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# "Faith in a Tree": The Roots of Commitment

Paule Lévy

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- 1 "In the city, there's a sudden density of population and there is constant communication of people [...] [O]utside in the city there is a thickness of life that's stimulating, constantly stimulating and constantly exciting, so it's quite marvelous," declares Grace Paley (Interview Aarons 57). Born and educated in New York City, the author roots her art in her most immediate environment ("once across the street from us," as Faith Darwin, her fictional alter ego, puts it in "A Conversation with my Father" [234]),<sup>1</sup> that is to say in the vitality and diversity of the Bohemian and multiethnic New York of the sixties and seventies. Many of her stories can be read as delicately etched vignettes of urban life. The cityscape, however, is rarely described in its concrete aspects. The focus is laid rather on the human element, and city life is the vantage point from which Paley chooses to observe the fads and foibles of the society of her time.
- 2 Turning away from naturalism, however, the author rarely focuses on the city's gigantism, anonymity and violence. Synonymous with social interaction and human bonding, inviting to "long walks and intimate talks,"<sup>2</sup> the city ("our dear urban center" ["Wants" 131]) functions as a sustaining force in the lives of the characters. Alternately entering private and public spaces, exploring playgrounds, street corners, subway stations, house or school thresholds where people daily meet, Paley's short stories design a peculiar topography, conveying a sense both of urban dangers ("Anxiety," "Samuel") and of warm neighborhood solidarity ("Friends," "Ruthy and Edie").
- 3 Based on an aesthetics of the mundane and the minute ("Le je-ne-sais-quoi et le presque rien," to borrow Vladimir Jankélévitch's phrase), Paley's short fiction stages a variety of ordinary people ("I write about the lives of women and men of our time" [Interview Hulley 24]) absorbed in their petty concerns—in what the author calls "the little disturbances of life"—as they keep devising precarious strategies for their daily survival. A special place is made for the poor and the weak, for the underdogs roaming the city streets, for the immigrants, for women also, especially when they are left

alone. For all the obscure and the neglected whom Paley chooses to move to stage center in an effort to lend them presence and visibility: "Stories illuminate. That's the purpose of a story for me. To shine a light on what's dark and give it light. And the balance is something else...It's justice" (Interview Hulley 27). A highly committed writer, Paley thinks the artist should "go in and out of ivory towers and two-room apartments on Avenue C to learn the truth from the powerless" (*New and Collected Poems* 56).

- 4 In Paley's case, however, observing people has more to do with hearing than with seeing: "What I say comes from what I hear. It comes from the speech of my city" (*Conversations* 36). Attuned to the variegated tongues of the city, to the inflections of oral speech, her fiction seems to delineate a politics as well as a "po-ethics" of hearing as it strives to capture the colors, texture and rhythms of everyday talk, the shrill discordances or unexpected harmonies that build up the ceaseless rumor of the city. Though her stories often return to the same endearing characters, they show little concern for characterization and plot ("plot, the absolute line between two points which I've always despised" ["A Conversation with my Father" 232]). What they stage instead is a world of voices: Jewish voices, Afro-American voices, Irish voices, Hispanic voices, all recorded with the same empathy, tolerance and humor. Meanwhile, the strangely "defamiliarized," landmarks of the urban setting recede in the distance. Likewise, Paley's narrators often opt for self-effacement or self-derision as they foreground a city which they view, above all, as an intricate network of human motives, languages and relationships. As Daniela Daniele aptly points out: "In Paley's stories, the modern urbanite turns from a male, self-centered *flâneur* into a woman who decides to stay in brackets to report, in a collage of voices a dense network of human relations" (157). This strategy of self-effacement is precisely what allows for a constant shift from the individual to the collective, from the local to the global, from the prosaic to the poetic.
- 5 This is particularly striking in "Faith in a Tree," a story published in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), which stages a decisive city experience forever altering the narrator's outlook on life. In this disconcerting narrative, Faith Darwin is perched on a tree in a city park, day-dreaming while watching the people under her feet. By the end of the story the harmony of the scene is broken by an altercation between the police and a small group of demonstrators against the Vietnam War. While the adult on-lookers remain passive, Faith's eldest son, Richard, gives free rein to his indignation, thus triggering in his mother a new political awareness which, experienced as a sort of "epiphany" (in the Joycean meaning of the term) radically changes the later course of her life.

## "See the interesting world" ("Faith in a Tree" 180)

- 6 As the story starts, Faith, who humorously recalls being sent alone on an airplane at a very early age (177), is still suspended in mid-air, so to speak, perched "on the twelve foot-high, strong, long arm of a sycamore, my feet swinging" (176). The scene is a city playground on a warm Saturday afternoon in spring. It is a leisurely interval, a moment of respite in the chaos and turmoil of urban life. As sociologist Pierre Sansot observes, the city playground, a hybrid locus, half-pastoral/half-urban, suited both for solitary reverie and for social interacting, functions as a blessed, albeit precarious refuge for

city-dwellers: "The city playground is meant to be a haven, some kind of an Eden. It is but a poor version of paradise lost. It does somehow generate a sense of peace, however, in its sluggish immanence and suspension of time" (338).<sup>3</sup> The city park, "that women's pub," as Sansot ironically points out (343), is also a gendered place, a den of females and children:

A city [...] must provide pauses. Meant and constructed for adults, it needs an outlet for its surplus of children and housewives. Therefore it builds public playgrounds [...], sanctuaries for the seated but also areas allotted for the boisterous games of children. (339, 341)<sup>4</sup>

- 7 Indeed, few men people Paley's narrative: reluctant "Saturday fathers" (they "have to go to a lot of parties. They are sleepy but pretend to great energy for the sake of their two-year-old sons" [178]), a few idlers and strollers, a couple of drug-dealers operating behind the bushes and a group of teenagers ("vitamin-enlarged high-school kids" [178]) playing the guitar under the suspicious gaze of "boy-faced policemen" (178).
- 8 Faith, however, has chosen to distance herself from her surroundings and to view things from above. A parodic version of the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge, suggesting roots as well as transcendence, Faith's tree allows for a panoramic vision from which she draws an exhilarating sense of empowerment and freedom, "the exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive," as Michel de Certeau puts it.<sup>5</sup> Thus she compares her position to that of the biblical God as her gaze wanders beyond the limits of the park, to the larger city around, a roaring universe of steel, asphalt and glass, which she prefers to see as an exotic jungle:
 

One God, who was King of the Jews [...] can look down from His Holy Headquarters and see us all [...]. He sees south into Brooklyn how Prospect Park lies in its sand-rooted trees among Japanese gardens and police, and beyond us north, to dangerous Central Park. Far north, the deer-eyed eland and kudu survive, grazing the open pits of the Bronx Zoo. (175)
- 9 Faith's lofty existential ("what am I?" [177]) or pseudo-metaphysical considerations ("let man be in charge of God" [185]) are frequently interrupted, however, by the petty demands and clamor of the small world underneath, of which she provides at first only fleeting, impressionistic snapshots: "heads of girl, ponytails riding the springtime luck, short black bobs and an occasional eminence of golden wedding rings" (175). However reluctantly, she, "the creation of [God's] soft second thought" as she humorously calls herself (175), is obliged to leave her perching-place to see to the children playing together or to join in the gossip of her neighbors and friends. Longing for companionship and affection she also shows deep interest in the "open-shirted and ambitious" (178) young men passing by, obviously in search of a girl to pick up.
- 10 Highly disjointed and elliptic, the story stages in fact two apparently unrelated micro-dramas, one of a strictly private nature, the other political. The first, which is about twenty-pages long, focuses on Faith's comic frustration and chagrin as, distressed by her husband Ricardo's recent departure to South America, she realizes that the young man she has lately set her heart upon is concerned only with her friend Anna. The anti-war demonstration and the reaction of Faith's son are depicted only in the second, much shorter, part of the narrative—which constitutes in fact a two-page-long appendix to a prior version of the story, published in *The New American Review* in 1967 and restricted to the sole presentation of the playground world.<sup>6</sup> In such a decentered and lopsided narrative priorities and meaning are difficult to locate. "Disperse,

disperse!" (193); the policemen's injunction to the demonstrators could almost be read as a guide for reading the entire story.

- 11 Abrupt shifts in viewpoint, tempo and style, as well as the telescoping of the various levels of enunciation contribute to the sense of disruption and indeterminacy. The narrative keeps alternating the city scene itself with the narrator's purely interior vision ("although I can't see them I know . . . I can easily see" [176]); it juxtaposes the conversations in the park with Faith's private musings as each word addressed to her immediately triggers unexpected personal recollections or humorous reflections on the state of the world. Likewise, the story oscillates between the view from above and that from beneath, between withdrawal and empathy, between monologue and dialogue, between direct and reported speech. As the narrative unfolds, all conventional distinctions are comically subverted. Eminently plural in the Barthesian sense of the term, "Faith in a Tree" amounts in fact to

an iridescent exchange carried on by multiple voices, on different wavelengths and subject from time to time to a sudden dissolve, leaving a gap which enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to another without warning; the writing is set up across this tonal instability [...] which makes it a glistening texture of ephemeral origins. (Barthes 41-42)

- 12 It is a loose verbal collage, or rather a motley web of voices which intersect, collude or collide with each other in a joyful cacophony, while it seems impossible to determine their motives or refer them to a specific speaker. Thus the narrator's inner voice is constantly interrupted and her authority as omniscient narrator is undermined by the ironic comments of the characters who, though "some distance away" (181), seem to read into her thoughts. "That's a typical yak yak out of you, Faith," declares Richard mockingly (181), while Mrs. Finn, a self-righteous matron, shows even less consideration: "Blah blah [...]. Blah to you" (181). These narrative short-circuits as well as the extreme stylization of the setting (of the park itself, one hardly sees anything) facilitate the shift from microcosm to macrocosm, from the local to the global. Paley's miniature is gradually enlarged to the greater city around. The comedy of urban life becomes a pretext for political and social satire.

## **"What a place in democratic time!" ("Faith in a Tree" 174): Paley's "American Scene"<sup>7</sup>**

- 13 The park, which is most probably Washington Square,<sup>8</sup> as suggested by the explicit reference to Henry James (176), is no longer the bastion of an uptight and haughty WASP bourgeoisie. It has become "democratic" (174). Yet the pool has gone dry with no "lilies floating" (176); Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" have withered; everything now smacks of urban decay and social exclusion. The kids "hopped in and out of dog shit and dug tunnels into mole holes" (175); the women look shabby: one is "rumpled in a black cotton skirt made of shroud remnants at about fourteen cents a yard" (176), another is wearing a worn out skirt "in muddy cashmere" (176). Faith who once "grew up in the summer sunlight of upward mobility" ("The Immigrant Story" 238) has ceased to believe in the American dream of prosperity and equal chances for all. It is but pure illusion, she observes with lucid, pungent humor.

Something is wrong with [...] Mrs. Finn, Mrs. Raftery, Ginnie, and me. Everyone else in our building is on the way up through the affluent society, putting five to ten years into low rent before moving to Jersey or Bridgeport. But our four family units,

as people are now called, are doomed to stand culturally still as this society moves on its caterpillar treads from ordinary affluent to absolute empire. (182)

- 14 Poverty is enhanced by solitude and spiritual vacuity in a fiercely individualistic nation where family bonds have disintegrated (Faith's parents are left to themselves in a retirement home [180]),<sup>9</sup> where people (men in particular) seem to have lost all sense of their responsibilities. Practically all the ladies in the park have been deserted by their husbands or boyfriends. As for the children, they seem to have lost count of their fathers:

"She's lost two fathers," said Anna, "within three years."

Tonto stood up to scratch his belly and back [...]. "Mostly nobody has fathers, Anna," he said. [...] "My father is in the Equator. They never even had fathers," pointing to Kitty's daughters. "Judy has two fathers [...]." (190-91)

- 15 It seems that American democracy has hardly improved the status of women, confined as they are to "low-level job(s)" (178) and domesticity. They are "forced to lounge in the neighborhood park" (175) while their companions, just like Faith's husband, Ricardo, feel free to sail to broader horizons in amorous company. Here, as in other stories, Paley derides the cynicism and absurdity of masculine behaviors. Ricardo's hilarious letter from South America is a case in point:

The letter says: "I am not well. I hope I never see another rain forest. I am sick. Are you working? Have you seen Ed Snead? He owes me \$180. Don't badger him about it if he looks broke. Otherwise send me some to Guerra Verde c/o Dorothy Wasserman. Am living here with her. [...] Wonderful girl. Reminds me of you ten years ago [...]." (179)

- 16 No bitterness, however, in Paley's female characters. For motherly love heals all the wounds and transfigures the world: "I kiss those kids forty times a day. I punch them like a father should. When I have a date and come home late at night, I wake them with a couple of good hard shakes to complain about the miserable entertainment" (177-78). The narrator's impassioned hyperboles turn her boys into lords and princes: "Antony, you are prince of the day-care center for the deprived children of working mothers, you are the Lord of the West Side loading zone whenever it rains on Sunday [...] The Boss!" (183). The mock-epic style and the incongruous imagery contribute to broadening the perspective. In this respect the long-drawn sea-metaphor is particularly effective.

I can easily see Mrs. Junious Finn, my up-the-block neighbor and evening stoop companion, a broad barge, like a lady, moving slow—a couple of redheaded cabooses dragged by the clothesline at her stern; on her fat upper deck, Wiltwyck, a pale three-year-old captain with smoky eyes, shoves his wet thumb into the wind. [...] Mrs. Finn goes puff puffing toward the opinionated playground, that sandy harbor.

Along the same channel [...], tilting delicately like a boy's sailboat, Lynn Ballard floats past my unconcern to drop light anchor, a large mauve handbag over the green bench slats. (176)

- 17 However ludicrous, these tropes uproot the fictional characters from their dreary environment ("this creepy slum" [181]) and project them onto a fabulous universe where, "obscure heroes of the ordinary" (de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 14), they become magnified, embellished; they recover their full stature and visibility to be at last revealed in their poignant dignity and humanity ("so those names can take thickness and strength and fall back into the world with their weight" ["Friends" 308]).

- 18 Grace Paley's generous imagination instills new colors in the quotidian; in the park where "the playing of fretted instruments is banned by municipal decree" (178), she strikes new notes, a melody of the soul ("a high note out of a wild clarinet" [178]). Without ever losing sight of the referential, she reinvents the real, she transforms the dross of the mundane and the sordid into literary treasure, she makes free and vibrant the grimy playground and fills it with promise. She proposes an alternate geography whereby characters and readers are allowed to catch glimpses of those dream-like "invisible cities" celebrated by Italo Calvino.
- 19 Here as in many other stories (it is made obvious by Richard's rebellion in the second part of the narrative), the agents of this transformation are the children. One is reminded of Michel de Certeau's assertion that the "childhood experience that determines spatial practices [...] proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, creates within the planned city a 'metaphorical' or mobile city [...] built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation" (de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 110). This perception is to be related to Paley's feminism and to her political vision, which she considers inseparable: "Feminism means political consciousness. It means that you see the relationship between the life of women and the political life and power around her. From there you can take any route you want" (Paley, Interview Hulley 32). In "Faith in a Tree," men and "the man-wide world" (175) are relegated to the margins of the text. All the "transient fathers" (183) in the park are vain, vaguely ridiculous and obviously out of place. The masculine is also associated with the violence of the police and that of the ruthless world of war and power they stand for. To the "Law of the Father" whether it be expressed in aesthetic moral or political terms,<sup>10</sup> Paley substitutes the ethos of "a radicalized maternal subjectivity" (Chaskes 142) antithetical to the nexus of affluence and destruction which—metaphorically at least—she associates with the world of men.<sup>11</sup> Such "maternal subjectivity" draws its spontaneity, wisdom and lucidity ("I often see through the appearance of things right to the apparition itself" [183]) from the very task it is confined to: that of child rearing which—this is made clear in the second part of the narrative—turns into the very source of moral and political awareness.
- 20 With the appearance of the small crowd of demonstrators, the little playground bustling with laughter and life is reminded of the violence and terror at work in the larger world. The demonstrators carry three posters denouncing the horrors perpetrated in Vietnam.
- The first showed a [...] well-dressed man about thirty-five years old next to a small girl. A question was asked: Would you burn a child? In the next poster he placed a burning cigarette on the child's arm. The cool answer was given: WHEN NECESSARY. The third poster carried no words, only a napalmed Vietnamese baby, seared, scarred with twisted hands. (192)
- 21 It is as if the love of trees, children and the world professed by the narrator were suddenly shattered by the reference to napalm, that dreadful defoliant America had been spilling on the Vietnamese with an easy conscience. The people in the garden seem tempted by the same arrogance and indifference. Faith's aloofness on top of her tree at the beginning of the story is hardly any better.
- I said, oh! Anna said to Philip, "They'll only turn people against them," and turned against them herself at once. (192)
- "What they're doing is treason," said Douglas. He had decided to explain and educate. "Signs on stick aren't allowed. [...] It's for their own protection too. They



might turn against each other." He was afraid that no one would find the real perpetrator if that should happen. (193)

- 22 In their absurdity and sickening hypocrisy ("it's for their own protection [...] they might turn against each other"), these remarks seem a comic echo of the official political propaganda justifying the war. "Luckily" (192), Faith's boy teaches everyone a lesson and shakes his mother out of her self-centeredness and complacency.

In a fury of tears and disgust, he wrote on the near blacktop in pink flamingo chalk—in letters fifteen feet high, so the entire Saturday walking world could see—WOULD YOU BURN A CHILD? and under it, a little taller, the red reply, WHEN NECESSARY.

And I think that is exactly when events turned me around, changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling. Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children's heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and everyday about the world. (194)

- 23 Richard's determined gesture of re-inscription, the intrusion of another mode of expression (photography), as well as the parallel established by the narrator between "living and telling" divert the reader's attention from the story being told to the art of telling, from the message proffered to the signifying practices, from the world depicted to the "world-inventing words" ("Ruthy and Edie" [334]), from politics to metafiction.

## "Dreamer in a Dead Language"<sup>12</sup>

- 24 "[My stories] are all about language," declares Grace Paley (Interview Hulley 26), while pondering with humor on what she calls her "verbalosity" (Interview Hulley 21). In fact, all her stories appear to be struggling with a language clearly conceived as "a transmission of orders, an exercise of power or of resistance to this exercise" (Deleuze 23): "So that's never just language. Language doesn't just live its own little syntactical life. It's part of the whole thing" (Paley, Interview Batt and Rocard 132). For Grace Paley who describes herself as a story-hearer as much as a story-teller, language is undeniably a source of fascination, one that prevails over characters and plot: "Sometimes what it comes from is pure language. I can't even tell you that I'm thinking specifically of any event of any kind and I may simply write two or three sentences that seem to me beautiful or right or true for the day" (Paley, Interview Michaels 27). Language, however, is also perceived as a hierarchic and imperative system, particularly for women, subjected as they are to a symbolic order dominated by men.

- 25 In "Faith in a Tree" the narrator expresses from the start her yearning for a language fit for self-expression and communication. It is in linguistic terms that she voices her sense of solitude and alienation: "Just when I most needed important conversation, a sniff of the man-wide world, that is, at least one brainy companion who could translate my friendly language into his tongue of undying carnal love, I was forced to lounge in our neighborhood park" (175). Faith's gradual release from her omniscient faculties and authority may be related to her full awareness of what she humorously calls her "language limitations"—even as she displays amazing verbal virtuosity.

My language limitations here are real. My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but absolutely useless for an active moral life. If I really knew this language, there would surely be in my head, as there is in Webster's or the *Dictionary of American Slang*, that unreduceable verb designed to tell a person like me what to do next. (182)



- 26 There is not much point in trying to find that life-giving and liberating tongue in the dictionary. For it is not *in* words but *between* words, in the interstices of language, the interlacing of voices and the meandering of the syntax that Paley's characters—especially her women ("by necessity and disposition [...] the soft speaking tough souls of anarchy" [Paley 306]) seek possibilities of emancipation. Just as they prove able to draw strength and meaning from their cramped quotidian, just as they manage to transcend the narrow limits of the park by establishing new bridges of compassion and solidarity, it is in the very language that alienates them that they try to capture fragments of an ever-"floating truth."<sup>13</sup>
- 27 "The city is the stage for a war of narratives [...] For us the fraud narratives from television or advertising stamp out or atomize the small narratives of streets or neighborhoods," observes Michel de Certeau (*The Practices of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 143). These "small narratives" are moved to center stage in Paley's stories, for the author wages a war indeed against what she views as the "dead language" taught at school according to rigid grammatical and ideological norms, or against the lies and platitudes daily broadcast by the media: "There's dead language everywhere. We're cut off from the truth of our tongues" (Paley, Interview Hulley 25). As she reaches new political awareness, Faith realizes the limits of individualism and self-reliance, these cornerstones of American ideology much revered by her immigrant parents: "You are an American child. Free. Independent" (177). Or was it the remnants of their socialist ideals that once led Faith's mother to make her daughter "the third commercial air-flight baby passenger in the entire world" (177)? "Why would anyone send a little baby anywhere alone? What was my mother trying to prove? That I was independent? [...] That in the sensible, socialist, Zionist world of the future, she wouldn't cry at my wedding?" (177). Faith now sees through all the socialist clichés, as shown by her tongue-in-cheek lesson to her son about the advantages of growing up in an underprivileged multicultural environment: "I dwell in soot and slime just so you can meet kids like Arnold Lee and live on this wonderful block with all the Irish and Puerto Ricans, although God knows why there aren't any Negro children for you to play with. . ." (181). Feminist clichés are discarded in the same light-hearted manner: "[...] Independent.' Now what does that mean? I have always required a man to be dependent on, even when it appeared that I had one already. I own two small boys whose dependence on me takes up my lumpen time and bourgeois feelings" (177). Likewise, images drawn from the realm of business and finance belie all romantic views of male-female relationships. As she evaluates the few men passing by ("squint-eyed speculators who come by to size up the stock" [184]) one of the lonely ladies in the park muses:
- "The trick [...] is to know the speculators from the investors..."
- "I will never live like that. Not I," Kitty said softly.
- "Balls!" I shouted, as two men strolled past us, leaning toward one another. (184)
- 28 The story is replete with puns, double entendres and sexual innuendos which, at once furtive and audacious, override the codes of proper language and behavior and disrupt conventional meanings while they repaint the world in the colors of hope, laughter and desire: these allusions "detach with a finger the armor that protects the king in order to discover, through laughter his nakedness" (de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, vol. 2 33). While looking after their children, the women in the park secretly "drea[m] of

private midnight" (177). Faith's empty philosophizing on top of her tree is undercut by saucy remarks revealing rather down-to-earth preoccupations.

"Say!," said Philip, getting absolutely red with excitement, blushing from his earlobes down into his shirt, making me think as I watched the blood descend from his brains that I would like to be the one who was holding his balls very gently, to be exactly present so to speak when all the thumping got there. (192)

- 29 As it ceaselessly juxtaposes jarring semantic registers, as it telescopes the private and the public, the abstract and the concrete, the serious and the burlesque, Paley's rapid fire prose revitalizes worn out stereotypes and allows every day speech to vibrate with new intensity:

[...] inside, always inside of sentences, phrases, paragraphs, meanings you know, so that they are not clichés. Think of what a cliché is, it's one of the most *accurate* ways of describing something, and it's just been used too much, but if you use it for its real meaning, you are always surprised at how good it is.

But so then, if you move it a little bit, that's where the play comes in. (Paley, Interview Chauvin-Plouzeau 163-64)

- 30 In her park, which also functions as an experimental scriptural playground, the author plants wild rhetorical flowers liable to grow into unexpected poetry. When politely asked about his occupation ("What's your field"? [187]), one of the gentlemen in the garden answers: "Daisies [...] I happen to be in the field of daisies.' [...] How often does one meet, in this black place, a man, woman or child who can think up a pastoral reply like that?" (188). Sometimes bouquets of incongruous associations point to the torments of the soul, as shown by Faith's evocation of her husband's affair with another woman in some exotic country.

Ricardo even at the present moment when I am trying to talk with you in a civilized way, Ricardo has rolled his dove-gray brain into a glob of spit in order to fly secretly into my ear right off the poop deck of Foamline's World Tour Cruiseship *Eastern Sunset*. He is stretched out in my head, exhausted before dawn from falling in love with an *Eastern Sunset* lady passenger on the first leg of her many-masted journey round the nighttimes of the world. (179)

- 31 Thus stretched to its utmost, and strangely "deterritorialized" (in the most literal sense of the word), language is free "to take flight along creative lines of escape" (Deleuze 26) or even "on a line of non-sense" (Deleuze 21). Owing maybe to her capacity, as a daughter of immigrants, to hear English from a distance,<sup>14</sup> Paley is able to instill "a minor music" into the language (Deleuze 26), one that precludes all indifference or passivity in the reader, who is invited to establish new links between proximity and distance, between repetition and transformation, between world and text.
- 32 There is no wonder then if Paley's park is also a self-reflexive terrain, a miniature version of the author's larger fictional universe which, in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, her second collection of stories, the reader has grown familiar with. One meets again with Kitty, who was four months pregnant in "The Contest" (41-49); one catches glimpses of Mrs. Raftery, the imposing Irish Matron earlier seen in "Distance" (135) and "An Interest in life" (50-65); one hears once more of Faith's parents and of Ricardo, the fickle husband whose shadow haunts all the Faith stories. Conversely, "Faith in a Tree" bears the seeds of future developments. Isn't it precisely the type of story that will exasperate the father in "A Conversation with my Father"? "I object not to facts but to people sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who knows where" (233).

- 33 As he/she listens to these voices ("a ladies' murmur about life and lives" ["Faith in the Afternoon" 152]), the reader is taught to envisage the world from multiple and contrasted perspectives; he/she is encouraged to remain attentive to the disarming presence of the other and to the links that tie him to a larger community of stories and beings.

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## NOTES

1. All the quotations from Paley's stories refer to the Collected Stories.
2. *Long Walks and Intimate Talks* is the title of one of Paley's collections of poems.
3. "Le Square voudrait être une oasis, une eden. Il imite mal le paradis perdu et, pourtant, il apporte d'une certaine façon la paix : par sa routine, par son immanence molle, par l'étirement digestif de son temps." All translations of Pierre Sansot are mine.
4. "Une ville [...] doit ménager des pauses. Faite pour les adultes, il lui faut bien déverser en un lieu son surplus d'enfants et de ménagères [...] Alors elle construit des squares [...], sanctuaire[s] des assis, mais aussi espace[s] alloué[s] aux mouvements désordonnés des enfants."
5. See *The Practices of Everyday Life*, vol. 1: "His [the pedestrian's] elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's feet. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a God. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (92).
6. According to Judie Newman, the second version, reprinted several years later in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, at the height of the Vietnam War, was written in the aftermath of Paley's 1969 visit to Hanoi as part of a delegation of peace activists, an experience which contributed to her heightened moral consciousness (4).
7. The phrase is borrowed from Henry James's essay.
8. Washington Square was Paley's favorite city park (see *Arcana* 58-59). With a group of other women activists, the author even defended it against city planners who were trying "to push a road through [it] to serve the real estate interests" (Taylor 44).
9. Faith pays them a visit in "Dreamer in a Dead Language."
10. See in particular "A Conversation with my Father," 232-37.

11. See Paley, Interview with Hulley: "Most men do think it is appropriate to take some kind of stand. They stick out either their fists, or their cocks, or their guns. The arms race was not created by women. Of the 40% of the scientists in this country working for the military establishment, maybe 95% of them are men. Not that women wouldn't do it... But so far it is not the world of women..." (32).

12. "Dreamer in a Dead Language" is the title of one of Grace Paley's stories (265-83).

13. See "The Floating Truth" (115-28).

14. See Paley, Interview with Batt and Rocard: "I had to fight to get into it, in a way" (131).

## ABSTRACTS

Rarement perçue dans son gigantisme, son anonymat ou sa violence, la ville chez Grace Paley est synonyme d'interaction sociale et de relations humaines : c'est gdf gf2016-03-04T16:10:00ggle lieu par excellence où se tisse le lien entre le sujet et son environnement social et politique. Ainsi dans "Faith in a Tree", le jardin public devient un microcosme de la Scène Américaine, l'arène où se rencontrent et s'affrontent le privé et le public, l'anecdote et l'Histoire, le local et le global. C'est le locus symbolique où s'ébauchent une esthétique du « je-ne-sais-quoi et du presque-rien » et une éthique fondée sur l'attention et la responsabilité pour autrui – en un mot, une nouvelle façon d'habiter le monde et les mots. C'est aussi un terrain d'expérimentation scripturale où foisonnent les figures inédites et où s'affirme, par-delà le labyrinthe des digressions et la broussaille des clichés, une volonté de faire cohabiter le poétique et le politique.

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