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Grace Paley's Revisiting Fathers

Laura Muresan

- 1 In 1972 Grace Paley published "A Conversation with My Father," an autobiographical and widely acclaimed story which takes the form of an argument between a woman writer and her father about the style of her fiction. The father advises his daughter to return to the kind of stories she "used to write," that is to say to plots with "recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next" (Paley, *The Collected Stories* 232).¹ The type of plot and characters that the father longs for is, however, subverted by the author-narrator who is in search of a form free of patriarchal dominance.
- 2 In 2002 Paley returns to the "real" father with the publication of "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age," a short story that first appeared in *The New Yorker*² and was then republished in *Here and Somewhere Else* (2007). "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" elaborates on themes already present in "A Conversation with My Father" while also exploring more encompassing issues, such as intergenerational gaps, sexuality, memory, politics, or historical and personal tragedy. To a certain extent, "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" may be seen as a sequel to the earlier story, creating a sort of antiphonal effect.³ The events appear to be dated by the suggestive hints about the father's age and condition: in "A Conversation with My Father" he is eighty-six and sick; here he seems to be older and approaching death. While the chronotope is quite similar (in both stories the daughter visits her aging father in hospital or at home), thirty years have elapsed between the two publications.
- 3 The rather long and seemingly self-explanatory title already hints at the sort of "conversation" the reader is to expect as it posits the father's intention to give his daughter a lesson and to correct inappropriate behavior and attitude.⁴ The title may actually seem paradoxical in that it juxtaposes terms belonging to the private sphere ("my father," "old age") with more formal or neutral language ("addresses," "facts"). Misleading as it might be, the title introduces the gaps opening between daughter and father. To the child/parent conflict, however, are added other oppositions: between man and woman, subservience and patriarchy, self and other, freedom and conventions, outside and inside, past and future.

- 4 The focus of this article will be on the paradoxical attempt at subverting the paternal figure while at the same time using his voice in an effort to unearth the family's history so as to comprehend its meaning. By employing the concepts of logocentrism (Derrida) and "the Name-of-the-Father" (Lacan) to refer to the function of patriarchal masculinity, I will attempt to show how the semiotic (Kristeva) comes to menace and displace the symbolic order, as represented by the father. I will first analyze the father's endeavor to hand down advice, assuming from the very beginning the position of a sage, denying his daughter any opportunity of intervening or defending herself. I will then examine how the daughter-writer challenges patriarchy and manages at last to reclaim her voice by creating a space where her voice could at last be heard. The third part will focus on how the father comes to revisit his haunting past, bringing to light painful memories and suppressed truths. By restoring her own voice, the daughter also reclaims an intense desire to repossess her father's memories. The last section will thus analyze the process through which the father's story becomes in fact the daughter's.

"THE LITTLE DISTURBANCES OF MAN"⁵

- 5 "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" is a first-person narrative in the form of a fragmented dialogue, suspended by the father whenever he feels too tired to talk and then resumed upon his daughter's next visit. However, it soon becomes apparent that it is a one-sided conversation (the word "addresses" is suggestive in this respect): the master is addressing his pupil so that the latter should acquire knowledge. The story begins with the father telling his daughter that he wants to teach her how to grow old and that they had better start as soon as possible:

I said O.K. My children didn't think it was such a great idea. If I knew how, they thought, I might do so too easily. No, no, I said, it's for later, years from now. And, besides, if I get it right it might be helpful to you kids in time to come. (65)

- 6 This *incipit* introduces the interplay between the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. The father uses his personal experience to guide his daughter and prepare her for what may befall her in the coming years. With somewhat cruel humor, he recommends strategies to counter the effects of time:

You'd be surprised. You can do little things—putting cream on the corners of your mouth, also the heels of your feet [...]. But I must mention squinting. DON'T SQUINT. Wear your glasses. Look at your aunt, so beautiful once. (65)

You'll see, in thirty, forty years from now, you'll get tired often. It doesn't mean you're sick. This is something important that I'm telling you. Listen. To live a long time, long years, you've got to sleep a certain extra percentage away. (71)

- 7 The father, much to his daughter's surprise, also tackles the subject of sexuality and "its troubling persistence" (74):

He said that might happen to me, too, eventually [...] Then, a little accusingly, After all, I have been a man alone for many years. Did you ever think about that? [...] Actually, I had thought of it now and then, his sexual aloneness. I was a grownup woman. But I turned it into a tactful question: Aren't you sometimes lonely, Pa? (74)

- 8 Is the father's confession a veiled reference to masturbation? Or is it just a way of making his daughter aware of his lack of intimate relations? The sexuality inherent here never becomes fully explicit, relying on allusion and metonymy while the narrative quickly moves on to the father's evocation of his dead wife:

Your mama was planting all kinds of flowers every minute. Trees were growing. Your grandma, your babushka, sat on a good chair on the lawn. In back of her were birch trees. I put in a nice row of spruce. Then one day in the morning she comes to me, my wife. She shows me a spot on her left breast. I know right away. [...] I know in that minute, in one minute, everything is finished, finished-happiness, pleasure, finished, years ahead black. (75)

- 9 The passage turns from the description of an idyllic existence exuding life and vitality, underscored by such words as “planting,” “flowers,” “trees,” “growing,” “spruce” (an evergreen tree), to the rapid realization of his wife’s imminent death, emphasized by the repetition of the verb “finished” and the use of the color “black.” The transition from the past continuous (with its emphasis on progression) to the past simple (implying stasis) and then to the present tense contributes to conveying a sense of immediacy, with the past contaminating the present.
- 10 For the daughter, however, the mother’s illness constitutes a moment that can be neither apprehended nor represented. Her voice is reduced to a simple “No”: “That minute had been told to me a couple of years ago, maybe twice in ten years. Each time it nearly stopped my heart. No” (75). In an interview with Kathleen Hulley, the author refers to her own mother’s death in the following terms:
- My mother’s death was really hard...and very terrible... And it’s hard for me to deal with [...] I mean she’d been sick since I was about 13. You know, really sick. And I think that’s where a lot of my pain comes from. That long period when I kept trying to think of something else all the time. (37)
- 11 This difficulty in dealing with her mother’s death is reflected in Paley’s entire fiction. Unlike the father, the mother cannot really be a subject of conversation/in conversation, but rather a site of the unsayable. She is reduced to what Virginia Woolf called “one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life” (80).⁶ Paley’s short story “Mother” inevitably comes to mind:
- At the door of the kitchen she said, You never finish your lunch. You run around senselessly. What will become of you?
Then she died. (*Collected Stories* 325)
- 12 Here again the mother’s death is eluded, as if the daughter had no words at her disposal to refer to it. This is highlighted by the absence of transition, of quotation marks, and of description. These ellipses serve to epitomize the abyss opening between life and death, between now and then, between daughter and mother.
- 13 While muted when it comes to the mother’s death, the narrator succeeds however in voicing the pain caused by her father’s suffering in old age and his impending death. This is partially due to the fact that, unlike the mother’s, the father’s demise comes as a natural process. As he evokes his “little disturbances,” the father hands down to his daughter his personal experience of getting old while trying in retrospect to instill humor and meaning into painful aspects of his own life.
- 14 Although well-intentioned, the father fails to establish true communication with his daughter. Instead, he systematically reduces her to silence. She tries in vain to take control of the narrative by redirecting its stream or changing the subject: “Please don’t start in. I’m in the middle of telling you some things you don’t know” (72). What strategies does the daughter have at her disposal to disrupt her father’s dominance and recover her own voice?

RECLAIMING THE SILENCED VOICE

- 15 In "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age," as in "A Conversation with My Father," the father is the one who reinstates conventions, protesting at the daughter's attempt to free herself from social constraints. He does not understand the new generation and their attitude toward life. When his daughter tries to slip in the news of her imminent divorce, he has a violent reaction: "What? What? Are you crazy? I don't understand you people nowadays. I married your mother when I was a boy [...] and you know I stayed married till the end" (70). The father overshadows his daughter, allowing her to exist only as a reflection of himself and in the margins of the text. As a mentor, he dominates the story (and the story's conclusion), forcing the narrator into submission.
- 16 In that respect the father appears as the very embodiment of what Jacques Derrida calls "logocentrism," the belief in the power of speech endowed with divine qualities and absolute meaning. One is also reminded of Lacan's view of the father as promulgator and protector of the Law, and of his concept of "the Name-of-the-Father" (a continuous permutation of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary father) as "primordial signifier."⁷ After a while, the daughter no longer tries to respond through speech, as she understands that her father will simply not listen. In order to assert her own "power" she resorts to another strategy of resistance: she focuses on her own writing as a way of "counter[ing] logocentric repression" (Derrida 51) and, in so doing, she disrupts the father's authority and law.
- 17 Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and the symbolic proves useful to our analysis of Paley's strategies of subversion.⁸ While the symbolic designates language in its normative usage, the semiotic represents the pre-linguistic state of language. According to Kristeva, "we have to move out of the enclosure of language in order to grasp what is going on in the genetic temporality which logically precedes the constitution of the symbolic function" (140). For Kristeva, writing may become a way of acknowledging the semiotic which, unlike the symbolic, represents heterogeneity of meaning and may be expressed through deviations from grammatical or syntax rules, lack of punctuation, ambiguity, use of metaphors, etc. The symbolic, on the other hand, is clear, logical language, where conventional grammar and syntax dominate, providing the formal means for communication. As Ruth Robbins points out in *Literary Feminisms*,
- [The Symbolic] is the language of transparency, power and conformity, and, as such, is aligned with patriarchal functions in culture—*le non/nom du père*—which signals the father's name and the father's prohibitions in social and psychic formations. [...] It is traditionally the language [...] into which authority is written. [...] [T]he developing child [...] inserts him/herself into culture by submitting to the father's 'no,' by conforming to the linguistic rules of grammar, syntax and propriety in vocabulary [...] [which], therefore, necessitates a submission to masculine functions and a farewell to the feminised pre-Oedipal space of the mother-child bond. (128)
- 18 Paley's struggle against the "myth" of the Father is therefore "against the language of the myth contained in language itself," as Joyce Meier suggests (119). Paley locates the origin of writing in the mother's body while capturing "the rhythms and intonations of speech before it captures meaning" (Hulley 8). It is no accident that women and (their) children are the protagonists of most of her stories. Motherhood is central to Paley, shaping and modifying her women's relationships with the surrounding world. The discrepancy

between “mother” and “father” culture is reflected in the former’s use of language characterized by an abundance of dialogues, free direct speech, narrative ruptures, a compressed style, or open-ended structures.

- 19 In Paley’s fiction, indeed, the symbolic is relentlessly menaced by the intrusion of the semiotic. Her stories are decentered, showing no linear progression or hierarchical structure, breaking patriarchal fictional forms. The choice of themes also constitutes a way of subverting traditional structures. Significantly, Paley’s stories deal with issues rarely included in patriarchal discourses. She writes about ordinary people living ordinary lives. She discovers the power of one’s own (auto)biography, of unremarkable events, and unsophisticated feelings. In “My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age,” she does not hesitate to tackle the issues of aging and dying which, “when presented referentially, are taboo topics within phallogocentric discourse” (Marks 187).
- 20 Another instance pertaining to the semiotic is the complex use of silence, a recurrent motif in Paley’s stories. As Bach and Hall remark in the introduction to *Conversations with Grace Paley*, “her characters fall silent, either because they are muted by forces of unkindness and abuse—verbal or physical—or because they know the power of the word not spoken” (xiv). When it “follows unkindness in which little truths growl” (Paley, “Listening,” *Collected Stories* 381), silence is a refusal to participate in any kind of communication, a mutism with purely negative implications. But for Paley, it may also have creative and regenerative powers. Does not silence precede creation itself in most religious traditions, as if it were an opening, a prelude to revelation, a great ceremony of preparation? (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 883).
- 21 Significantly, in “My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age,” the daughter, before falling silent, remains open-mouthed several times in the course of the story:
- “I said, *Oh*, but then said, Well, thanks.” (67; emphasis mine)
 “*Oh, Pa.*” (69; emphasis mine)
 “No hope, *Pa.*” (71; emphasis mine)
- 22 The use of one-syllable words ending in vowels gives the impression that her mouth literally remains open. Discursive arguments are replaced by a sort of child’s language, a language of “babble, incoherence, rhythm and sound, which are not exactly meaningless, but which are not susceptible to rationalistic systemic analysis” (Robbins 128).
- 23 While the father’s “logocentrism” occupies practically the entire space of the dialogue, the daughter is striving to exist in the blanks, in the interstices of the text, and in the narrator’s commentaries. The scene is therefore symbolically divided into inside and outside. The father, while being the most vociferous character within the text, never manages to take possession of the narrative voice; he remains on the outside. Conversely, and strangely enough, the daughter, although maintained outside this pseudo-conversation, does manage to communicate, yet only for the sake of the reader. Also, while the aging father is at all times confined to his apartment, the daughter is allowed movement as she pays him visits whenever she likes. Her comings and goings attest to her freedom, while the father is confined to passivity and immobility.
- 24 The opposition inside/outside is blurred towards the end of the story: “I stood near the door holding my coat. A space at last for me to say something. My mouth open” (77). The doorway, a place where daughter and mother are conjoined again,⁹ carries the potential of a liminal space, being neither inside nor outside. It is a symbol of passage and transition, which may take on multiple meanings: is it a space for mutual understanding

or does it reinforce the gap between father and daughter? Does it symbolize entry into a private space where the daughter could at last acquire the status of insider? Or is it a metaphor for dying? The door may also symbolize the passage from life to art, a passage which in turn generates life so that “art and life cross imperceptibly into another in an erotic exchange and interchange” (Hulley 16). Indeed, the daughter’s “open mouth” recalls the open door (or open page) itself, inviting new (narrative) possibilities, for “[e]veryone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life” (Paley, “A Conversation with My Father” 232). At the end of the story, however, the narrator seems to miss a unique opportunity to verbalize her emotions: “A space at last for me to say something” (77). The narrator here keeps the promise she once made to her family that she would never deny her father the last word (“A Conversation with My Father” 237). By ultimately choosing silence she places herself at the very limits of language.

Silence is a sort of new language, the purest form of enunciation, creating an interlocution of “plenitude” which, accompanied by an unbearable “emptiness,” necessarily gives rise to an effect of *implosion*. (Van Den Heuvel 84; translation mine)

- 25 To the daughter’s (imploded) silence corresponds the father’s explosion of feelings and memories triggered by the pretext of offering useful advice for the years to come. The narrator soon realizes though that more important issues preoccupy the father. Going back to the historical reality of the 1920s, the father revisits the ghosts of his past in an effort to find an answer to the meaning of his life.

GHOSTS

- 26 The father, arrogant as he may be, is in fact a frail old man, thick with anxiety. Gradually, his fear of dying and his inevitable regrets come to dominate the narrative: “[...] you’ll remember everything you did, didn’t, what you omitted, whom you insulted, betrayed–betrayed, that is the worst” (68). The daughter is also puzzled by the tendency of her once atheistic father to bring up God in his conversation. Do people become more religious as they age? Or is it just an exploration of the ultimate meaning of life? Faith may offer solace and acceptance of death while also providing meaning to otherwise inexplicable tragedies.
- 27 One of the most poignant moments in the story is when the father advises his daughter to take her heart into her hands every morning and massage it. At first he cannot bring himself to talk about it, so he drops the subject for a while (“Forget it, he said sadly” [65]), yet proves able to make his point in the next paragraph:
- Then you must talk to your heart [...] Say–maybe say, Heart, little heart, beat softly but never forget your job, the blood. You can whisper also, Remember, remember. (66)
- This is good for the old heart–to get excited–just as good as for the person. Some people go running till late in life–for the muscles, they say, but the heart knows the real purpose. The purpose is the expansion of the arteries, a river of blood, it cleans off the banks, carries junk out of the system. (67)
- 28 The comic juxtaposition of the literal and the figurative, the scientific and the absurd, highlights both the father’s helplessness and his resilience as well as his determination to counter “the facts of old age.” He, a doctor, knows all too well that with time the body becomes threatening and ungovernable, turning into an unrecognizable Other: “the body is your enemy. I must warn you it is not your friend the way it was when you were a

youngster" (69). The "heart" then would rather "carry" memories (of others) than purify ("carry junk out of") the system. The body becomes a site of remembrance, a source of knowledge, and a privileged locus for the construction of meaning. It is precisely the vicissitudes of old age that spark the dialogue in the first place and allow the narrative to expand further, becoming a pretext for ever more urgent issues.

- 29 The father is at last able to articulate the guilt and the concerns tormenting him. He is assailed by unanswered questions: first of all, what happened to his brother who was deported back to Russia in 1919? Why didn't he ever try to find out?

These days I think often, especially after telling you the story a couple of months ago, about my brother Grisha. I want to know what happened to him.[...]

All the years not talking. Me seeing sick people day and night. Strangers. And not talking to my brother till all of a sudden he's on a ship. Gone. (76)

- 30 Addressing his daughter becomes an opportunity for the father to disclose suppressed truths, to revisit a haunting past, and to come to terms with ghosts, figments of memory, which are unlikely to be turned into fiction. According to J. Carlos Rowe, "Ghosts haunt precisely because we recognize them as impossible fictions, whose power we assume must derive uncannily from ourselves" (26). The father is in a stasis, petrified by old age, illness, and regrets. By now what remains of him is a disembodied voice:

Go home now. I don't have much more to tell you. Anyway, it's late. I have to prepare now all of my courage, not for sleep, for waking in the early morning, maybe 3 or 4 A.M. I have to be ready for them, my morning visitors—your babushka, your mama, most of all, to tell the truth, it's for your aunt, my sister, the youngest. She said to me, that day in the hospital, Don't leave me here, take me home to die. And I didn't. And her face looked at me that day and many, many mornings looks at me still. (76-77)

- 31 The term "babushka," a Russian word meaning old woman or grandmother, tears the text apart, creating a sense of dissonance and strangeness. This is accentuated by the hectic rhythm and foreign inflections. The father's anxiety and frailty are also reflected in the fragmentary form of his "address," in the abrupt shifts from one topic to another, and in the regressive movement from the known to the unknown or unknowable. The conversation is also haunted by a "submerged non-conversation" (Hirsch, Introduction 17), by subjects that cannot be talked about, such as the narrator's divorce, the father's intimate desires, or his brother's political life in Russia. Yet both the daughter and the reader are soon able to infer the links between personal destiny and history, as the father's story reflects that of many immigrants in the 1920s.

- 32 Thus, in "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age," the father seizes the opportunity to deplore the sacrifices imposed upon his wife as they first arrived in the New World. While they had both been active participants in Russia's political and social life, only the father was able to succeed in the New World. Choices were made at the expense of the narrator's mother: "It was a shame, everything went into me, so I should go to school, I should graduate, I should be the doctor, I should have the profession. Poor woman, she was extremely smart" (73). In an interview with Kathleen Hulley, Grace Paley recalls:

My mother was very oppressed, yet my father never could have thought of himself that way [...]. My mother was oppressed by her circumstances. Coming here to this country...who were they going to educate? They put all their money into my father, the male. [...] He took care of everybody. But that meant my mother didn't get to do any of the things she wanted to do. But that wasn't *his* fault. (28; emphasis in the original)

- 33 In Paley's universe, "there are some important connections to be made between female and Jewish experiences of subordination" (Taylor 59). Despite the emancipation movement of the 1920s, and despite the matrilinearity of Jewishness,¹⁰ women were confined to a marginal role. The father was the sole head of the family and the sole transmitter of cultural values.¹¹
- 34 Even for the father and other first-generation immigrants for whom the American dream seemed to have come true,¹² full integration was impossible. Although now in his late eighties, the father must admit he is still an outsider living on the fringes of American society: "Well, I suppose you do know a number of Gentiles, you're more in the American world. I know very few" (72). Paley herself affirms that in terms of mentality and values her father has remained until the very end "just a ghetto Jew" (Interview Perry 102).
- 35 While having fled anti-Semitism and the constant fear of pogroms, many immigrants were confronted in America with prejudices, which, though less virulent, deprived them of equal chances of integration: "Anti-Semitism in the American blood from Europe—a little thinner, I suppose" (76), contends the narrator's father. American anti-Semitism became even fiercer in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution in Russia. Russian immigrants—especially if they were Jewish—were viewed as supporters of bolshevism. As he evokes the prison term he himself served as a political activist in tsarist Russia,¹³ the father draws an implicit parallel between the political repression in his native land and the climate that prevailed in America during the post-World War I Red Scare. The father recalls the violence of the Palmer Raids and the memory of those who, like his own brother, were sent back to Russia:
- Even after the Palmer Raids—that was maybe 1919—they kept deporting people. They picked them up at home, at the Russian Artists' Club, at meetings [...] They thought that these kids had in mind a big revolution—like in Russia. Some joke. Ignorance. Grisha and his friends didn't like Lenin from the beginning. More Bakunin. Emma Goldman, her boyfriend [...] Berkman [...] They were shipped [...]. (76)¹⁴
- 36 In the end, the dying father assigns his daughter a mission: explore the archives, take advantage of whatever useful connections she might have to find out about Grisha. This, claims the father half-seriously, half-humorously, will help her give a sense of purpose to her own life while saving her from the regrets and remorse he himself has experienced.
- 37 The father's "address" gradually turns into a kind of self-justification and into a confession, which itself becomes a kind of testament: "[y]es, but I'm supposed to tell you a few things, give advice, *a few last words*" (72; emphasis mine). According to Ulric Neisser, "Parents cannot help interpreting the world for their children; indeed, they must do so if culture is to be transmitted to the next generation" (12). What position should the daughter assume so as to become, in Marianne Hirsch's words, "a space of transmission" ("The Generation of Postmemory" 103)?

"I AM THE FATHER!"¹⁵

- 38 It is noteworthy that Paley was eighty years old when she wrote "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age." Her father had been dead for more than thirty years. Why should she decide to revisit him? Had she reached an age when she was at last able to understand her father's preoccupations in his old age? Or is the story an "address" that she would have needed to give some decades before? Whose voice then is it? The father's or the daughter's? A voice one hears is a heard voice, as critic Neil D. Isaacs aptly observes

- (9). The story-hearer's¹⁶ voice is thus as important as that of the story-teller. Paley explains that before finding a voice she needs to listen first. Listening, like silence, provides creative power: "I can't find my own way of speaking until I have other voices. It's almost other voices that give me the strength or the permission or whatever to go through with it" (Interview Taylor 163). But isn't the daughter both the story-hearer *and* the story-teller with the father turning into a sort of ghost writer in "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age"? Isn't this story Paley's own testament in old age? The author confesses: "I think when people get older, they really think about the past a lot. They think about the wide future and the narrow past, really the tunneled past, way back. There's more to be said yet" (Interview Taylor 174).
- 39 Picking at the threads of the text, the narrator (re)weaves herself into the texture of the narrative, writing herself between the lines, unspinning the threads of her (father's) life so as to bring back those left behind: her parents, other relatives, as well as all the colorful world of Russian Jewish immigrants of the early twentieth century. Her position inside the story is therefore also characterized by nostalgia and regression.
- 40 "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" then turns into a narrative of (her) self in search of the ghosts whom she might also have felt tempted to forget or reduce to silence. In various interviews Paley acknowledges that it is the real father and herself who are the characters in some stories such as "Debts" or "A Conversation with My Father": "You know in 'A Conversation with My Father,' that's really very much him. My father and *me*" (Interview Hulley 37; emphasis in the original). Significant too is Paley's epigraph that appears in the first edition of her second collection of stories, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974): "Everyone in this book is imagined into life except the father. No matter what story he has to live in, he's my father, I. Goodside, M. D., artist, and storyteller" (n.p.). Joyce Meier analyzes the ambiguous use of the initial "I" as follows: "The inclusion of the pronoun 'I' implies that Paley too is the Father, or that the Father is within Paley as writer" (Meier 125). By authoring the voice of others, the narrator takes over the father's position, and, thus, places herself in a position of power: "By becoming a narrator, one plays the role of the dead so as to allow them to be heard. [...] All literature is a dialogue with the dead, for one has to die along with them so they could come alive again" (Sallenave 176; translation mine).¹⁷
- 41 Let us now return to the "heart" metaphor, which constitutes in fact the pivot of the narrative. This is how the father encourages his daughter to talk to her heart: "Heart, little heart, beat softly but never forget your job, the blood. You can whisper also, Remember, remember" (66). By helping the heart to beat ad infinitum, one can eschew time and mortality. It is, however, not the man's heart but the heart of the tale that will continue to beat so as to "memorialize certain things and people" (Interview Taylor 96), because, as Philip Roth puts it in his moving autobiographical account of his father's death, "[y]ou must not forget anything"¹⁸ (Roth 118; emphasis in the original).
- 42 Through the process of recording these snippets of conversation, the author forges connections between herself and the family members who only live in her father's narratives. Thus "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" seems to be a perfect example of "postmemory," as it was first coined by Hirsch in her essay "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory," and developed in her later work. She defines postmemory as "a structure of inter—and trans—generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (106). Here, the traumatic experience first comes in the shape of her lost uncle, whose story remained unrecorded by the official historical archives of

the 1920s. It is now the task of the daughter to reconstruct the process of remembering through the writing of the father's narrative.

- 43 By assuming the role of the father, the narrator reverses her position of being "addressed" into a position of power. There is, however, a certain ambiguity to the daughter's attempts at challenging patriarchal esthetics. On the one hand, she succeeds in reclaiming her voice by writing and thus becomes the author of her father's "address." On the other hand, she still needs the voice of the father to reanimate her own (hi)story. The narrative is ultimately not so much a conversation with her father as it is a conversation with herself.

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NOTES

1. All quotations from this collection as well as from the short story "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" refer to the editions mentioned in our works cited list.
2. Published in *The New Yorker* on June 17, 2002.
3. Richard Kostelanetz defines antiphonal effects as "the alternating back and forth of sound from one side of the room to the other" (88).
4. The verb "to address" means to make a formal speech. Etymologically it comes from the Anglo-French word "adrescer," meaning "to straighten" (Merriam Webster Dictionary).
5. *The Little Disturbances of Man* is the title of Paley's first collection of short stories published in 1959.
6. It is interesting to note that Woolf's mother died when the former was thirteen, the same age Paley was when her mother became seriously ill.
7. For an analysis of Lacan's concept of "the Name-of-the-Father," see for example Fink.
8. For a discussion of Kristeva's concept of the semiotic in Paley's writing, see Hulley.

9. In the short story "Mother," the mother is described as always standing in the doorway (325).
10. According to Jewish tradition, to be Jewish, one only needs to have a Jewish mother. The father is not taken into consideration.
11. See Ertel 332-33. One is also reminded of Anzia Yeziarska's autobiographical novel *Bread Givers*, a testimony to the difficulties encountered by Jewish women at the time in their search for self-assertion: "Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into heaven because they were daughters of men" (11). Like Yeziarska, Paley associates America with a sense of optimism and freedom. In a 1985 interview, she speaks in favor of creating new traditions that might help reshape Jewish identity: "That word identity has been hard for many women who live secular lives and maybe harder for religious women and also feminists. But the women's movement has made a big difference [...] It's given a lot of Jewish women courage to stay Jewish and fight... for those ordinary rights. R-i-t-e-s. Rights to have rites" (Interview Bach and Hall xii).
12. Here is how the father comments on the family's achievements in America: "But finally with us, everything was all right, ALL right, accomplished. Do you understand? Your brother and sister finished college, married [...] I was working very hard, like a dog. We were only fifty years old then, but, look, we bought the place in the country" (74).
13. This put an end to his political activism: "Then no more, no more, I said to myself, no more saving imperial Russia, the great pogrom-maker, from itself" (69).
14. The raids were aimed at radical groups seen as threats to the US which feared that a "red" influence might grip the American population. The Red Scare was exacerbated by the class and labor conflicts taking place at the time. The year 1919 was marked by the organized labor's struggle to obtain better working conditions. Labor leaders, radicals, and foreigners were soon labeled Bolshevik instigators. Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, probably America's most famous anarchists, were among the victims of the Palmer raids. Although no crime was leveled at the "instigators," they were rounded up and deported back to their country of origin in what the then Assistant US Secretary of Labor called "the deportations delirium" (Preston 2).
15. This phrase appears in "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute" (218).
16. This is an allusion to Grace Paley's short story "The Story Hearer" (337-45).
17. "Se faire narrateur, c'est jouer le rôle du mort pour permettre aux morts de se faire entendre. [...] Toute littérature est un dialogue avec les morts, car il faut se faire mort avec eux afin de les rendre vivants."
18. These are the last words of *Patrimony*.

ABSTRACTS

Trente ans après la publication de la célèbre nouvelle "A Conversation with My Father" (1972), Grace Paley reprend la discussion avec son père dans "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age" (2002). Il s'agit à nouveau de subvertir la figure paternelle, comme le suggère cette étude qui en analyse les modalités : de quelle façon la fille s'emploie-t-elle à défier le père pour trouver un espace où elle aura enfin la possibilité de faire entendre sa propre voix ? Ce faisant, comment parvient-elle à s'appropriier l'histoire / l'Histoire du père ? Parler avec le père est en fait prétexte à l'introspection et à une réflexion tout à la fois ironique et angoissée sur la mémoire et sur la transmission intergénérationnelle.

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