heartbeat, and recognizes a “goût de vivre / Et d’être fraternel” resembling his own (*Paroi* 77). Shortly thereafter, reference is made to “des corps / Que serait la paroi” and to a “flanc fraternel” (83), suggesting that close connection to the social whole plays a part in his ties to the real. Briefly, this variation on the theme of creative exchange extends to empathy with those who suffer: “un mal nourri, / [...] un mal logé” (80); “des clochards / Qui n’ont plus rien à boire” (82).

However, Guillevic’s poetic vision dismisses action tied to institutions. He flatly rejects “l’un ou l’autre Dieu,” blaming talk of such figures for filling back in potential openings in the wall, excoriating himself for having succumbed to them as “quelque espèce / D’ange du bien” (80), as “nos vrais vampires” (96). If we improve society, he seems to say, it will be through individual human action in response to stimuli in the outer world, such as “[l]’espace [qui] aspire” (90), and not out of a desire to accumulate treasures of any sort or monuments to ourselves (104). In a familiar Guillevician rhetorical move, he insists that everyday encounters—with time and space, being and things, sensation and perception—are what truly shape us:

Dans le fouillis, dans le ramassis,
Dans le pas clair, dans l’indistinct,
Entre minéral et végétal,
Dans ce qui devient, qui va devenir,
[...]
Dans ce qui grouille, dans ce qui foisonne,
Dans le minuscule, dans l’affamé,
Dans ce qui est magma, dans ce qui est plasma,
Dans les germes, dans les spores,
Dans les interstices par où ça dégouline,

Y prendre des forces
Pour attaquer. (105)

Regarding May 68 as well as American social movements of the same era, it is intriguing to note shifts in tone, from practical discussion of what opposes us, to fascination with feeling caressed and attracted by “parois,” to this more violent, aggressive, yet still tender and loving stance. As with Deleuze and Guattari, diverse small differences might become the basis for a large-scale transformation. An earlier and more problematic “champ de possibles” (“Mai 68” 23) will hopefully be left behind as a mere “souvenir” (*Paroi* 97). Our endeavors must be energetic, impassioned:

Nous sommes faits pour ça.
Elle aussi doit le voir
À la passion qu'on met

À la forcer le plus possible,
À grignoter, cogner, percer. (97)

The statement “À la paroi, j'y crois” (84) signifies that despite what stands between us and fulfillment of our desires, we must refuse pat answers, facile conclusions, formulaic resolutions to the human dilemma.

Discussion in *Paroi* of group action suggests pleasure to be had in being individually and collectively combative. Several quanta imply a direct affinity with the May uprisings, for example as a fearless forward march that results in expanded power and vision. Phrases such as “Nous occuperons,” “Nous aurons plus de vue,” and “nous la refaisons / Avec les briques, avec les pierres / Qu'on lui arrache” directly recall May 68 and prior barricade traditions:

Nous irons, nous ferons
Que la paroi recule. Nous occuperons.

Nous aurons plus de vue.
De notre pouvoir nous serons les maîtres
Sur une aire plus large. (126)

Nonetheless, this striving reflects more a set of desires than a conviction that radical change must occur. The quanta in *Paroi* fight against what opposes us, yet ease us toward accepting related tensions, toward recognizing that a world without limits could be too frightening:

Le pire, c'est peut-être
Qu'il nous faut la paroi

Pour chantonner contre elle
À l'occasion,

En s'appuyant sur elle. (131)

References to the “lieux communs” of graffiti as “pleins de secret, de ressource” (129) especially recall the poetic act (cf. Brophy), while also highlighting a need for *témoignage*. Terms such as “inscrire,” “graver,” and “[m]arquer le sien” (128) remind us that “la guerre des hommes” (129) will always be present, and that language transforms the commonplace into a source of renewal, an indispensable tool in our interactions with the “paroi”:

Comme ce qu'on écrit sur la paroi
S'approfondit, prends du sens, éclaire!

Comme cela donne des forces!
Comme ce qui est inscrit

Devient plus vrai, plus potentiel,
Du fait que c'est inscrit! (129)

Using a phrase that has ethical, spiritual, and sociopolitical resonance, Guillevic identifies “les rêves de gloire” (130; cf. 100) as also contained in the graffiti written on the walls of the “paroi.” He encourages impassioned engagement with the real in order to “brûler de l'ardeur / Que la matière nous délègue” (130). As regards these dreams of glory, a further parallel to Deleuze and Guattari reveals itself in that ‘instabilities and fluctuations’ (“Mai 68” 23) lead to more effective action. *Paroi*'s iterative process—its descriptions of

events and attitudes, its varied tone and forms of address—creates a ‘new subjectivity’ (“Mai 68” 23) when its narrative arc comes to a close and we see a certain glory in the speaker’s merging with “l’étendue” (*Paroi* 139-42). Rather than set himself in opposition to perceived barriers, he becomes an equal opposing element and grasps how to coincide with duration. The assured, minimalist form of the final quanta reinforces this fresh approach to perception:

Être paroi.

Se confondre
Avec la paroi.

L’intégrer.
S’intégrer.

Rêver le temps
Devenu corps. (142)

The closing attitude is one of calm, determined, somewhat dreamlike exploration as a positive forward step.

By way of conclusion, remarks on Guillevic’s interview volume *Vivre en poésie* will help contextualize *Paroi*’s exploration of world and self, while further underscoring the notion that when paradigm shifts seem about to occur, “[i]l n’y a de solution que créatrice” (“Mai 68” 24). The interviews that he granted later in his literary career reflect hard-won wisdom from a literary figure who, like Victor Hugo, saw his share of historical events and came to terms with societal shifts. *Vivre en poésie*, for example, completed in collaboration with his companion Lucie Albertini, tracks frankly and openly the arc of Guillevic’s whole life, from difficult beginnings, to a close but later discarded familiarity with faith, to professional highs and lows, to evolving conceptions of the poetic act. Such interviews particularly clarify Guillevic’s embrace of the poetic surge as a path to fuller perception. Speaking as one who experienced an especially troubled century, he foregrounds a careful approach to the written word, a relatively subdued, often playful, often sotto voce

lyricism, as in *Paroi*'s closing lines. Aware of a need to “cogner” or “attaquer” (*Paroi* 27, 97, 105), he nonetheless values above all relationality, communication, communion, a consideration of the sacred in the everyday treated with love and respect as well as passing humor. As concerns potential ties to Deleuze and Guattari, he repeatedly affirms, speaking from the vantage point of a poet and an elder statesman of sorts, that the quotidian should be our true anchoring point, our true vista.

Given that he left both the Catholic Church and the *Parti communiste* behind him, each after several decades of involvement, one could perhaps paraphrase Guillevic's later views by saying that the political begins with the personal. When Deleuze and Guattari state that the events of May 68 are “en rupture,” “une bifurcation, une déviation,” “un état instable qui ouvre un nouveau champ de possibles” (“Mai 68” 23), they echo Guillevic's renunciation of religious and political dogma and espousal in its place of acute self-awareness. Although Guillevic as poet differs from Deleuze and Guattari in standing apart from society and being himself always “le centre” (*Vivre en poésie* 32), he shares a kindred focus on dynamic energy and renewed perception, on a “fluctuation amplifiée” (“Mai 68” 24) that might fraternally reshape the social whole. Guillevic describes this change in the penultimate poem of *Paroi*, where he shows how to be a source of energy for elemental aspects of the outer world such as time and space, which, in an important reversal, are inhabited by us as part of their anthropomorphized *devenir* (cf. *Vivre en poésie* 170):

Être en somme paroi

Pour l'étendue
Qui rêverait
D'être habitée.

Aussi pour soi. (142)

He depicts poetry not as observation, but as communion with beings and things, with world and self, a communion where tensions of opposites become richly intersubjective rapports. He comes to understand that he can

remove obstacles to perception by becoming through creative artistic vision—as in a separate but related observation on Cézanne’s still lifes—part and parcel of the real, an elemental component of the outer world’s surge, wholly alive to “le monde, la terre, le tourbillon” (*Vivre en poésie* 101). In short, Guillevic’s *Paroi* embodies an internal struggle that can be seen as exemplary in relation to Deleuzian views on May 68. It favors deep reflection over time, limits easy resolutions, admits interpersonal struggle, welcomes an “étendue” of thought and feeling (*Paroi* 139-42), inscribes possibility in improved perception, and prizes the flow of “la sève, le voltage de la vie” (*Vivre en poésie* 256).

Note

¹Thanks are due to The United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry for research support through Sam Taylor Fellowships.

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