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# Grace Paley's Poetics of Discontinuity

Anne-Laure Tissut

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- 1 Suzanne Ferguson proposes an enlightening analysis of the discontinuous structure of the Faith stories in her article “Resisting the pull of plot: Paley’s antisequence in the ‘Faith’ stories.” While the stories could have been made into a novel, Paley subversively kept them separate, as a protest against “the ‘minority’ or ‘subaltern’ status of her female Jewish alter ego,” according to Ferguson. She further develops the link between story structure and Paley’s identity as a Jewish feminist writer: “Paley’s resistance to developing the themes in a novelistic way [...] has to do with a need to subvert the novel’s often-noted tendency to justify ‘things as they are’: the culture according to its ‘mainstream’ rules and formulas. Unable to mount a full-scale war on the social norms, Paley sends up little explosive anecdotes that, even in themselves, almost always refuse to be traditional ‘stories’ with causal plots.”
- 2 In this article, Grace Paley’s poetics of discontinuity will be examined with special reference to “Dreamer in a Dead Language,” a story which, with its bittersweet humor and tender irony, stages impulsive, disorganized attempts at coping with the prospect of death, thus manifesting a powerful urge to live. Such an urge to live, as well as the ways in which humans relate to the prospect of death is by no means specific to this story, so let me admit that my attention was first caught, then arrested by the title. “Dreamer in a Dead Language”: language, death and dreams—life in a nutshell—is Grace Paley’s raw material and aesthetic playground.
- 3 So inspiring are Grace Paley’s titles that they actually provide an apt description of the successive moves this article intends to follow, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, *Later the Same Day*. I will try to show how the various forms of disruption at work in her stories actually reflect her specific vision of human relationships, itself grounded in a personal experience and a conception of time.

## The Little Disturbances of Life and Texts: Aspects of Discontinuity

- 4 As in all of Paley's stories, the formal characteristics of "Dreamer in a Dead Language" match and reflect the main topics at stake: loss, dissatisfaction and anguish. The overall structure itself is revealing, as the narrative begins *in medias res* and stops with an open ending. Left suspended in mid-air, the story seems to have been deliberately designed to puzzle the reader, playing on frustration through various forms of disjunction or evasion so that he/she progressively loses most of his/her certainties and gives himself/herself over to the surprises held by the story itself. Even the return of some characters from one story to another—of Faith Darwin, Paley's fictional alter ego, in particular—creates a sense of fragmentation and continuity. Some parts are missing in the characters' lives, of which only broken episodes are randomly given: "[...] plot, the absolute line between two points, which I've always despised," declares the narrator in "A Conversation with my Father" (237).
- 5 Within each story, the structuring principle between scenes seems to be one of juxtaposition more than of logical relation. In "Dreamer in a Dead Language," for instance, there is a gap between Faith's conversation with one of her three alleged lovers, Philip, about a poem her father has written, and her later visit to the old people's home where her parents live and where Philip eventually joins her. The reader is plunged into the new locus straight away. The narrative at this point seems to be told from Faith's perspective, as she has been watching her father while drawing closer to him: "Faith's father had been waiting at the gate for about half an hour" (276). Since Philip's visit had been given as highly hypothetical in the preceding dialogue ("Now listen Philip, if you ever see my folks, if I ever bring you out there, don't mention Anita Franklin [...]." [276]), the abrupt change of scenery forces the reader to wonder what has led Faith to allow her lover to come. Such ellipses recur throughout Paley's stories, giving them a realistic touch, as they reflect the fragmented nature of experience, with its omissions, misunderstandings, and distortions.
- 6 These ruptures in the narrative flow are rather destabilizing for the reader who can neither build on previous episodes nor anticipate what follows. They also create variations in rhythm that contribute to the overall effect of disjunction. As some episodes are deliberately skipped (one passes without transition from the retirement home to "the beach, the old Brighton Beach of [Faith's] childhood" [290] at the end of the story, for example), the pace speeds up, while it slows down when others are described at length (Faith's painful conversation with her tactless father, for instance, [283-89]). Similarly the broken rhythm of the characters' trains of thought suggests disorder and instability: "What will I do, she thought. How can you talk like that to me Philip? Vengeance ....you really stink Phil. Me. Anita's old friend. Are you dumb?" (276). Owing to a strategy of omission and condensation, the narrative sometimes comes close to a series of *non sequiturs*:

In Faith's kitchen, later that night, Philip read the poem aloud. His voice had a timbre which reminded her of evening, maybe nighttime. She had often thought of the way wide air lives and moves in a man's chest. Then it's strummed into shape by the short-stringed voice box to become a wonderful secondary sexual characteristic.

Your voice reminds me of evening too! said Philip. (274)

- 7 The elliptical rendering of the character's stream of thoughts, immediately followed by the other's reacting to a missing comment, creates a sense of acceleration, served by the format of the short story. Indeed as the narrative unfolds, accumulating wisecracks and incongruous metaphors or remarks, the reader is jostled about to such an extent that he/she is systematically taken aback, and may feel the logical grounds of the narrative collapse under his/her feet.
- 8 Owing to the abundance of repetitions, the dialogues reflect all-but desperate attempts to communicate, on the part of characters who seem to keep coughing and spluttering through the stories. Thus Mr. Darwin's speech hardly makes any sense as he expresses his bold resolve to leave the retirement home:
- Pa, what are you leading up to?  
 Leading. I'm leading up to the facts of the case. What you said is right. This: I don't want to be here, I told you already. If I don't want to be here, I have to go away. If I go away, I leave Mama. If I leave Mama, well, that's terrible. But Faith, I can't live here anymore. Impossible. It's not my life. I don't feel old. I never did. (286)
- 9 Logic is here replaced by tautology. Not "leading" anywhere, the father is brought back to where he started ("I can't live here anymore"/"I don't want to be here") while his distressed speech amounts to a frantic succession of modals ("I don't want," "I have to," "I can't"). This is reiterated in the lines that follow:
- If it were possible, the way I feel suddenly toward life, I would divorce your mother.  
 Pa! ... Faith said. Pa, now you're teasing me.  
 You, the last person to tease, a person who suffered so much from changes. No. I would divorce your mother. That would be honest.  
 Oh, Pa, you wouldn't really, though. I mean you wouldn't.  
 I wouldn't leave her in the lurch, of course, but the main reason—I won't, he said.  
 Faith, you know why I won't. You must've forgot. Because we were never married.  
 (287)
- 10 Sometimes repetitions introduce a farcical element into the story, as with Mr. Heligman's three phatic exclamations on the same page, "Oi, says Heligman"; "Oi says Heligman"; and "Ach, says Heligman," a series that is brought to its rhythmic and comic conclusion with "Heligman, oi, Heligman, I say, what the hell are you talking about?" (284).
- 11 Far from developing as a continuous flow, the characters' relations to each other and the world are hectic and their speech reflects their failure to control the course of their own lives as much as to draw meaning from experience. The beginning of "Dreamer in A Dead Language" is a case in point:
- The old are modest, said Philip. They tend not to outlive one another.  
 That's witty, said Faith, but the more you think about it, the less it means.  
 Philip went to another table where he repeated it at once. Faith thought a certain amount of intransigence was nice in almost any lover. She said, Oh, well, O.K...."  
 (273)
- 12 This incipit is loaded with meaning, yet remains in a budding state. The preposition "almost" leaves doubts as regards the stability of Faith's relationship with Philip: could he be the exception among all her lovers? Or is Faith indulging in a broad-sweeping review of them? The reader's attempts at making sense of the passage are discouraged by the second sentence which may well read as a metatextual comment: "That's witty, said Faith, but the more you think about it, the less it means" (273). Despite the invitation to read on, rather than ponder over this puzzling beginning, the reader's attention is still drawn to the mysteries harbored by language. Faith's reaction to Philip's statement

(“Faith thought a certain amount of intransigence was nice in almost any lover. She said, Oh, well, O.K....”) comes as an illustration of the evasive nature of meaning in Paley’s stories. It feels as if only the end-point of Faith’s thought process were given—or does she simply give up the topic? The reader, confronted with sentences fraught with innuendoes and branching out in several directions, follows them to their inconclusive endings, and is left to wonder about the nature of the character’s emotions. Faith often cuts discussions short, as in her exchange with Philip about her father’s poem. Apparently annoyed by Philip’s maintaining that “What an old man writes poems about doesn’t really matter,” she prefers to call it a day: “Well, goodbye, said Faith. I’ve known you one day too long already” (274). In other cases she lets conversations dwindle away. In the absence of inverted commas, dialogues may also melt into the narrative, to the point that it becomes difficult to tell speech from thought or internal monologue, or even to determine the origins of enunciation.

- 13 Indeed Paley is fascinated by meaning processes, as Emily Miller Budick suggests: “Like other authors in the romance tradition, Paley produces a skepticist text. She focuses the reader’s attention not on what words mean (as if language were a symbolic code, which the reader could crack) but on *how* they mean, which is to say when and why they mean” (219). Such take on words does not indicate despair on the author’s part but rather an intense interest in the human urge to communicate, for all the faults and limitations of spoken language. It also has to do with the characters’ thirst for knowing themselves and the world. Much as happens in “Friends,” according to Alan Wilde, “what the story registers is precisely the difficulty of knowing the world, along with the still more urgent need to know it” (181). Despite anticipated difficulties and disillusionments, Paley still proves willing to “engag[e] the world in the dynamics of an ongoing dialogue” (Wilde 3), though she renounces absolute mastery so as to invite otherness in. Her characters fail to fully control the effects of their words, hence constant discrepancies and surprise effects. Meaning gets blurred so that the scenes are sometimes depicted in an almost impressionistic way in the absence of any apparent logic.
- 14 There are hardly any linking words between the sentences; most of the time, the depicted action is in progress, as shown through the use of such inchoative verbs as “to start” or “to begin,” as if the story resisted conclusiveness and endings. Meanwhile the conjunction “but” recurs, as a great favorite, reflecting antagonism, reservations and limits: the complexities and “disturbances of man” indeed. The relative absence of a connective tissue that might have provided the story with a linear pattern corroborates the effect of the previously mentioned repetitions, creating an overall impression of stasis or at least of indirection. Many characters remain stuck in repetition owing to their stubbornness, as underlined by Mrs. Hegel-Shtein’s bitter rejoinder: “If that’s what I mean, that’s what I mean” (282) after her statement, “Sickness comes from trouble” has been corrected by Faith into: “What you mean is [...] life has made you sick” (282). The pleonastic turn of the final rejoinder debunks any alleged transparency in dialogue and speech. While Faith feels obliged to interpret the words addressed to her, Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, a caricature of the sententious Jewish old lady, prefers to stand her ground.

## Enormous Changes at the Last Minute: The Unpredictable

- 15 Communication seems problematic and limited between the characters, and most of the time conversation is not even structured as proper dialogue. The text, however, seems to achieve with its readers the communication that fails between the characters. Miller Budick explains: "Throughout her fiction Paley thematizes how and why and in what ways human conversations do not come into being. In the process she institutes the art of conversation that her characters fail to employ. She creates the relationships that they cannot establish" (221). Grace Paley's fictional creatures often seem defensive, yet drawn towards others, bringing the latter's concerns down to their own, even unconsciously so, as though everybody were engrossed in their own preoccupations. Maybe because of this self-centered trend, they dread identification with others. Thus Faith in "Dreamer in a Dead language" seems to fear any likeness between herself and her father: "In 'Dreamer in a Dead language,' Paley [...] identifies an element in the problematics of parent-child communication that remains inchoate in her earlier stories: the daughter's unwillingness to discover her own words and thoughts in her father's discourse" (Budick 229).
- 16 The characters' self-protective defiance shows in their systematically evading embarrassing issues, as illustrated by the following dialogue between Faith and Philip:
- How about I go with you tomorrow. Damn it, I don't sleep. I'll be up all night. I can't stop cooking. My head. It's like a percolator. Pop! pop! Maybe it's my age, prime of life, you know. Didn't I hear that the father of your children, if you don't mind my mentioning it, is doing middleman dance around your papa?  
How about a nice cup of Sleepytime tea?  
Come on Faith, I asked you something. (275)
- 17 While Philip's nervousness is conveyed through the hectic rhythm of his speech, Faith tries to cut him short by symbolically putting him to sleep with herbal tea. Throughout the story, selfish concerns pop up unexpectedly, as the characters keep trying to flee from the situations in which they find themselves or feel that they may get caught up in. Incongruous questions or exclamations are blurted out repeatedly, as though the speaker could no longer hold his fear or unease in check. Thus the insistent question of Faith's little boy, Richard ("Is this a hospital?" [277-278]), as he comes to his grandfather's retirement home for the first time; a question which is reiterated in exasperation ("Well, is this a hospital?" [278]), expresses his shock at finding himself confronted with old age and death and his attempt to euphemize the nature of the place. Faith's gasping plea, let out breathlessly as if she were suffocating, conveys a similar panic: "I want to get the boys. I want to get out of here. I want to get away now" (288). As she repeats the phrase with a slight variation ("I want to get the boys. I want to go now. I want to get out of here" [289]) some kind of magical power seems to be attributed to language. The characters' denial of, or escape from harsh realities may sometimes be suggested *a contrario*, through Mrs. Hegel-Shtein's invitation for the boys to literally look at old age "in the face": "Mrs. Hegel-Shtein smiled and invited them. Look it in the face: old age! Here it comes, ready or not. The boys looked, then moved close together, their elbows touching" (283).
- 18 Most of the time, however, Paley's stories play on euphemisms and allusions. As the characters fail to express their emotions straightforwardly, they tend to convey them

indirectly, working on a language screen, behind which they hide their pain or onto which they project their naive longings and delusions. Has Faith's father not written dozens of poems so as to affirm and preserve his vitality?

My lungs are full of water. I cannot breathe.  
Still I long to go sailing in spring among realities.  
There is a young girl who waits in a special time and place  
to love me, to be my friend and lie beside me. (274)

- 19 His explanation of the "sixth floor" of the retirement home, where the very old and the very sick are relegated, proceeds from the same grounds: "He explained that incurable did not mean near death necessarily, it meant, in most cases, just too far from living" (280). The semantic field of closeness and distance runs throughout the story, mapping the text as a zone of high sensitivity, in which the most minute move bears massive and durable effects. After her father tells her of his enthusiasm for her ex-husband Ricardo, Faith physically expresses what she cannot say, shrinking or recoiling with pain combined with a sense of injustice: "He's not so young, said Faith. She moved away from her father—but not more than half an inch" (285). The improbable *addendum* conveys much kindness on the narrator's part towards characters whose vulnerability seems proportionate to their perceptiveness. Attitudes of evasion are exposed, not condemned, and with mild humor and compassion despite the bitterness that crops up at times.
- 20 Denial of life's harsher realities is also operated through irony. In "Dreamer in a Dead Language," Faith's father shows the ironical turn of mind that is characteristic of Paley's narrators throughout the stories. "What a beautiful sight," he exclaims, affecting sarcasm and indifference as he faces a "wall of wheelchairs that rested in the autumn sun [and] furious arguers [...] leaning—every one of them—on aluminium walkers" (278). Sometimes, however, one cannot but wonder whether he has come to believe in his own selfish circumlocutions. For instance, he answers Faith's worried inquiry:
- Pa, I've got to get this straight. You are planning to leave Mama.  
No, no, no. I plan to go away from here. If she comes, good, although life will be different. If she doesn't, then it must be goodbye. (287)
- 21 Deliberately or not, the characters avoid giving justifications or even explanation. As one reads Paley's stories, "straight" and open exchange become increasingly improbable. The only way of speaking is via detours, or silence, with the body's taking up the expressive task, either because the characters are overcome by emotion, or because they are unable or unwilling to face their responsibilities. Miller Budick sees responsibility as a crucial issue in Paley's "art of conversation," making her an heiress to the Romance tradition: "For Paley, as for Hawthorne, conversation has to do with acknowledgement. It involves speaking words to other people, assuming responsibility for those words once spoken, and assuming the responsibility of listening" (220). Paley's male characters in particular are often depicted as totally irresponsible. Both angry and amused, Faith derides the attitude of her three lovers:
- Oh sure, they pay me all right. How'd you guess? They pay me with a couple of hours of their valuable time. They tell me their troubles and why they're divorced and separated, and they let me make dinner once in a while. They play ball with the boys in Central Park on Sundays. Oh sure, Pa, I'm paid up to here. (288)
- 22 As weak or cowardly as they may seem, double-talk and pretence also are creative in their own way. Do not lying or "telling slant" require as much talent as telling things straight? Is it not a strategy to avoid inflicting pain on oneself and others, to mitigate alienation or despair? Paley's ironic characters are escapists, endowed with powerful imaginations.

- 23 While liars or pretenders often pursue their own interests, Paley's fictional creatures hardly ever seem to defend theirs, or not efficiently, and a form of truth—a "floating truth"<sup>1</sup>—does seep through their cagey or deluded attitudes. Answers always seem to fall beside the point, beneath or above, but never with a view to embellish or exculpate. As they ironically elude other people's inquiries or comments, the characters in fact unwittingly acknowledge their own sense of guilt and low self-esteem. Much as Faith's father may be earnestly fighting for his life, all characters develop strategies of survival rather than offensives to gain power. An intense, though clairvoyant love for people can be felt in Paley's short fiction—love even for people's foibles and failures. With fondness rather than resignation, Grace Paley evinces a no-nonsense attitude to the world, taking it as it comes, and embracing as much of it as she can. Faith, her fictional alter ego, makes fun of idealists as she brings her father back to "the real and ordinary world" with which she fills his "innocent ear" (287). This "real and ordinary world" is indeed what Grace Paley is interested in, as she herself stated "I write about the lives of women and men of our time" (Paley, Interview Hulley 24). Such interest must have earned her work its "realistic" label, despite her original style, characterization and narrative strategies. The reader can no more anticipate them than she can anticipate his/her existence to come. As Alan Wilde suggests, the world "continues to be for Paley 'the interesting world,' ["Faith in a Tree"] as open and unpredictable as the digressive techniques she characteristically uses to express it" (184). Paley's work may thus be called realistic from a phenomenological viewpoint, or an insider's viewpoint, as indeed the text reflects a speaker-listener's experience, with its lacks and blurred or mute points. No omniscient narrator intervenes to organize the reader's perception into a coherently structured whole. Yet her characters, however disconcerting they may seem at first sight, are in fact strangely resembling versions of ourselves.
- 24 By staging surprise throughout her stories—"enormous changes at the last minute"—the author aims in fact at offering a true-to-life picture of a world in which things do not last and where the only certitude is change. Ferguson sees in the specific, fragmented structure of the Faith stories, which Paley chose not to bring together into a novel, the reflection of a dominant culture "crumbling from its own inconsistencies and inattention." While Paley strives to preserve a measure of hope, since "everyone real or invented deserves the open destiny of life" ("A Conversation with my Father" 237), her characters' puzzling behaviors, as well as the devices through which they are represented, stem from an acute awareness of the ephemeral nature of life and from the anxieties generated by human finitude. Hence the sense of loneliness that may arise from the stories despite all-but constant interactions between characters. Such sense of loneliness is enhanced by the disruptions in the dialogues as well as by the occasional resort to metafiction: taking the narrative itself as their object, metafictional narrators leave the characters to their isolation as textual creatures, keeping them partly remote from the readers. Yet the readers, who live in language, who *are* language, are likely to feel both the potentials and limits of language, as the characters struggle to make themselves understood and find support. The pervasive tension and unease perceptible in the stories do not spring from estrangement so much as from the reader's sense of kinship with all too human characters. Anguish and pain can be felt in the blanks and silences of the narratives. Paley's characters have all been hurt, and their strategies of evasion are a tentative response to deeper anxieties and existential fears.

## Later the Same Day: Postponing Death

- 25 In most cases, the characters' lack of purposefulness or resolution owe little to sheer frivolity or off-handedness. Rather, their wavering courses reflect their being caught in an absurd plight, and their awareness of human frailty in the face of an indifferent cosmos. The unpredictable quality of life conveyed by Paley's stories is turned into an opportunity for moral developments, as argued by Alan Wilde: she "invites us [...] to perceive the moral, as well as the epistemological, perplexities of inhabiting and coming to terms with a world that is itself ontologically contingent and problematic" (4). Stranded in a finite world, the characters seek continuity from the heart of separateness and isolation, and they prefer emotions, be they painful to vacuity. Tears offer their soothing veil to Faith at the end of "Dreamer in a Dead Language," as she falls prey to exasperation and outrage:

She wanted to scream, Help!  
Had she been born ten, fifteen years later, she might have done so, screamed and screamed.  
Instead, tears made their usual protective lenses for the safe observation of misery.  
(291)

- 26 In the absence of transcendence there is some comfort to be found in such intense emotions, for they at least allow one to feel alive. Even as they strive to give sense to their lives, the characters are aware of the ultimate futility of their efforts.

She had begun her worried preparations for death. [...]  
She said, Go to sleep for godsakes, you damn fool, you and your Communist ideas.  
We saw them already, Papa and me, in 1905. We guessed it all.  
At the door of the kitchen she said, You never finish your lunch. You run around senselessly. What will become of you?  
Then she died. ("Mother" 335)

- 27 Their haphazard ways and talk may well give the reader an impression of vain agitation, of desperate, pointless attempts to resist the passing of time: does Faith not unconsciously aspire to rehearse her own death, as she asks her sons to bury her under the sand—yet leave her enough space to move about a little ("so I can give you a good whack every now and then when you're too fresh" [291])? According to Miller Budick, Faith here "plays out her own worst fears: that the parents' life forces can be preserved only at the expense of the child's, that their radicalism and idealism, like their very survival, diminish her own" (230). Is Faith not—even unconsciously—hoping to make death familiar so as to mitigate the anguish she and her children have just experienced in the old people's home?

- 28 Writing and reading, and art in general, offer the possibility to experience the impossible—the experience of death, for one thing—through representation and imagination. Grace Paley's strategies of resisting the inexorable passing of time include settling down in the ephemeral—making good use of time, kneading the immaterial structures it offers into rhythmic patterns in prose, or metric structures and beats in poems. Paley's sensitivity to the music of language is apparent in the carefully chosen sounds and patterns of speech and narrative, as well-illustrated by the following paragraph, evoking both materially and thematically Faith's ear for the sensuality of male voices:

In Faith's kitchen, later that night, Philip read the poem aloud. His voice had a timbre which reminded her of evening, maybe nighttime. She had often thought of

the way wide air lives and moves in a man's chest. Then it's strummed into shape  
by the short-stringed voice box to become a wonderful secondary sexual  
characteristic. (274)

- 29 The steady beat and fluid continuity of the sentences aptly convey the motions giving birth to voice while repeated consonants (“r,” “m,” “t,” “w,” “s”) bring into the text the referred-to sensuality. While Paley’s characters try to keep everything short-lived or transitory, changing lovers or places, in a desperate attempt to avoid ending, as if repeated endings defused the agony of finitude, their creator develops a poetics of lightness, skimming the surface of things so as to feel and affect without leaving indelible marks, so as to preserve the possibility to disengage oneself without renouncing all responsibilities. Paley’s are fallible, vulnerable characters, sketched with enough kindness to arouse compassion and to call for identification.
- 30 The overall vision coming out of the stories is not of despair but rather of hopeful acceptance and endurance—as the heroine’s first name, “Faith,” suggests. Wilde comes to similar conclusions as he states that “what is at issue is not an effort to ignore or mitigate the fact of death but the attempt to accept it and, through that acceptance, to make possible the raggedly continuing activities of life” (183). The narrators’ discontinuous ways involve the reader in the creation of meaning, as he/she has to fill in the blanks to compose the characters’ portraits, within each story and from one story to another: “Well you just have to let the story lie around till some agreement can be reached between you and the stubborn hero” (“A Conversation with my Father” 239). Yet such collaboration keeps being challenged by suspension, surprise and detours: “the little disturbances” of reading progressively shape the reading practice into an image of living—a matter of perseverance and adaptation, which is difficult but rewarding. The readers’ efforts at making sense of the inchoate and the disjointed are all that matters, as they correspond to one of the main aspirations in life, contributing to the definition of what being human means: ever resisting the main stream of habits and norms as well as the repeated assaults of accident, so as to follow the flux of one’s and each others’ emotions. Even as he/she may be under the impression of being left in the margins or outskirts of the stories, like an outside observer looking on in silent emotion, the reader feels involved in the shared grief of being fallible and mortal. Whether it is “songs or poems” (277), little matters, as long as one goes on sending out to the wide world one’s message-in-a-bottle. From Milton’s poetry, alluded to at the beginning of “Dreamer” (276), to the “*Poems from the Golden Age*” (277) written in the retirement home and finally to “Dreamer in a Dead Language” (275), the gloss of tradition and antiquity is gone, but the beat remains, and the rhymes—the dynamic principles that keep propelling language forever ahead, the patterns that will stay with us, stamped in our memories but that will admit reshaping and amending over time.
- 31 “The real question is how are we to live our lives?,” Paley declares in her dedication to the *Collected Stories*. She leaves the question open, thus making her reading public aware how crucial it is. As they promote endurance and self-derision, her stories read as incentives to live intensely and imaginatively. Repetition, in her stories as well in her poetry, is turned into the vital impulse to live on. The poem “This Life” reformulates the author’s indomitable vitality:
- my friend was not interested he said you're always  
inventing stuff what I want to know how could he throw  
his life away how do these guys do it  
just like that and here I am fighting this

ferocious insane vindictive virus day and  
 night day and night and for what? for only  
 one thing this life this life (*Begin Again* 162)

- 32 The eagerness perceptible at the end of “This Life” shifts to a more peaceful expression of acknowledgement or acceptance of the life of others in Paley’s poem “Here,” whose title is evocative of the author’s anchoring in the present, and of her desire to enjoy every single minute, whatever the conditions, in old age as much as in youth:

Here I am in the garden laughing  
 an old woman with heavy breasts  
 and a nicely mapped face  
 how did this happen  
 well that's who I wanted to be (*Begin Again* 177)

- 33 The change indicated in the poem through the question—now devoid of anxiety—“how did this happen” is “the biggest surprise” of old age evoked in “Dreamer in a Dead Language” (286). In “Here,” it is presented as a willed-for surprise, expected and desired, both a part and a sign of life. Paley’s carefully wrought language deceptively conjures ordinary speech forms to draw a sophisticated literary textual object out of them, and invites the reader to embrace, not resist the course of time. Paley exploits the variegated resources and beauties of time, and of language, developing in time, as the writer’s privileged material. She offers “songs or poems” (277) on time and of time—the very condition of hope, pain and joy.

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## NOTES

1. See the short story entitled “The Floating Truth.”

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## ABSTRACTS

Cet article analyse les formes de discontinuité, de surprise et d'instabilité dans les nouvelles de Grace Paley, en portant un intérêt tout particulier à "Dreamer in a Dead Language", afin de mettre au jour la vision spécifique du langage, de la vie et de la mort que reflètent ces formes discontinues. L'instabilité et la pratique du détour délibérées semblent offrir le moyen de continuer à s'adresser aux autres malgré les échecs de la communication. Plus que tout, elles ouvrent la voie d'une réconciliation avec la perspective de la mort tout en exprimant avec humour et tendresse un puissant désir de vivre – aussi faillible que soit l'être humain qui se sait voué à la désillusion mais continue de « rêver » dans une langue qui, parce qu'elle est d'abord « morte » a pu être renouvelée.

## AUTHORS

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Anne-Laure Tissut is Professor of American Literature at Rouen University, France. Her research focuses on contemporary American literature, on aesthetics, exchanges between forms and media as well as on translation. She also translates American and English fiction and poetry into French (Blake Butler, Percival Everett, Nick Flynn, Laird Hunt, Adam Thirlwell, Steve Tomasula) and takes part in collaborative translations from French into American English. She is co-founder of the Percival Everett Society.