

Grace Paley Writing the World

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One day I made up a story. I imagined a wild old woman leaning on her elbows at her open window, next door to the schoolyard, making a speech to the street. She shouted: Listen. Stop! I must tell you that smart, greedy madmen intend to destroy this beautifully made planet. Listen!

Grace Paley, "One Day I Made Up a Story" (*Just as I Thought* 196)

Grace Paley is world renowned as a short fiction writer, poet, essayist, political activist, and especially, perhaps, as one of the most brilliant short story writers of all time. Angela Carter said it best: "Technically, Grace Paley's work makes the novel as a form seem virtually redundant" (*Collected Stories*, Jacket blurb). And yet Paley has received little serious critical attention. This special issue of *Contemporary Women's Writing* emerges from this critical lacuna. It originated in a Forum and two linked sessions at the December 2008 Modern Language Association Convention in San Francisco, at which some of Paley's most probing readers came together to discuss the literary and the political dimensions of her work and to explore her unique voice and literary career.

Let us imagine Grace Paley as that wild old woman shouting to us out of her window, enjoining us to listen. Much that is characteristic of her work can be found in these few sentences. The force of her voice: she speaks, she shouts, she warns. Her subject position: she writes, most often and most unusually for a fiction writer, in a mature adult voice and, eventually, self-consciously, as an old woman. Her location: by or on the street, next to the schoolyard; children are always present, vulnerable and well-loved reminders of an endangered future. Her concerns: the world, its vulnerability to greed, to war, and to destruction. Her engagement with

that world: she leans out of the window, yelling, she will not be still. And her belief in the truth of fiction: the story is “made up.” In the next paragraph, the wild old woman shuts the window and plays the piano for a while. She is complete in herself; she creates, but her creativity is fed by the world outside her window, a world she tries desperately to save from itself.

Paley’s work poses paradoxical difficulties to the reader and the critic: she simply does not seem to fit into the established conventions of her time, nor does her work respond to predominant critical approaches. Paley foregrounds these difficulties in her story “A Conversation with My Father”: “I would like you to write a simple story just once more,” the father in the story says, “the kind Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write. Just recognizable people and write down what happened to them next.” She would like to write such a story, the narrator thinks, but she has “always despised . . . plot, the absolute line between two points. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away” (Paley, *The Collected Stories* 232). She simply can’t write a “plain story,” the father concludes, “so don’t waste time” (234). Her rejection of linear plot, and her embrace of the “open destiny of life” that “everyone, real or invented, deserves” (232), are not the only difficulties her work poses, however.

Seemingly transparent and always colloquial, her stories and poems are structurally complex, even opaque. Plots take unforeseen turns, embracing open destinies and remaining, most often, unresolved. Seemingly realistic, they are postmodern, absurd, fantastical, “people sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who knows where,” as the ornery father and ordinary reader complain (233). Engaged, outspoken, and seemingly spontaneous, her stories, poems, and essays are carefully crafted and formally intricate. Her political commitments are absolutely clear, but her poetry and her fiction, and even her essays, resist interpretation, following unexpected paths and revealing irresolvable complexities.

Paley is a woman writer, a Jewish writer, an immigrant writer, an urban writer, a rural poet, but she exceeds and defies any such traditional characterization. Her characters, most often, are adult women and men, going about their daily lives, unusual in a literary world that is largely shaped by stories about childhood and the quest for origins, about the processes of coming of age and the events of romance. They have parents, of course, but their most powerful attachments are to their friends, sometimes their children, and also, but not centrally or exclusively, their lovers. They are fully engaged in the world around them; they read, work, lead ordinary daily lives. They are always in conversation with each other and with Paley’s readers. We lack, it seems, a critical idiom for such a writer.

Throughout her writing career, Paley gave frequent readings, talks, and interviews, taught many writing classes, and attended numerous political meetings and rallies. She was so publically accessible, present, and engaged, that many readers feel they know her well. She tells us a good deal about her writing in her stories, poems, and interviews, and she does so in such appealing ways as to create the temptation to cite her rather than grapple with the work itself. Paley’s charming and disarming

public persona matches the deceptive simplicity of her stories and poems. Perhaps this is why we have only just begun to engage with her work and to assess her artistic legacy. Her recent death has prompted an urgent need for just such a serious analysis.

It is fitting for a critical discussion of Paley's work that the essays included here retain some of the intimate qualities of their oral presentations. Though addressed to the academic audience of the MLA convention, and written in response to an invitation to engage in close readings of particular texts and specific aspects of Paley's work, these essays also, necessarily, fall into the genre of the tribute. Paley's death in August 2007 is still quite fresh, and many of the contributors to this issue knew and loved her. But as much as we write with a sense of mourning her loss, we also wish, each in our own way, to find critical methods to discuss the work of this remarkable writer and to invite others to teach and write about her work.

Grace Paley, who had primarily written poems during her childhood and youth, published her first short story collection, *Little Disturbances of Man*, in 1959. It was followed by *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), *Later the Same Day* (1985), and *The Collected Stories* (1994). The short fiction stands alongside her poetry volumes *Leaning Forward* (1985) and *Begin Again: Collected Poems* (2000), her book of essays and speeches *Just as I Thought* (1998), her book of poetry and prose *Long Walks and Intimate Talks*, with illustrations by Vera Williams (1991), and the joint volume with her husband, the writer Robert Nichols, *Here and Somewhere Else* (2007). Her last volume of poetry, *Fidelity*, was published posthumously in 2008.

Paley's literary work spans the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Born to recent immigrants from Ukraine in the Bronx in 1922, Paley moved only as far as Greenwich Village and, eventually, Vermont. But her political work took her across the world to numerous sites of world and US conflict. Still, her stories and poems are mostly products of the intimate settings of New York and Vermont – her childhood home in the Bronx, the parks and schoolyards of Greenwich Village, and the country roads, gardens, and hillsides of Vermont.

Her writing voice emerged from the languages and inflexions that surrounded her in her Bronx childhood, and the Russian and Yiddish spoken by her immigrant parents. Paley studied briefly at Hunter College and New York University and, though she never finished college, she taught writing in numerous workshops and universities, most notably Sarah Lawrence College, Syracuse University, Dartmouth College, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, among many others. Some have argued that the freshness of her voice can be explained by her lack of formal education, but it is also imperative to stress Paley's profound intellectual and political formation, acquired in the less formal contexts of New York intellectual life and the active readings and discussions motivating the political work of her generation.

Paley's stories are peopled by the women and men of her New York world, engaged in the dailiness of lives spanning post-World War II adjustments, in the women's movement, in struggles for civil rights and environmental justice struggles,

antinuclear struggles, and protests against the war in Vietnam, the United States' involvement in Central America, in the Gulf, and in the Iraq wars. Deeply committed to the feminist and peace movements, Paley did some of her most important political work with and on behalf of writers throughout the world, fighting political repression.

Thus, Paley's writing career needs to be seen in relation to her important and influential political and intellectual activism and engagement. Since the 1950s, she worked with, supported, founded, and cofounded a number of activist political groups working for peace, including the War Resisters' League, the Women's Pentagon Action, The Clamshell Alliance, Resist, and Madre. She was active in PEN, particularly in the struggles against censorship and as a founder of the PEN Women's Committee (this in response to a 1986 all-male conference organized by Norman Mailer and to the invitation of Secretary of State George Schultz to speak at PEN). Paley traveled to Hanoi on a 1969 Peace Mission and to Moscow as a delegate to the 1974 World Peace Conference. In 1979, she organized the first feminist environmental conference, "Women and Life on Earth." Paley was named the first official writer of New York State and, more recently, Vermont's Poet Laureate. With Robert Nichols, she founded and ran a small leftist publishing company, Glad Day Books.

What one might call Paley's *littérature engagée* bridges writing and activism. Many have said about Paley that if she had not gone to so many demonstrations, she would have written more books. Although she was certainly sensitive to the charge that her output was what reviewers sometimes called "slight," her reply to this frequent charge was always, "But then what would I have written about?"

Rooted in her generation – the generation, broadly, of Philip Roth and Norman Mailer, of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, of Tillie Olsen, Maxine Kumin, and Paule Marshall – Paley has forged a unique voice and body of work, a unique way of writing the world, and of being in the world. Only someone of Paley's characteristic courage and optimism, for example, would see, from the start, the rich possibilities in the identity of the "housewife who wants to be a writer." This is, in fact, how she was described in her early reviews. What can her work tell us about how she eluded the pitfalls of her generation of women writers – despair, suicide, debilitating anger? Why did she feel "lucky" rather than oppressed or disadvantaged, as others in her situation might have? How was she able to mobilize the healing power of humor to offer, over and over again, inspiring possibilities of repair? To muster a form of irony that is illuminating without being superior, distancing, or dismissive? As Alix Kates Shulman said in a recent broadcast on National Public Radio, "Paley's stories changed my life. We women needed to write about our own experience but feared we would be relegated to literary marginality. Now here was Paley, writing about what I lived, and it was recognized as Literature."

At a PEN tribute to Paley at the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York in 2007, Michael Cunningham argued that, like only a few other writers, one recognizes Paley's unmistakable voice from the first few words of any of her stories. To prove his point, he read the beginning of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, of Faulkner's *The*

1 To hear Grace Paley's voice in a sampling of radio readings and interviews, see the links provided in the bibliography under Additional Resources.

Sound and the Fury, and of Paley's "The Loudest Voice." What makes her voice so distinctive?¹ While addressing the literary and the political dimensions of her work, the contributors to this special issue pay focused attention to particular stories or poems, to individual characters, scenes, and turns of phrase, precisely in order to respond to this question. This exercise in close reading is not a retreat into aestheticism, or a denial of the political legacy of a great writer-activist. On the contrary, we all wish to explore the effects of Paley's work on the cultural life of our times and vice versa. We want to understand the connections between writing and activism and the particular form of political and feminist writing and thought that Paley forged. But we also want to pay close attention to her craft and to think about her particular contribution to short fiction and to poetic form.

Following a series of recent tributes by fellow writers and students, some collected beautifully in an issue of the *Massachusetts Review* and others published separately as newspaper articles and obituaries, this issue is the first volume of literary readings of Grace Paley's work. It brings together a number of approaches: the tribute (Allison), reception studies (Miller), formal analysis (de Koven), cultural history (Bell), *explication de texte* (Christiansè), genre studies (Ezrahi), readings for race and gender (Schweitzer), and discussions of specific themes, devices, and formal features of Paley's writing (Perry on orality, Zeiger on breath, Ezrahi on Jewishness). The issue begins with two essays that assess Paley's career and influence more broadly, moves to four close readings of specific stories, poems, themes, and formal devices, and closes with three essays that examine Paley's particular strategies of writing social change. All the contributors share a love of the work and a determination to move beyond its deceptively transparent surface and to take seriously, and account for, its resistances to simple reading and interpretation. They draw on a small body of previous analytic work on Paley: a 1993 biography by Judith Arcana; two monographs also from the early 1990s; several collections and a number of individual interviews with Paley; and a remarkably small number of essays published in journals and essay collections.

In her recent tribute "Stalking Grace," Paley's student Barbara Selfridge describes Paley's "favorite writing assignment. Tell a story from the point of view of someone you're in conflict with. It can be the story of your conflict or it can be some other story, but it has to be from their point of view" (551). Paley always wants you "to know that there's a story over there on the other side," Selfridge continues (552). Grace Paley herself practiced this assignment in most of her stories, essays, and poems. She has often said that there is never just one story, there are at least two, sometimes more. Calling herself a "story hearer," Paley is always attuned to a multiplicity of voices and to their dialogue or their conflict. She listens, reproduces different points of view, and sometimes she lovingly allows her characters an escape from the constraining plots of the later twentieth century – "the open destiny of life." What enables her to do so is the topic of the essays in this issue.

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Additional Resources

- <http://www.progressive.org/radio/paley07best.html>
- <http://www.nhpr.org/node/8897>
- http://www.democracynow.org/2007/8/24/grace_paley_1922_2007_acclaimed_poet
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/audioitem.html?id=464>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13898363>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13924175>