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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview led by Emmanuel Vernadakis and Jean-François Dreyfus, Conference on Jewish Identity and Otherness in the Modern Short Story, March 27, 1999.
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- 1 Grace Paley is one of the most beloved of American writers. She was born in the Bronx in 1922 to a family of radical Russian Jewish immigrants. As a woman, mother, Jew and political activist, Grace has been committed to fighting for vital social concerns, from protests against War to demonstrations against the production of nuclear weapons.
- 2 She started writing in the 1950s and is the author of three highly acclaimed collections of short fiction, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), and *Later the Same Day* (1985), published together in *Collected Stories* (1994). Grace's stories tell of Jewish family life and create a dialectic of Jewish and American attitudes. The array of almost detached voices in them interweave an American outlook with the Jewish assumption of suffering and sacrifice, of giving and tolerating. Grace has also published three books of poetry, *16 Broad-sides* (1980), *Goldenrod* (1982), *Leaning Forward* (1985), collected in *Begin Again: Collected Poems* (2001) and a book of autobiographical prose, *Just as I Thought*, (1998). Her writing is endowed with a deeply humane quality which, in Vivian Gornick's words, "makes people love life more."
- 3 Grace has been given many an award. She received a Guggenheim fellowship in 1961, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1966, and an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1970. In 1989 she was declared the first official New York State Writer by the Governor and was also the recipient of the first Edith Wharton Award. She also received the 1992 REA Award for Short Stories, a Vermont Award for Excellence in the Arts in 1993, a Jewish Cultural Achievement Award for Literary Arts in 1994 and has also been given awards by the Lannan Foundation and

others. She is a member of the Executive Board of P.E.N and was the founding chair of Women's WORLD.

- 4 In 1998 Grace accepted to attend an international colloquium at the University of Angers, as a guest of honour, on the topic "Jewish Identity and Otherness in the Modern Short Story." Her presence conferred the conference an aura of grace. She gave a reading at the Town Library and at the University Conference Centre, *L'Amphigouri*, in which her story "The Louder Voice" was performed by the dramatic company "Word for Word." At the end of the colloquium (which was organised by Jean-François Dreyfus and Emmanuel Vernadakis) she was interviewed by Corinne Dale. Then she answered questions from the audience that included several French academics specialising on Jewish-American fiction.

Question: What is special to the short story form as opposed to writing novels?

Grace PALEY: When I began to write stories – I had been writing poems up to then – so I decided to write stories, but if I had had a different kind of mind I would have decided to write a novel. But I wanted to make sure that I wrote a story; that I finished it; and the greatest thing for me was finishing my first two stories; that I really got them done. So once I did that I really liked the form. It is much closer to poetry than it is to the novel, even though they are both prose. I now find that whatever I want to do, I can do it with the short story form; stories between two or four pages, twenty eight or thirty two, but within that it does what I wanted to do. Unless I think of some kind of fantastic novel that I can find the form for, I probably would keep writing stories and poems.

Question: I was just wondering whether one of the reasons why you chose the short story rather than the novel, is not that you wish to introduce a dimension of subversion, or as many items of subversion as you can in the story. I am wondering whether the genre of the novel would be as appropriate to introduce that variety of subversion.

G. P.: I cannot say I have thought of it that way, but I do know that this works for me so far, and since I do not have much further... You may well be right. But it is not a very good answer.

Question: Who are the writers that influenced you most?

G. P.: It is hard to say because when I began writing stories, I had really read a lot. I was a keen reader, like a lot of writers are, and having read a great deal, I guess I just began to put things together. I was very much interested in the form of the short story as I read in Joyce; people of my age were really reading a lot of Joyce at that time. But the short story interested me and I thought to myself, "It can be done," which I did not feel about novels actually. But I felt I could make a try at it. In general I read lots of Russian novelists in my family's home, and everything everybody else was reading. In my introduction to one of my books I talk about having two ears. Since I read a lot, I had already had a lot of literary influences without knowing it. But when I began writing stories, I realized I had this other ear, on the language of home, the language of my street, my neighborhood, my city, and once I got those two ears together, I seemed to have figured out how to do it. But I needed both ears.

Question: You say that [when] you started writing stories, you used your second ear. Do you ever use that second ear in writing poetry as well?

G. P.: No. I went to school to learn how to use language for poetry. And then, when I worked things out, that affected my story writing. Learning to use that other ear was

very useful, and loosened up my muscles a little bit for writing poems. I think it helped a lot.

Question: So many people have been asking you why you have not written novels, preferring short stories. So I wonder why it is different for you when you write a poem, because to me your short stories are poems.

G. P.: Thank you. It sounds so good, I might leave it at that! Well, when I begin actually to write, either stories or poems, I write a line, and then another line... In some cases I know it is not going to be a story, it is just going to be a poem. But by the third line, I know it is going to be a story, because it is going to flow in a sort of narrative way. That is the only way I can tell that is what is going to happen at that point. But for some stories, I begin immediately with somebody talking to someone, but for certain other things it can go either way at least for two or three lines. And sometimes I make a mistake: the other day I was just turning two poems right back into stories which was what they were.

Question: You have just mentioned the fact that you had to write a line. There are two lines you quote in your latest book, *That year, all the boys in my block were sixty seven*. Two years later, two other boys had died and my husband said, "well, I'd better take this old age business a little more seriously." Did you write something out of it?

G. P.: I have never written that story because they are all seventy seven now. I thought it was a great line though, when I wrote it, and it was!

Question: Do you remember this quotation you made about dialogues: I said dialogues, and there are dialogues. This is a very Jewish word. It believes that what happens inside a person's head is dialogue, not stream of consciousness or third person voice. Free association is just right for psychology. But these Jews are made of history, and they talk in long sentences, especially to themselves. Do you have the feeling that you are working this way with dialogues?

G. P.: Well, if you do not have people speaking to each other, I do not know what you are doing writing a story. That has to be happening, you have to have, if not two people speaking to each other, one head speaking to the other, I mean from one side to the other. Dialogue is really action, it is the way you move the story; but it is not just like, "Isn't that great to have these people speaking to each other for three pages," or something like that. It has a job to do. I think people, in a lot of my stories, really think in whole sentences, they do not just smear the paper up. But it is an argument, almost every story is an argument of some kind. You write it because you do not know something, you write what you do not know about, otherwise you would not bother to write.

Question: A lot of your work is based upon dialogues. Did you reject the idea of drama?

G. P.: Well, I luckily understood that writing dialogues is not writing theater. I mean theater is a whole different subject, and it is one that I think I have no gift or patience for, because all I can do is to sit in a room and try to write a few words of a story, and do all the other things I wanted to do. I never had an urge particularly to do it. I mean, it is not a solitary business. I think the people who write for the theater should be in the theater, and not just sit in some place and write it. I do not understand how they could do it without whatever it is that makes a dramatic event.

Question: What do you think of one of your stories being performed before you today?

G. P.: I think, as long as I do not have to do it, I am delighted. I like seeing things, I am just not good at doing them.

Question: One thing that readers remark about your fiction is some sense of optimism that comes for instance with the character Faith – the humor and an optimistic view of life. Some critics locate this in your experience as a Jew, some locate it in your experience as a woman, or as an immigrant, or in an immigrant family. These are all positions of alterity, and so I want to ask two questions: Do you have a sense of your optimistic spirit being located in any particular position, or any combination of positions? And could you say something about the relationship between alterity and optimism?

G. P.: I am not all that optimistic in general. I am specifically optimistic but not generally optimistic. I think a lot of it comes from the position of my family and their attitude. Talking about being Jewish and all that; when I was a kid, my father had certain kinds of different attitudes with some people. I remember we used to travel, we tried and go to see New England. My parents wanted to see all of America, which they were in love with already. They wanted to see everything, and they never did. But they did go north towards New England and travel; and what they used to do is they would stop in the evening and try to get a place to sleep; and very often my father who was a rather short Jewish Russian guy, with an accent and so on, would come down after going to the house, and he looked at us in the car, and he would say, “They don’t like us here either;” and so the whole car would begin to laugh. So there was very little rage about it, or whatever it was. I just grew up thinking these other people were quite crazy and stupid, not to like a wonderful little family like ours. I think, things like that really affect your character more than what you read in newspapers. Being of a generation that had saved itself by coming here very early, like in the early 1900’s, is very different from the generation that suffered the holocaust, and came here later.

Question: What does it mean for you to be a Jew today in America?

G. P.: Well, I often do not know what that means because the country is very big. When I’m a Jew in New York, I am one person but when I am a Jew in Vermont I am another person. Jew in New York, I am a Jew among Jews. I do not even have to think about it, that is who I am, and that is the way it is. In Vermont, I have to enhance myself, I have to find my sisters and brothers [...] I am more self-conscious as a Jew in New England than I am in New York. I attend to it by being a member of the community which means money, and attending services sometimes, not too much. My parents were totally agnostic; my father was enragedly anti-religious; he would not even step into a synagogue. But on the other hand, he allowed me to take my grand-mother there. But the self-hating Jew business that was brought up in New York by many people was not something to think about because there was nothing like that in my family. It was just a simple young couple about nineteen, twenty years old who left Russia and who ran away from the orthodoxy of the Jews and who were very anti-religious and very Jewish. That is who they were and that is the way it was.

Question: Talking about your parents, I was wondering whether your parents were Zionists?

G. P.: No, they were socialists. They had both been imprisoned in Russia as socialists, when they were nineteen years old, in Siberia and everything. My grandmother’s children were socialist, Zionist, a different kind of socialist, anarchist and communist – her five children.

Question: In 94, we invited A. S. Byatt at the university of Angers, and one question came to the floor about what kind of reader she was addressing, and she said Henry James.

G. P.: Some people are crazy!

Question: Do you address yourself, or a certain type of reader?

G. P.: I think some stories are different than others. Sometimes I write a story for someone. After 'Wants' I have a story called 'Debts', and I wrote that story for my friend Lucia, because it is about her family; so that is why I wrote it for; and everybody else in the world. I would like everybody to read. I just hope to speak a little bit for my friends and my old lady buddies sometimes.

Question: You have often said that to write a story, you need two stories which you put together and you create, not your plot because you say that you don't like plots, but your story. What are the two stories in 'Wants'?

Grace Paley: Let me think about that. I think the story really is about time, it's a time story. I am really making this up, because I said that we have these two stories, but I don't say it before I write it. I say it after I have written it, when I see it actually has two stories. I think there are two stories that I put together, but it is particularly true in longer stories.

Question: Is Faith your narrator in this story?

G. P.: I didn't mean it to be. It could have been but I have a few stories in which it is ambiguous: it could be Faith and it could not be.

Question: I noted that several figures are used in 'Wants'. For instance, the narrator had been married for twenty seven years, and this fact is repeated two times over. In Edith Wharton's book, the change in New York occurred within twenty seven years as well, and the narrator had kept this book for eighteen years. The narrator's ex-husband may get a sail boat eighteen foot long...

G. P.: I like a good reader! Well, look, one of the nicest things about writing is play. A lot of that is play. You can take what meaning you want out of it. Certain things are accurate: I was sitting on the steps of the library, and my ex-husband to whom I had been married for twenty seven years did pass. After that, it's all invention, but the numbers are part of fun. It's kind of a serious story about time I think, and how it went like nothing, you know, the tree grew, the husband's gone... Many of you have already noticed that about time I'm sure. But the numbers are just sheer fun, because this kind of story has to have some play; there has to be some joy in life for God's sake! In this series of numbers there is only one accuracy: the fact that I had been married for twenty seven years. Everything else after that was just pulling numbers out of a hat!

Question: Really? Because twenty seven is nine multiplied by three, and eighteen is two times nine, and the price you pay for your book in the library...

G. P.: It just goes to show that as a person who failed math constantly, there's an approach that could have been used with me; doing it on a more unconscious way probably would have passed. [...] I want to thank all of you, for your thoughtfulness about this subject which is the Jewish culture and literature, and everything that hangs of the edge of it— and I think I do. So thanks a lot, and thanks to you, and you, and you...