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"The Grand Storyteller[s]": Debt and Emancipation in Grace Paley's "A Conversation with My Father"

Clément-Alexandre Ulff

- 1 One of Grace Paley's most celebrated short stories, "A Conversation with My Father" (1974), relates a passionate argument between a dying father and his daughter about the art of storytelling. Though the tale deliberately strips the two characters to the status of pure "voices from who knows where" (238), it captures a convergence of ethical, political and aesthetic positions which are unmistakably Paley's. Indeed the author claimed that the dialogue unfolding in the story was representative of many of the conversations which she had with her father: "It's not that it happened, but that it could have happened. And parts of it did. It's close to what happened. It really is the body of our running argument on art and the possibilities of life" (Interview Pool and Roses). The reader is thus presented with a conversation neither quite autobiographical nor altogether fictional between two unnamed voices, yet clearly identifiable as Paley's and her father's.
- 2 In this short, yet tightly constructed narrative, the author plays on the boundaries between art and life while offering a reflection on tradition and subversion, debt and emancipation. Family, literature and politics are discussed at length while conflicting definitions of truth, justice and compassion are being examined. The result is the coalescence of a unique *ars poetica* attesting to the author's passionate desire to secure an authentic and autonomous voice.
- 3 The narrator first gives minimal expository details: "My father is eighty-six years old and in bed. His heart, that bloody motor, is equally old and will not do certain jobs anymore. [...] Sitting on one pillow, leaning on three, he offers last-minute advice and makes a request. 'I would like you to write a simple story just once more,' he says" (237). Eager to please her afflicted and bedridden father, the daughter complies. The embedded micro-story, which the reader gets in its integrity, is her account of the life of a neighbor living "right across the street" (237): a Manhattan lower-class single

mother whose teenage son has become a drug addict. The woman decides to use drugs too so as not to become alienated from her boy. When the son eventually gets clean, he turns into a health food freak and abandons his mother, to her great despair: "the boy gave it all up and left the city and his mother in disgust. Hopeless and alone, she grieved" (238).

- 4 The narrator's father, however, criticizes his daughter's story for its lack of background and its jolty, disconnected tone. He asks for a longer, revised version, which his daughter reluctantly provides. Again, he harshly voices his dissatisfaction: "I see you can't tell a plain story. So don't waste time" (241). Father and daughter eventually argue about the ending of the revised, extended version of the embedded story. Should the forsaken mother know a tragic end, as the father suggests in the name of logic and literary realism, or a new, redeemed life, as the daughter proposes? The framing story, which had begun with a cooperative daughter and a gentle father, now ends in a comic impasse with the father vehemently urging his daughter to face the "tragic" dimension of existence, while she flounders in her attempts to convince him of the validity of a more optimistic outlook on life (243).
- 5 The plurality of lenses through which "A Conversation with my Father" can be read is remarkable. Characteristic of most of Paley's stories, this constitutes one of the main challenges for the critic, as Noëlle Batt remarks in her study of the author's short fiction:

In order to grasp some meaning and relevance for this labile fiction [...], the critic ought to fancy himself or herself not simply as the two-headed Roman God Janus but as a triple Janus. No less than six heads would perhaps allow him to understand and to explain, aptly and succinctly, what Paley's work actually deals with [...]. (16-17, my translation)¹

- 6 In order to engage with the literary complexity of the story, I will examine it from various perspectives. I shall maintain as my guiding line the central conflict opposing the daughter to her father. First I will focus on the ironic portrayal of the generational gap and of Oedipal conflicts. Then I will analyze the feminist dimension of the story and the way in which it indicates broader American cultural changes. Finally, I will read the tale as a metafictional anecdote concerned with the issues of literary realism and poetic voice.

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- 7 "A Conversation with My Father" proposes a humorous representation of family dynamics. The story in fact depicts not one but two families, in two different plots: the storytelling daughter and her critical father in the framing story, the single mother and her drug-addicted son in both versions of the embedded story. In these narratives, major difficulties arise between a parent and his / her child. Generational roles are comically reversed as the elderly, bedridden father "request[s]" a "story" very much as a young child would before he goes to sleep. His vulnerability, his exacting demands and harsh judgments align him with the personality of a difficult young boy, while his appeasing daughter is unwillingly cast as a caring mother figure: "I say, 'Yes, why not? That's possible.' I want to please him" (237). This unusual parent/child configuration is echoed and displaced in both versions of the embedded story, in which there is an understanding mother and a difficult, judgmental son whose rigidity recalls that of the father in the framing story: "the boy gave it all up and left the city and his mother in

disgust" (238), "He was in fact [...] an ideologue" (240), "[The boy and his girlfriend] were very strict" (241).

- 8 As a matter of fact, the two stories function in a constant interplay of echoes and symbolic reversals. The father's declining health seems to reflect that of the drug-addicted son and of his mother, which is later reversed into the son's "radiant, splendid" conversion back to full health and eventually into the mother's new career as a receptionist in a community clinic (241). The self-sacrificing mother mirrors the cooperative daughter, whose palliative storytelling becomes too gruelling for her father, just as the mother's copycat use of drugs soon gets out of control: "the mother tried several times to give up [...] This effort only brought it to supportable levels" (241). Common expectations are derided as the devoted mother decides to imitate her son, while a negative mother figure appears in the person of the boy's girlfriend, a "stern and proselytizing girl" whose sharp personality, unlike the permissive mother, accomplishes wonders (240). Likewise the conspicuously absent father in both versions of the embedded story echoes the absent or dead mother—and wife—in the framing story, a pattern which emphasizes vulnerability and a growing anguish over the precarious nature of family ties. Moreover "Chekhov and Maupassant," the literary masters the father recommends as valuable sources of inspiration in the framing story, are paralleled in the embedded story by another couple of writers whom the young drug-addict and his friends seem to emulate: "A few felt artistic like Coleridge and others were scientific and revolutionary like Leary" (240). The reader is struck not only by the comic discrepancy between the two pairs of writers, but also by that within the second pair: Coleridge, an 18th century lyrical and romantic poet, who was a notorious opium addict, and Timothy Leary, a Harvard psychologist who became a leader—or father figure—of the hippie drug culture in the 1960s and was eventually sentenced to jail.
- 9 In its complex architecture the story raises a series of pressing questions about family duty and legacy. How can you pass on to the next generation a cultural, intellectual and spiritual heritage? What is a daughter's duty? A mother's? A father's? A son's? Competing plots, disruptions and revised versions in "A Conversation" suggest not only the complementarity of all possible attitudes but also the utter difficulty to be in a fixed, universally validated family role.
- 10 Whether in the framing or in the embedded story, the characters' behavior is rather ambiguous from a moral point of view. The daughter fiercely argues with her dying father; yet she stands by his side until the very end, and complies with his demands, at least to the best of her ability. As for the father, he denies his daughter's status as an artist by asking her to merely write *in imitation* of his literary masters, and then he lambastes her efforts as a "waste" of time (241). Yet, he devotes the little energy he has for "last-minute advice" (237), and for what he views as the benefit of his daughter's art. Likewise, the devoted mother in the embedded story may be viewed as just foolish, while her son is at least doing his best to pull through. As "A Conversation with My Father" refuses to posit any prescriptive model, the question of family duty is ultimately displaced onto the reader, whose task it is to explore the ethical intricacies of family relationships in the troubled context of cultural changes.
- 11 The usual hierarchy between the generations and the sexes is further undermined by the ironic subversion of the Oedipal triangle (father/mother/child). Owing to the absence of the mother in the framing story and of the father in the embedded one,

what we have instead is an unmediated suffocating scenario whose pattern is reduced to a single "line" between two points. Is it incidental that the daughter should evoke her distaste for plot as "the absolute line between two points" (236)? Is it incidental that she should eventually resist her father's penetrating "request" for the type of narrative he wishes? One that would arouse the old man's intellectual and imaginative capacities, and provide him with what Philip Roth, another Jewish American writer and a great admirer of Paley, describes as the erotically charged pleasure of the listener (the *écoutteur*)² of a good story: "an audiophilic [...] a fetishist. [...] It is erotic" (*Deception* 42). In some respects the father *dying* for a good story and symbolically castrated as a bedridden patriarch also resembles Philip Roth's Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* who, suffering from debilitating impotence, seeks alternative sources of pleasure: "My carnality is now really a fiction [...] and language and only language must provide the means for the release of everything. Maria's voice, her talking tongue, is the sole erotic implement" (184). This is of course reminiscent of Roland Barthes's discussion of the eroticism of the literary text in his famous essay "The Pleasure of the Text":

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts [...] brings to a crisis its relation with language. (14)

- 12 In Paley's story, however, the father, whose sick heart "still floods his head with brainy light" but "will not do *certain* jobs anymore" (237, emphasis mine), obviously reaches no metaphorical *jouissance* or bliss when listening to his daughter's tale. Neither does he show any sign of pleasure. The daughter, though willing to "please," instinctively senses she cannot satisfy his awkward demand: "I don't remember writing that way" (237). No phallic narrative and no straight "line between two points" for the father, whose listening experience turns into flaccid frustration instead: "You misunderstood me on purpose. You know there's a lot more to it. [...] You left everything out" (238). While the framing story deals with the daughter's refusal to provide her father with his narrative "fix," the embedded story focuses on the mother's inability to get herself or her son *off* the "fix." Her attitude is also presented as somewhat incestuous as she disrupts traditional family ties in a trans-generational mix: "to maintain her close friendship with him, she became a junkie too. She said it was part of the youth culture, with which she felt very much at home" (238). Actually, she recreates a new home, or rather a new womb, by having her kitchen transformed into a haven for her son's and his friends' addiction: "Her kitchen was famous for a while—a center for intellectual addicts who knew what they were doing. [...] she would rather be with the young, it was an honor, than with her own generation" (240). The Oedipal fusion between mother and son is, however, broken by the recreation of a full triangle when the strict, reforming girlfriend makes her appearance.
- 13 Though Oedipal tensions are eventually resolved, the claustrophobic atmosphere remains in both stories. In the daughter's revised version of the tale, the addicted mother is left in solitude and despair: "We often crossed the street to visit and console. But if we mentioned any of our children who were at college or in the hospital or dropouts at home, she would cry out, My baby! My baby! and burst into terrible, face-scarring, time-consuming tears. The End" (241). As for the framing story, it ends with daughter and father still arguing, running around in circles, with no possibility of a classic *dénouement*. The sense of tragic claustrophobia is broken by the daughter's ultimate version of her story—an open door, so to speak—in which the addicted mother

has become able to transmute her pain into useful professional experience: "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" (242).

- 14 The father's rejection of this new narrative option, and his daughter's lasting opposition to him, highlight the asymmetrical nature of gender relations. In the framing story, the father constantly infantilizes his daughter. By regarding a middle-aged and perhaps married woman as a naïve and immature little girl unable to perform a simple narrative task ("With you, it's all a joke" [238]), the old man attempts to reassert his authority and legitimacy as a mentor and fine literary *connoisseur*. As for the daughter, she adopts a strategy of indirect yet winning opposition. With her careful responses, cunning cooperation and comic comebacks, she is able (for a while at least) to appease him (238-39). However, she feels entitled to reject the literary genre he prescribes ("[T]ragedy. The end of a person" [242]), and chooses instead to keep room for the unpredictable: "Not for literary reasons but because it takes all hope away" (237).
- 15 The father's frustration with his daughter's tale stems from his being trapped in a resolutely male perspective from which he cannot understand his daughter's narrative choices. While she insists that the mother in her story is not only a fictional character but also her neighbor and friend across the street ("She's my knowledge *and* my invention" [242, my emphasis]), he fails to grasp that shared fictional *and* non-fictional space from which his daughter's story has emerged. Just as he fails to understand the sense of "responsibility" that ties his daughter to her character: "I had promised the family to always let [my father] have the last word when arguing, but in this case I had a different responsibility. That woman lives across the street. [...] I'm sorry for her. I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying" (242). Likewise he is blind to the discreet yet persistent sense of female solidarity in both versions of the embedded story ("Hopeless and alone, she grieved. We all visit her" [238] / "We often crossed the street to visit and console" [241]). To him, the absence of a father in the embedded story smacks of liberal excess: "Doesn't anyone in your stories get married? Doesn't anyone have the time to run down to City Hall before they jump into bed?" (239). He is shocked by his daughter's bold intimation that the mother's situation depends little on whether or not there is a ring on her finger ("it's of small consequence" [239]). His prejudices are also highlighted by his surprise that the head doctor of the community clinic should admire the mother's competence: "If we only had three people in this clinic with your experiences . . ." (242). In the daughter's imagination, the woman has proved able to bounce back with praise and recognition from a prominent male, while the father is convinced that deserted by her husband and her son, deprived of all stabilizing phallic presence, she will remain an amorphous, slowly disaggregating failure of a woman: "She will slide back. A person must have character. She does not" (242).
- 16 Notable is also the fact that none of the artists mentioned in "A Conversation with My Father" is female. Whether it be the writers the father views as absolute models (Chekhov, Maupassant and Turgenev), the allusion to Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, the odd coupling of Coleridge and Leary, or the veiled echoes of Walt Whitman's vigorous "Song of Myself" (1885) suggested by the son's self-celebratory poems in the embedded story,³ the artistic and intellectual references Paley

deliberately projects onto the female canvas of her story are uniformly male. Thus the author stigmatizes the male monopoly on the American literary canon as well as on the great foreign "classics." The male masters referred throughout, however, are far from being targets of hostility. If anything, the story is fed by the tension between Paley's life-long feminist engagement and her reverence for the male-only literary models her own father had taught her to admire. As Paule Lévy remarks, the story amounts to a reconsideration of cultural inheritance:

Contrary to what often happens in Jewish literature, the Daughter and the Mother have the upper hand, here. In the same way, the issue of the body, of its needs and instincts, usually associated with the feminine, eventually dominates the whole narrative in which, through a process of ironic reversal, it becomes an essentially masculine preoccupation. The male bodies represented in the story—the weakening, sick father and the grotesquely fit son—may be viewed as mocking allusions to a literary corpus confiscated by men and characterized by ossified patriarchal codes. (Lévy, *Figures* 120, my translation)⁴

- 17 Viewed from a larger perspective "A Conversation with My Father" in fact proposes a humorous depiction of the deep cultural changes that affected American society in the second half of the twentieth century. The story, which may be broadly situated in the late 1960s or early 1970s stages three generations: the father, a Russian immigrant⁵ born in the 19th century, his daughter, born in America in the early 20th century,⁶ just like the mother in the embedded story, and her baby-boomer son, born after the Second World War and a teenager in the 1960s. The son's fads and his mother's cult of youth illustrate the radical shift from the 1950s' model of unblemished domesticity and wholehearted belief in the conformist and consumerist American "way of life," to the free-thinking, alternative outlook of the youth culture which denounced the American Dream as a mirage (see Roszak). However misguided and dangerous, the widespread use of drugs was not only recreational for the new generation, it corresponded to an emancipatory agenda, an attempt to gain a fresh perspective on the world, a quest for new values and experiences as well as an increasing awareness of the way institutional practices were shaped—on all levels of American life—by racism, sexism, cupidity, warmongering militarism and authoritarianism.⁷ Through the story-telling daughter, however, Paley also dramatizes America's incredible potential for change and personal *reinvention*—something the father tends to forget, as he cannot see any possibility of redemption for the drug-addicted mother. According to the daughter, this bold ending does not stem from pity, it is just emblematic of life's unpredictability in a fluctuating world: "I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying. (Actually neither would Life, which unlike me has no pity.) [...] It's a funny world nowadays" (242). The term "nowadays" of course refers to the troubled and somewhat theatrical American 1960s and 1970s, a period when the American myth of the self-made man had been historically verified, while that of the American self-(re)made woman was gradually emerging (see Castro).

- 18 How could a storyteller (here, the daughter) translate this new, explosive reality into her own artistic form, while still acknowledging the precious legacy from the previous century? Is it possible to tell the "plain" story the father demands in a world that has become so unrecognizable and unintelligible? Philip Roth addressed the same issues in a speech delivered at Stanford in 1960:

The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to

one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents.
(*Reading Myself and Others* 167)

- 19 What Roth refers to is very much the daughter's challenge in Paley's story. On the one hand, the European masters, adored by the Russian émigré patriarch, come knocking on her door, followed by a dark, indistinct mass of unknown geniuses ("There are in fact Russian writers you never heard of, you don't have an inkling of, as good as anyone, who can write a plain ordinary story" [238]). On the other hand, American reality, contemporary and ubiquitous, is the direct environment for the daughter's "House of Fiction," to use Henry James's metaphor.⁸ Perhaps the reason why her story seems so disjointed and anarchic is that it remains split between two worlds, two visions, two literary possibilities—or simply that it strives to deride the fads of her times.
- 20 Rather than providing details about what the father calls the heroin's "stock" ("What were her parents like, her stock? That she became such a person. It's interesting, you know" [238]), the storyteller prefers to focus on the son in an ironic accumulation of arbitrary explanations or incongruous clichés: "She had a son whom she loved because she'd known him since birth [...]. In order to keep him from feeling guilty [she too became a junkie] (because guilt is the stony heart of nine-tenths of all clinically diagnosed cancers in America today, she said)" (239-40). In a *feuilleté* of voices, Paley systematically deconstructs the absurdity of hyper-logical, trendy or institutional discourses: "So that's never just language," Paley explains in an interview, "Language doesn't live its own little syntactical life. It's part of the whole thing" (Interview Batt and Rocard 132).

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- 21 Thus "A Conversation with My Father" is in fact a metafictional anecdote concerned with the notion of literary realism. Is it a coincidence if the father constantly refers to the great realists of the Old Continent? The embarrassed daughter and the parochial father are fighting over what may realistically happen to a literary character. What is lifelike enough to *pass* as a valid fictional possibility? What the father hastily identifies as either preposterous "jokes" or incontrovertible "truth" (242), the daughter approaches with more circumspection. At stake is the supposedly indispensable "suspension of disbelief"⁹ which the daughter deliberately jeopardizes with her eccentric narrative. Paley points out the relativity of all literary criticism as well as the importance of preserving both a listening ear (which the daughter does) and an autonomous vision.
- 22 Both father and daughter are artists with strong opinions: the daughter is a seasoned writer, one of whose stories is mentioned in the narrative¹⁰ while the father himself has been "a doctor for a couple of decades and then an artist for a couple of decades" (239). The old man, however, is "interested in details, craft, technique" (249), thus aligning himself more with the *artisan* than with the artist, while the daughter focuses on vision, elaboration as process and fictional possibilities. How can craftsmanship be elevated to the rank of art? When and how does the artisan become an artist?
- 23 While no blueprint is given, preliminary "conditions" may be delineated. Just as the daughter in the framing story is urged to rewrite until she *gets* to something ("Tell the story again. See what you can do this time" [239]), Paley often expressed her dismay

over her poor early drafts (whether in poetry or in prose) and her ardent, tenacious rewriting. Far from clamoring "out with the old and in with the new," she acknowledges with love and humor her debt to her predecessors, starting with her father, whose influence as a *passeur* was paramount: "He was the grand storyteller. [...] He wrote a lot of stories. Some of them were really marvellous" (Interview Pool and Roses).

- 24 Yet Paley insists on the ethical imperative to respect the radical autonomy of all individuals, be they real or fictional: "Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (237). This can be read as the author's own Declaration of Independence, one granting "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to her fictional characters. Are those three "inalienable rights" not the very things at stake in the tripartite architecture of the story? Also, is the ravaging "absolute Despotism" not rejected in the Declaration of Independence humorously displaced in "A Conversation with My Father" into the adamant father's almost tyrannical demand for "tragedy [...] the end" (242)? The daughter recovers her own form of self-governing storytelling as she decides to *alter or abolish* the forced ending she had birthed earlier (241), thus intertextually feminizing the American democratic ideals and weaving them into an ethic of art and life.
- 25 Wedged at the end of a discursively complex paragraph (237), the "open destiny of life" deceptively passes for an afterthought whose "truth" the narrator holds to be so "self-evident" that it requires no further elaboration. It is no coincidence, however, that in its programmatic, matrix-like quality this ethical stance should be spelt out in the very first page. For it is no ethereal *vue de l'esprit*: it enables the mother's redemptive new beginning in the revised ending (242), while, on another level and with much *grace*, it allows the ailing father to live on, though bed-ridden and intubated, beyond the *open* ending of Paley's short story. Thus both the story-teller and the story-hearer share hope, pleasure—and frustration. Perhaps this frustration is encapsulated by the dialectic tension between the terms "open" and "destiny," replicating respectively the daughter's and the father's vision of fiction-writing. Is life to Paley, then, a palimpsest of sorts, a written destiny constantly rewriting itself new and open? As Paule Lévy observes: "Both writer and reader are taught to admit discontinuity and loss, to defuse the tragic and to view disruption as a mode of signification" (*Péril* 83, my translation)¹¹. I would nuance this analysis by noting that the tragic is nonetheless allowed the privilege to chime in—or, perhaps more accurately, *out*—conspicuously in the *excipit*: "Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?" (243). In ending the framing story with these words, Paley makes it possible for the unnamed narrator to keep her promise ("I had promised the family to always let him have the last word when arguing" [242]), while she invites the reader to loop back into a full circle with the *incipit*'s plain wording of the framing story's manifest tragedy: "My father is eighty-six years old and in bed" (237).
- 26 Ultimately, the daughter keeps her father on his toes (at least figuratively) as much as he keeps her on hers. With much empathy, the story dramatizes the eternal—and mutually enriching—conflict between art and life, between tradition and modernity, between Self and Other. If there is a "loudest voice,"¹² it is not that of fixed discourses, whether old or new, but the alert, hybrid and eminently dialogical voice of the Self who patiently accommodates *within itself* the voice of the Other:

It is the responsibility of the male poet to be a woman

It is the responsibility of the female poet to be a woman [...]

It is the responsibility of the poet to be a woman to keep an eye on
this world and cry out like Cassandra, but be
listened to this time.
(Paley, *Begin Again* 56)

- 27 Granted, the reader never gets to the "end of the story,"¹³ but it is all the better: the narrative stops but the voices keep on talking in the reader's now emancipated imagination.

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NOTES

1. "[P]our entrevoir quelque chose du sens et de la pertinence de cette fiction labile [...] le lecteur se prend à rêver d'être non pas seulement Janus mais un tripe Janus. Six têtes, pas une de moins, lui permettraient peut-être de capter et de transmettre, d'une manière juste, en quelques pages, ce qu'il en est de l'oeuvre de Grace Paley."
2. In French in Philip Roth's novel.
3. "The son's poem "the fingers of my flesh transcend/my transcendental soul/the tightness in my shoulders end/my teeth have made me whole" (241) may be viewed as a parodic version of Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" (1855): "O my body! [...] I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that you are the soul,) [...] Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth [...] forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails, [...] O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul" (131).
4. "A l'inverse de ce qui se passe si souvent dans la littérature juive, la Fille et la Mère paraissent prendre le dessus. De même la question du corps, de ses instincts et de ses besoins, si volontiers associée au féminin, finit par dominer l'ensemble du récit où, suivant un processus d'ironique inversion, elle devient une préoccupation essentiellement masculine. Dans les corps masculins amoindris et malades (le père), ou tout au contraire grotesquement musclé (le fils) dont il est question ici, on peut voir un renvoi à un corpus littéraire confisqué par les hommes et sclérosé par des codes patrilacaux obsolètes, systématiquement tournés en dérision."
5. Significantly, the story following "A Conversation with My Father" in the *Collected Stories* is entitled "The Immigrant Story" (244-47).
6. "I grew up in the summer sunlight of upward mobility. This leached out a lot of that dark ancestral grief," declares the narrator in "The Immigrant Story" (244).
7. This led to massive demonstrations, sit-ins, protests, and other forms of political activism to change the face of an America whose establishment no longer elicited patriotic admiration, but indignation and shame.
8. The term is originally from Henry James's preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: "The house of fiction has [...] not one window but a million [...] they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from any other" (11).
9. The earliest known occurrence of the term is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817).
10. The father's rejection of fictional characters "sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who knows where" (238) is an explicit allusion to Paley's "Faith in a Tree" published in the same 1974 collection, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (179-98).
11. "[L'] apprentissage de la vie et de l'écriture consiste à admettre la discontinuité et la perte, à désamorcer le tragique et à faire de la dispersion un mode de signification."
12. See Paley's "The Loudest Voice."
13. How could the loving daughter propose a tragic ending to her dying father? She will never feel ready for that sort of closure.

ABSTRACTS

Entre fiction et autobiographie, Grace Paley développe dans "A Conversation with My Father" une réflexion sur les tensions qui animent sa création artistique : entre tradition et subversion, entre dette et émancipation. Dans l'intimité d'un dialogue intergénérationnel cocasse mais poignant, la nouvelle aborde en un feuilleté des discours les enjeux et les écueils de la politique et de la littérature, de la justice et de la compassion. En résulte l'élaboration d'un art poétique érigeant l'autonomie et l'authenticité de l'artiste comme valeurs capitales.

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