

A PERFECT MARGINALITY: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE TELLING IN THE STORIES OF GRACE PALEY

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It was possible that I did owe something to my own family and the families of my friends. That is, to tell their stories as simply as possible, in order, you might say, to save a few lives.¹

So resolves Grace Paley's narrator in the short story "Debts" as she—like so many of Paley's narrators—begins to make public, to reinvent, personal history. These lines, spoken by a narrator who is also a character dramatized in the story, suggest that Paley at once thematizes the act of telling stories in her fiction and employs storytelling as a fundamental narrative structural device. The resolve to "tell" stories, as set forth by Paley's narrator in "Debts," illustrates by no means simply a classic storytelling prelude, which frames a story within a story. More to the point, Paley's narrators reflect an urgency to tell stories. For them, recording the lives of their families and friends becomes a *necessity* which can be heard in the immediacy in their individual and collective voices; it is the "debt" that Paley's narrator "owes."² One might well claim that virtually all of Paley's stories call attention to *telling* in one sense or another (many of the titles of the stories themselves reflect this preoccupation: "A Man Told Me the Story of His Life," "The Story Hearer," "Zagrowsky Tells," "Listening," and the like). For Paley and her host of character-narrators, telling becomes the collective experience of *bearing witness*, the making public of personal mythologies, validating both self and community. Through her skillful use of terse, simple language, Paley creates a community of shared belief and experience. It is this communal experience that is reinforced through the words of her narrators, characters who tell their stories and the stories of their families and friends. The dramatic unfolding of these narratives, derived from the tension created by Paley's stark and unsparring use of language, underscores, paradoxically, a source of hope and optimism for her characters. For, in verbalizing and thus making real individual histories, telling stories serves as a means of connecting, of creating a community in which Paley's narrators and characters may indeed "save a

¹"Debts," in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), p. 10. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

²Grace Paley herself refers to the transmission of stories as a kind of moral obligation: "People ought to live in mutual aid and concern, listening to one another's stories" ("A Symposium on Fiction," *Shenandoah*. 28 [Winter 1976], 31).

few lives." It is this saving power of storytelling, the merging of public and private discourses, that moves Paley's short fiction and demonstrates the life-affirming force of memory enlivened through community.

Paley's characters cry out to be heard, to connect with others, believing that, in doing so, they will imbue their lives with meaning. In "Listening," for example, Faith (a reappearing character who governs the telling in many of Paley's stories)³ is confronted by her friend Cassie, who, angered that she has been omitted from Faith's stories, feels that her identity has been denied. In her characteristic mixture of irony and humor, Paley constructs a character who steps into the narrative to demand characterization, so to speak, to assert her place in the unfolding of the story. In doing so, she demands a kind of public approbation from her friend, the narrator of the story:

Listen, Faith, why don't you tell my story? You've told everybody's story but mine. I don't even mean my whole story, that's my job. You probably can't. But I mean you've just omitted me from the other stories and I was there. In the restaurant and the train, right there. Where is Cassie? Where is *my* life? . . . you even care about me at least as much as you do Ruthy and Louise and Ann. You let them in all the time; it's really strange, why have you left me out of everybody's life?⁴

On the one hand, as Cassie makes clear above, it is her responsibility to tell her *own* story, to take control over her own life. On the other hand, however, individuals do not live in isolation from each other in Paley's fictional universe. They have a responsibility to one another, to include one another in the telling of stories, in the making and reinforcing of reality. And they do so carefully, deliberately. In leaving her friend out of the stories she tells, Faith has essentially denied her a reality. Furthermore, in omitting Cassie from her story, Faith prevents her from participating in the community. Cassie's plaintive tone is very suggestive here; it calls attention to her *need* to be a part of "everybody's life," an ongoing communal heritage. Cassie, of course, is the narrator's invention, just as Faith is Paley's fictive creation. Paley's self-conscious, reflexive narration here renders her own authorial position ironic. She, as writer, invents and thus gives life to her characters. Their utterances, however fictive, enliven them, make them real. And what makes this passage so compelling is the implied relation between self and others, and the reminder of the storyteller's responsibility to tell and, in so doing, to bring together the lives of her friends. In recognition is affirma-

³For a discussion of the evolving role of this character-narrator, see Minako Baba, "Faith Darwin as Writer-Heroine: A Study of Grace Paley's Short Stories," *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 7 (Spring 1988), 40-54.

⁴"Listening," in *Later the Same Day* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 210. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

tion, is self-identity. Faith responds to her friend by acknowledging her outrage: "It must feel for you like a great absence of yourself" (210).

Storytelling thus becomes a process of discovery, a *making of selves* for Paley's characters, but a making of selves *in relation to others*, to a community of belief, a community of shared values. I am reminded here of the "community of memory" and the creative, enduring power of such "communities" set forth by Robert N. Bellah, et al., in *Habits of the Heart*:

Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a "community of memory," one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. These stories of collective history and exemplary individuals are an important part of the tradition that is so central to a community of memory.⁵

The "community of memory" for Grace Paley's characters depends upon a coming-to-terms with the past, which, by necessity, is comprised of the ethical choices and circumstances of others. These choices, of course, determine possibilities for the future. In "The Immigrant Story," for instance, Jack tells the haunting story of his parents' past. Polish immigrants who have lost three sons to famine, they live out the remainder of their lives—sorrowfully, from Jack's point of view—in America. Their story becomes the vehicle, the filter, through which Jack views the world: "Isn't it a terrible thing to grow up in the shadow of another person's sorrow?"⁶ Jack can't let go of his parents' past because in it he views his own agency, his own participation and thus compliance. In describing their lives in America, he concludes his story:

They are sitting at the edge of their chairs. He's leaning forward reading to her in that old bulb light. Sometimes she smiles just a little. Then he puts the paper down and takes both her hands in his as though they needed warmth. He continues to read. Just beyond the table and their heads, there is the darkness of the kitchen, the bedroom, the dining room, the shadowy darkness where as a child I ate my supper, did my homework and went to bed. (175)

The abrupt closure of Jack's story, the matter-of-fact, abbreviated rendition of the narration at large, suggests a combination of reluctance and

⁵*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 153. Subsequent reference is cited in the text.

⁶"The Immigrant Story," in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 171. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

urgency—an uneasy compulsion to tell. Jack’s “memory” of his parents’ past is fictionalized in the *telling* of it, fictionalized in such a way that he can see it in the light of his own day, making their lives *real* in the telling. It is this connection between memory and stories, community and a shared past, that we find in Paley’s unique voice and in the varied voices of her narrators.

It is, in no small part, this multi-layered narrative interplay of voices that enriches Paley’s fiction so dramatically. Her short stories, characteristically related in first-person narration, are “told” by characters in conversational style, a necessarily abbreviated form of address, because they speak a language that the other characters understand. Paley creates a linguistic community based on shared assumptions about how the world *works*: her characters speak the same language, as it were, and recognize that in talking—in conversations about people, living and dead, about experiences, about politics, love, children—they are giving meaning to the past and so create a “community of memory” out of shared stories. In, for example, “Friends,” a small group of women, friends for a generation, sit at the bedside of their dying friend, another woman whose own child died. Their gathering is defined by storytelling—stories of their pasts, collective and individual, and of the lives of their children. In recollecting the past, in naming the dead child of their dying friend, the women bring her back to life: “I wanted to say ‘Abby’ the way I’ve said ‘Selena’—so those names can take thickness and strength and fall back into the world with their weight,”⁷ affirms the narrator.

Individual tragedies are embraced by the community here, as they always are in Paley’s stories. But the community is selective and, more often than not, gender-defined. In “Listening,” for example, Faith responds to Jack’s question of why she doesn’t tell stories “told by women about women” by claiming, “those are too private” (203). However, there is virtually no distinction between public and private for Paley. Faith’s reluctance here to tell Jack stories about women speaks to the establishment of and belief in a community of women, which provides mutual strength and support. By its very nature, telling stories is a public act, but one which gives meaning to private sorrow, personal suffering, and tragedy. However, in the telling—and this is what makes words so powerful for Paley’s characters—sorrow is mitigated. The act of telling provides hope; it suggests a future because the private is shared and preserved in the memory, in the language, of others. And this, finally, for Paley, defines community. Dena Mandel argues in “Keeping Up with Faith: Grace Paley’s Sturdy American Jewess” that Paley’s Faith Darwin, in particular, functions as “an emblem of hope in a hopeless world.”⁸ I would go on to argue that hope exists not only in the ways in which Paley’s narrators live in the

⁷“Friends,” in *Later the Same Day*, p. 79. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
⁸See *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 3 (1983), 85-98.

world, but also in the ways in which they *talk about* living in that world. Talk enlivens the past for Paley's characters as well as ensures a future: "You grab at roots of the littlest future," says the narrator in "Friends," "sometimes just stubs of conversation" (83)—as a stronghold on life. It is these "stubs of conversation" with which Paley creates a community into which we too are drawn, since, as John Clayton contends in a very interesting essay, "Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen: Radical Jewish Humanists," "it is our common life, our common pain, that concerns her. . . . In the stories of how many modern writers do we hear of collective experience?"⁹

This "collective experience" is achieved through the active telling voices of Paley's characters. And this community can only occur and remain intact if the stories are told. Paley's narrator in "Debts" tells us: "There is a long time in me between knowing and telling" (9). Such invention is a process of making knowledge, a process refined. In creating characters who tell their own stories and the stories of their friends, Paley is able to bring to her fiction a multiplicity of perspectives. This coming-together of diverse points of view enriches our reading experience and, perhaps even more to the point, provides us with a more complete worldview, suggesting to us—as it does to her characters—the possibilities for life. Paley as the implied author who invents characters, dramatic situations, and actions, remains behind the scenes, as it were, allowing her characters to speak for themselves. In this way, Paley is very much in the tradition of the late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century Eastern European Yiddish writers such as Sholom Aleichem, who made a place for Yiddish fiction, who formed a written tradition of Jewish storytelling in which we can locate such contemporary Jewish writers as Issac Bashëvis Singer and Tillie Olsen. Sholom Aleichem, the great Yiddish realist and humorist, creates in his short fiction the qualities of oral storytelling—an orality, preserved in written prose, that has continued to be a fundamental characteristic of Jewish literature.¹⁰

The orality in Paley's fiction contributes to the fluidity of her prose and engages the reader in what often appears to be direct address with the character-narrators. In constructing characters who become narrators, the tellers of their own tales, Paley's characters resemble the monologists in Sholom Aleichem's early stories of ordinary *shtetl* Jews—Jews who relate their troubles, their complaints, to the writer Sholom Aleichem. In doing so, Sholom Aleichem's monologists seek vindication. The monologist in the short vignette "Gitl Purishkevitch" is typical in beseeching the writer, Sholom Aleichem, to record the injustices of her life: "do I deserve having

⁹"Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen: Radical Jewish Humanists," *Response*, 46 (Spring 1984), 43. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

¹⁰For a comprehensive account of the origins of Yiddish literature, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), and my *Author As Character in the Works of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

people laugh at me and poke fun at me, having everyone's tongue wagging about me? . . . This town's made up of wags, numbskulls and loafers. . . . Write them up so that the whole world will know about them. Write it all down so that not a single one of them will escape being written up."¹¹ Like Sholom Aleichem's narrator, Paley's characters believe, more often than not, that making public their personal inequities will give them control over their lives; through the telling they, in fact, secure a future. How like Sholom Aleichem's monologist is Paley's character-narrator Zagrowsky, in "Zagrowsky Tells":

since I already began to tell, I have to tell the whole story. I'm not a person who keeps things in. Tell! That opens up the congestion a little—the lungs are for breathing, not secrets. My wife never tells, she coughs, coughs. All night. Wakes up. Ai, Iz, open up the window, there's no air. You poor woman, if you want to breathe, you got to tell.

So I said to this Faith, I'll tell you how Cissy is but you got to hear the whole story how we suffered.¹²

I emphasize the connection between such seemingly unrelated writers because both Sholom Aleichem and Grace Paley are masters of the construction of dialogue in the short-story form.¹³ Both not only construct characters who, as I've said, are compelled with such urgency to tell their life-stories, but also write about them with a mixture of affection and irony. Their characters are ordinary people, *not* exemplary individuals noted for exceptional deeds. Or perhaps I should say, they are exemplary *because* they are ordinary—recognizable, identifiable people whose lives revolve around common occurrences. When asked to record the life of a stranger's grandfather, "a famous innovator and dreamer of the Yiddish theatre," Paley's narrator in "Debts" declines, saying, "I owed nothing to the lady who'd called" (10). She opts to tell, rather, a story about the family of her friend Lucia. By no means, however, are we meant to believe that the quotidian is any less tragic than the extraordinary. The very stuff of ordinary dialogue is full of tragic possibilities, as "Listening" demonstrates. In this story, the narrator overhears a conversation in which two men dispassionately discuss the timing and relative merits of suicide. Paley's characteristically understated tone underscores the pathos in the

¹¹Sholom Aleichem, "Gitl Purishkevitch," in *Old Country Tales*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York: Paragon Books, 1966), p. 148.

¹²"Zagrowsky Tells," in *Later the Same Day*, p. 161.

¹³I realize that the relation between Sholom Aleichem and Grace Paley, especially in terms of the function of Sholom Aleichem's monologists, is much too complex to address within the scope of this paper. Sholom Aleichem's monologists live in a very different world from that defined by Paley's playgrounds and neighborhoods of New York. I hope, however, that my much-abbreviated comparison is useful in placing Paley within the larger tradition of Jewish writers.

lives of her speakers. It is, indeed, *in* the ordinary that Paley's narrators uncover a rich and complex heritage.

Again I refer to Robert Bellah's description of a "community of memory," a community constructed of the stories of ordinary people:

The stories that make up a tradition contain conceptions of character, of what a good person is like, and of the virtues that define such character. But the stories are not all exemplary, not all about successes and achievements. A genuine community of memory will also tell painful stories of shared suffering that sometimes creates deeper identities than success. . . . And if the community is completely honest, it will remember stories not only of suffering received but of suffering inflicted—dangerous memories, for they call the community to alter ancient evils. The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities. They carry a context of meaning. . . . (153)

It is this context of meaning that allows for identification and community. John Clayton, in defining the underlying Judaism in Paley's fiction, argues that Paley establishes a community based on a "radical Jewish humanism" (41), a communal sense of Judaism as a recognition of suffering, of the role of the oppressed, as a kind of "populist politics" (42) and, moreover, that the value in such a culture is preserved through her stories of ordinary people living out lives with which we can identify. While I agree with Clayton that Paley's fiction is grounded in Judaism—that her fiction indeed reflects and affirms a Jewish heritage, the heritage of the immigrant, the outsider—I think that her stories speak even more powerfully to a universal human experience, an experience defined by seeming antitheses: public and private, traditional role expectations and feminism, suffering and hope, life and death. It is in the resolution of these tensions that Paley's characters and narrators survive. And they survive through the telling, through the making of fictions, through the integration of their collective pasts, their communal experiences and beliefs.

Nowhere more poignantly do we find this relation between invention and reality than in the brilliantly constructed story "A Conversation with My Father." The dramatic situation of this story is, on the surface, relatively simple. The narrator, a writer, is at the bedside of her father, who makes of her a request: "I would like you to write a simple story just once more," he says, "the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write. Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next."¹⁴ The narrator agrees, despite the fact that it's the kind of writing she has "always despised" (162), and the body of the narrative is

¹⁴"A Conversation with My Father," in *Enormous Changes*, p. 161. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

governed by her invention and revision of a story constructed for her father. It is a story about a woman who joins her son and his friends in becoming junkies, only to find herself alone, abandoned by her son, who opts for health food and a clean life instead. It is a story, says the narrator, "that had been happening for a couple of years right across the street" (162). Fiction, reinforced by reality becomes the governing metaphor for the frame story as well. The two "stories" work together: the "outer" story, the narrator's conversation with her father; and the "inner" story, the story she constructs to please him.

Her story, however, does not please him. He wants motive, character development, plot—"the absolute line between two points" (162). She can't give this to him because, in her estimation, such a story "takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (162). What we come to discover, in the dramatic unfolding of the frame story, is that the narrator's insistence upon what she describes as "the open destiny of life" is, beyond anything else, self-protective. After several drafts of her story, in which her protagonist's life ends in despair, she constructs a hopeful story of a woman who has options. Yet the narrator's father insists on a tragic ending to her story. In this moving dialogue between the narrator and her father, we come to appreciate the source of the story's tension:

"Yes," he said, "what a tragedy. The end of a person."

"No, Pa," I begged him. "It doesn't have to be. She's only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on. A teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie! Sometimes it's better than having a master's in education."

"Jokes," he said. "As a writer that's your main trouble. You don't want to recognize it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end."

"Oh, Pa," I said. "She could change."

"In your own life, too, you have to look it in the face." He took a couple of nitroglycerin. "Turn to five," he said, pointing to the dial on the oxygen tank. (166-67)

The narrator has constructed a story—a tragicomic story about a woman with options, with hope for the future—as a protective shield against reality. The fabricated story about hope, the story with "the open destiny of life," functions as a way of denying the reality of her father's inevitable death. As the narrator revises her story about the heartbroken woman, she amends it in such a way that prevents closure. She believes that she has a responsibility not to let that woman die alone and miserable: "She's my knowledge and my invention. I'm sorry for her. I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying"; "She did change. Of course her son never came home again. But right now, she's the receptionist in a storefront community clinic in the East Village. Most of the customers are young people, some old

friends. The head doctor has said to her, 'If we only had three people in this clinic with your experiences . . .'" (167). And here the two stories merge in what becomes more and more a battle for authorial control, since the narrator's father responds to her story's conclusion by arguing, "No. . . Truth first. She will slide back. A person must have character. She does not" (167).

Somewhat ironically and self-consciously, Paley's character has just told the internal narrator-writer that her protagonist lacks character. "Character" becomes the key in making stories real, because it creates empathy and identification. This is the responsibility that Paley gives her narrators and that she assumes herself. For "A Conversation with My Father" ends in mid-dialogue, ends with a question posed to the narrator by her father: "Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?" (167). Of course, what he wants her to look at is the inevitability of his own death. Life, he implies, is indeed "the absolute line between two points" between living and dying. However, Paley's storytelling defies such sharp delineation. In writing this story, Paley's narrator does more than simply immortalize her father. He is not a static character any more than her narrator is, but rather, an active participant in an ongoing dialogue which gives him the last word.

Herein lies the "perfect marginality"¹⁵ of Grace Paley's prose: "marginal" because the line between fiction and reality is precarious and because, for her characters, identity is a continual process; "perfect" because both self-identity and community are preserved in that precarious relation. Through the telling of stories, the ongoing dialogues among her characters, Paley creates a balance, which is, for her, a source of power. Dialogue provides her characters with possibilities for the future because it prevents resolution; it gives them the strength to insist on survival. Recording personal histories, creating and reinventing interaction and events, sustains her characters because it places them in the context of a wider human history. It makes such stories public, part of the heritage from which we all draw. The telling of stories becomes, in a very real sense, the saving of lives.

¹⁵I have liberally borrowed this phrase from Cynthia Ozick's wonderful description of what it means to be "a third-generation American Jew (though the first to have been native-born) perfectly at home and yet perfectly insecure, perfectly acculturated and yet perfectly marginal" ("Toward a New Yiddish: Note," in *Art & Ardor: Essays by Cynthia Ozick* [New York: Knopf, 1985], p. 152). For an analysis of the paradoxical position of contemporary Jewish-American women, see my "The Outsider Within: Women in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction," *Contemporary Literature*, 28 (Fall 1987), 378-393.