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New York Affinities: A Poetics of the City in the Writings of Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme

Claire Fabre

- 1 Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme were not only contemporary writers who happened to live in New York in the sixties and seventies, they were also close neighbors and friends who shared a sense of political-and poetic-commitment and respected each other's work, which led Barthelme to declare: "Grace Paley is a wonderful writer and troublemaker. We are fortunate to have her in our country" (qtd in Daugherty 287). While the biographical details of their friendship have already been documented,¹ few critics have tried to read their respective fiction and essays in parallel. Though both writers were considered as "experimental" at the time when they were published, their stories have little in common, and there is no denying that Barthelme's surreal collages starkly differ from Paley's chronicles of everyday life in New York.
- 2 This article, however, intends to investigate the ways in which the two authors' texts and ideas about fiction can be said to resonate with each other in spite of their differences. The starting point will be biographical and will lead us questioning and comparison their conceptions of writing. For both writers, nothing could be worse than fixity and, worst of all, the fixity of language. The mutability of the word, plot line and even character is one of the rules by which they abide. Along the same lines, they both consistently challenge all forms of categorization to give birth to what is admittedly called "hybrid" fictions, in which the mimetic grounding of the story is often likely to veer off into poetic surreality.
- 3 New York City will be viewed as the stage of an essential encounter between the two writers, as the material of many of their stories and essays and, finally, as an apt metaphor to express their poetic views. As Nathalie Cochoy has shown in her study of the figure of the passer-by in American literature, American writers have always sought to explore the conjunction between textual creativity and New York's permanent state of flux: "[by] substituting an interrogation on the foundation of words to a description of

the city, American writers have inaugurated a new mode of presentation of the city, based on the reciprocal impressions of the text in progress and the ever-changing city (Cochoy 17).”² Both Paley and Barthelme belong to the tradition of city writers for whom text and town are made of the same material.

Voices in the Village

4 One could start with the following anecdote: Paley and Barthelme, who then lived in Greenwich Village, both wrote an essay mentioning the Women’s House of Detention which was destroyed in 1974 and replaced by a garden, in the middle of the Village;³ a few years before, Grace Paley had been arrested and detained in that prison for six days for participating in a mass protest against the Vietnam draft. Before examining the two essays, let us recall their chronology: Grace Paley was arrested and detained in 1966; Donald Barthelme wrote “Here in the Village” in 1974, as the House of Detention was being demolished; Paley’s essay, entitled “Six Days: Some Rememberings,” because it unfolds the details of her stay in prison, was written almost thirty years after her arrest, in 1994. Thus the event in Paley’s life was also a source of inspiration for Barthelme who chose to include it in his own reflections and autobiographical material. A close reading of the texts will give insight into the lineaments of their poetics.

5 Barthelme’s essay is structured like a short diary of a week in the Village.

Walking around the Village. The vaguely rectangular vacant lot where the Women’s House of Detention used to be is being made into a little park, and the first bushes, shrubs-whatever-were put in last Monday, and you can now get a dim idea of what the place is going to look like. It’s going to be pretty. I don’t know who the genius responsible for getting this done is, but I take off my hat to her. The Women’s House of Detention was the place where they used to store women arrested for prostitution, mostly. The thing I remember about it best, aside from its social inutility and hideousness, is that one time a pal of mine who was in the anti-war activist business got situated there because she had sat down in front of an Armed Forces Day parade. And stopped it, for a while. Anyhow, she was put in a cell with a woman who was in that other business, and that woman asked her what she was in for and my pal told her. And the other woman immediately rushed to the cell door and yelled at the turnkey, “*Get these fucking housewives outta here!*” Anyhow, the planting is going in, and it looks mighty good. (“Here in the Village,” *Not-Knowing* 28)

6 Embedded in Donald Barthelme’s personal chronicle on his neighborhood is a story which was told by a friend of his, his “pal” whom everybody recognizes as Grace Paley. The durability of this little unpretentious and humorous piece comes from the extreme attention paid to the delicate balance of the sentences and, mostly, to their sonorities and rhythm. Thus the beginning (“Walking around the village. The vaguely rectangular vacant lot”) sounds like a poem devoid of conjugated verbs (except for the gerund “walking”), a purely musical designation with its regular alliteration (v) and initial rhyme (“vaguely”/“vacant”). The ironic comment made on the “social inutility” of the prison is detectable in the comically inappropriate use of the expression “to store women” and in the periphrasis “a woman who was in that other business” to designate the prostitute. All in all, Barthelme makes an elliptic yet recognizable allusion to Grace Paley’s arrest and clearly shows his bias in favor of the demolition (“It’s going to be pretty”). Later in the text, he continues his stroll in the Village and evokes the various encounters he made over the week: the salesgirl at the local liquor store (28), his friend Robin who tells him

that her daughter has been in hospital after a suicide attempt (29), four kids who bluntly ask him if he is straight or gay (29). He also relates his outing to the Jane street festival where he enjoys the music and ends up dancing with a woman he does not know: “Anyhow, when they played ‘Yesterdays,’ tears came to my eyes, which I don’t much like in public, so I asked this girl if she wanted to dance. She wasn’t a girl, really, she was a woman, and all the time we were dancing she had this three-year-old child (wearing glasses) clinging to her right leg. I didn’t get her name, but I sure did enjoy that dance” (30). The rather flippant tone of this chronicle contrasts with the subterranean violence contained in the episodes related: a police arrest in the context of the Vietnam War, the anger of imprisoned women, the distress of parents confronted with their daughter’s desperate move, a gang of young men intimidating homosexuals in the street. Though Barthelme’s text ends on a euphoric note which reasserts the power of music and community cohesion, the Village is shown as a place of unpredictable, albeit banal, violence.

- 7 Written some forty years later, Paley’s essay inevitably calls to mind the story first told by Barthelme, whether Paley was thinking about it or not when she wrote her own. The text was collected along with other “articles, reports and prefaces” and transcribed talks,⁴ and not as fiction. Yet Paley’s fictional voice seems to break through this autobiographical essay. First, the remoteness of the episode in time has blurred most of the referential details, as shown in the opening lines:

I was in jail. I had been sentenced to six days in the Women’s House of Detention, a fourteen-story prison right in the middle of Greenwich Village, my own neighborhood. This happened during the American war in Vietnam, *I have forgotten which important year of the famous sixties*. The civil disobedience for which I was paying a small penalty *probably* consisted of sitting down to impede or slow some military parade. (*Just As I Thought* 25, my emphasis)

- 8 The erasure of the specific historical references as well as the use of the simple past (“I was in jail”) make the passage suggestive of the incipit of a novel or a short story, all the more so since a discreet metafictional adjective (“a *fourteen-story* prison”) makes it clear that the focus of this piece is on the transformation of experience into “story.” Indeed, the text develops as a short, self-contained narrative in which the women encountered in jail (Evelyn, Rita and Helen, among others) briefly appear as characters with their own personalities, desires and conflicts. In other words, the Detention House appears as a place full of life and stories which Paley resented not being able to transcribe on paper at the time: “Then I complained. I had planned not to complain about anything while living among people who’d been here in these clanging cells a long time; it didn’t seem right. But I said, I don’t have anything to read and they took away my pen and I don’t have paper” (*Just as I Thought* 26). Despite her “paper-and-penlessness” (29), Paley does not feel entirely cut off from normal life for she is still in the midst of Greenwich Village:

Also, I must tell you, I could look out the window at the end of our corridor and see my children or their friends on their way to music lessons or Greenwich House pottery. Looking slantwise I could see right into Sutter’s Bakery, then on the corner of Tenth Street. These were my neighbors at coffee and cake. (*Just as I Thought* 26)

- 9 Far from being a secluded place, the prison communicates, visually and vocally, with the outside world. Paley remembers its importance as a fixture in the neighborhood, with its voices participating in the general din of the street:

For years, going to the park with my children, or simply walking down Sixth Avenue on a summer night past the Women’s House, we would often have to thread

our way through families calling up—bellowing, screaming to the third, seventh, tenth floor, to figures, shadows behind bars and screened windows, How you feeling? Here's Glenna. She got big. Mami, mami, you like my dress? We getting you out baby. New lawyer come by. (*Just as I Thought* 29)

- 10 At the end of the essay, Paley's stance concerning the demolition of the prison is the opposite of Barthelme's. As Tracy Daugherty aptly observes, "Grace's objection to the prison's removal was ideological; Don's approval of its absence was aesthetic. Grace did not want people to forget how the world is. Don insisted on considering how the world should be" (374). To Grace Paley the bucolic, pretty garden, "[a] green place, safely fenced in, with protected daffodils and tulips" (*Just as I Thought* 30), is paradoxically more cut off from the street than the prison used to be. She insists on the necessity to include prisons into the very fabric of the city so that offenders ("a whole huge country of the bad and the unlucky and the self-hurters" [30]) should not feel geographically and symbolically expelled from society. Though no apology for the existence of the prison, her text is reminiscent of the opening paragraph of *The Scarlet Letter* in which the prison and the rosebush coexist.⁵
- 11 Paley's and Barthelme's essays highlight the writers' commitment to their neighborhood, where they like to stroll in quest of unpredictable material. In both cases, the objective grid of the cityscape is covered by a more personal apprehension of geography.

Visions of the city

- 12 The city of New York is so omnipresent in Grace Paley's work that it can be perceived as a full-fledged character. It is a place endowed with a life of its own where individual and collective identities seem to coalesce. Whether in her stories or in her essays, Paley often dismisses the typographical markings of dialogues, she delays—or even erases altogether—all information about the identity of the speaker(s), thus providing direct access to the resounding chaos of urban life. The opening lines of "The Loudest Voice," for instance, clearly echo the description of the voices bursting in and out of the Detention House mentioned in "Six Days: Some Rememberings": "There is a certain place where dumbwaiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street to shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home. My voice is the loudest" (34, my emphasis). The personification of the city through the rapid succession of metaphor ("every window is a mother's mouth") and metonymy ("bidding the street to shut up") is taken up again later in the story when Shirley, the narrator, ironically compares the controversial Christmas tree in her Jewish neighborhood to a Hebrew in exile:

On the street corner a tree had been decorated for us by a kind city administration. In order to miss its chilly shadow our neighbors walked three blocks east to buy a loaf of bread. The butcher pulled down black window shades to keep the colored lights from shining on his chickens. Oh, not me. On the way to school, with both my hands, I tossed it a kiss of tolerance. Poor thing, it was a stranger in Egypt. (38)

- 13 The success of this story lies in the musical rearrangement of all the conflicting clichés and stereotypes that make up the basic material of the town's constant murmur. The use of clichés introduces a collective presence within the particulars of individuated speech. In her final prayer, Shirley includes "[...] everybody: my talking family, cousins far away, passersby, and all the lonesome Christians" (40). The intimate sphere ("my talking family") is gradually enlarged ("cousins far away") to the anonymous city around her ("passersby"). This shift from the individual to the collective also creates an impression of

randomness, a fundamental feature of Paley's aesthetics, which is also claimed by Donald Barthelme.

The importance of "not-knowing"

- 14 Paley's writing simultaneously asserts the variety and unpredictability of city life and its affective reordering by poetic coherence. An example of this tension is found in "Faith in a Tree," which opens on the approximate and subjective topography proposed by Faith, the narrator, as she contemplates the city from the improbable vantage point of a tree in Central Park.

What a place in democratic time! One God who was King of the Jews, who unravels the stars to this day with little hydrogen explosions, He can look down from His Holy Headquarters and see us all: heads of girl, ponytails riding the springtime luck, short black bobs, and an occasional eminence of golden wedding rings. 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)

- 15 New York, viewed from above, is evoked through a succession of synecdoches and by the juxtaposition of motley fragments, thus ironically denying God's presumed absolute knowledge. Even as it exhibits its haphazard character, this enumeration succeeds in recreating the microcosm of Washington Park, it reveals an underlying coherence in which the main ages of life coexist (girls, young women, married women) and North and South are assigned affective values (respectively danger and harmony). Washington Park—the very quintessence of New York—is a place where anything may happen, a small city within the city, in which hierarchies and rules are temporarily subverted and the possibilities for unexpected bifurcations of plot are therefore increased. As she keeps interrupting her story line with ironic digressions, Faith feigns to attribute her incapacity to conform to a pre-ordained plan to her faulty knowledge of language:

Despite no education, Mrs Finn is more in charge of words than I am. She is especially in charge of Good and Bad. 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 unreducible verb designed to tell a person like me what to do next. (181-82)

- 16 The expression of Paley's poetic views is "enacted" in such ironic comments; it is embodied by the fictional character of Faith, who is and is not an avatar of the author. In "Friends," another story featuring Faith, most of the action takes place on the train taking home three middle-aged women, first from their visit to one of their friends, Selena, who is dying, then from her funeral, the two journeys almost merging into one. Despite the humorous tone, the crossing of New York, and all the surrounding cities, parallels the metaphorical journey through the memories of the bereaved women, as if the town were actively taking part in their experience of death: "While we talked, a number of cities passed us, going in the opposite direction. I had tried to look at New London through the dusk of the windows. Now I was missing New Haven. The conductor explained, smiling: Lady, if the windows were clean, half of you'd be dead. The tracks are lined with sharpshooters" (309, my emphasis). The obscured windows of the train symbolize the narrator's exploration of the unknown, as she is vainly trying to make sense of her friend's death as well as of the urban space surrounding her. When at the end of the story

Susan, one of Faith's two friends, happens to meet a man with the "sly out-of-town-husband-in-New-York look" (312) on the train, Faith and Ann are pleased to admit that New York is still the city of chance encounters and change, opening up myriad possibilities of renewal: "Then Susan, like a New York hostess, began to tell that man all our private troubles—the mistake of the World Trade Center, Westway, the decay of the South Bronx, the rage in Williamsburg. She rose with him on the escalator, gabbing into evening friendship and, hopefully, a happy night" (313).

- 17 In Barthelme's fiction, New York is explicitly mentioned on occasions only ("The Balloon," "City Life," "110 West Sixty-First Street," "Sakrete" [40 *Stories* 193-96] to quote the main ones); more often than not, the city remains an unnamed American urban entity playing a major part in the story as in "I Bought a Little City" (*Sixty Stories* 290-291) or "A City of Churches" (*Sixty Stories* 203-207). Clearly, Barthelme's stories may occasionally be inspired by his personal experience of the city as related in the previously quoted essays, but, as Stanley Trachtenberg rightly puts it: "It is in fact, the loss of that world or the presumption of its loss, often as a result of equating it with absence or 'decontextualization,' that accounts for the satiric tone of much of Barthelme's writing and serves as its object" (239). The common point between Barthelme's cities and Paley's New York is that they are fundamentally uncontrollable and unknowable. This is shown *ab absurdo*; the narrator who has "bought a city" ("I Bought a Little City," *Sixty Stories* 290-91) and has been redesigning it, is loathe to accept its unpredictability even as he imposes the arbitrariness of his own whims:

I was pleased. All the people who lived in the four blocks surrounding the empty block had something they hadn't had before, a park. They could sit in it and like that. I went and watched them sitting in it. There was already a black man there playing bongo drums. I hate bongo drums. I started to tell him to stop playing those bongo drums but then I said to myself, No, that's not right. You got to let him play his goddamn bongo drums if he feels like it, it's part of the misery of democracy, to which I subscribe. Then I started thinking about new housing for the people I had displaced, they couldn't stay in that fancy hotel forever.

But I didn't have any ideas about new housing, except that it shouldn't be too imaginative. (290-91)

- 18 The narrator who wants to ban music (the bongo drums) and imagination—all forms of spontaneous expressions—from the city gradually turns into a violent tyrant; he eventually gives up on the city, however, when he has to admit he cannot force a woman to love him. The paradox of the story lies in the diametrically opposed visions of the narrator and of what the text implicitly suggests: indeed Barthelme manages to produce an unpredictable and fascinating text, dominated by fantasy and imagination, about a man who professes a hatred of all these qualities throughout the story. Thus the city and the text both appear as forces capable of confronting and countering the narrator's monstrosity. A similar conclusion could be drawn about the description of the dystopian city in "A City of Churches" (*Sixty Stories* 203-07) from which dreams and sex are banned, but whose local rules and norms are persistently challenged by the character of Cecelia who tries to assert the power of her desire: "I can will my dreams,' Cecelia said. 'I can dream whatever I want. If I want to dream that I'm having a good time, in Paris or some other city, all I have to do is go to sleep and I will dream that dream. I can dream whatever I want'" (206). Here again, the author ironically pleads for freedom against the rigidity of the totalitarian city. In both stories, the text is itself an outlandish object which is made possible by the city, though it counters its negative forces.

- 19 In his overview of the city in Barthelme's stories, Francis Gillen interprets the puzzling balloon which suddenly roams the New York sky ("The Balloon," *Sixty Stories* 46-51) as a metafictional symbol, its amorphous quality pointing to the seemingly formless nature of the text, which, like the balloon, "offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradiction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet" (41). The tensions at work in Barthelme's city stories are nowhere more palpable than in "Sakrete," a hilarious very short story published in the collection *40 Stories* (193-96). The narrator starts investigating the disappearance of "fourteen garbage cans" from his street, a trivial incident, which gives rise to a ludicrous succession of descriptions of the garbage cans, their contents and, indirectly, their owners, as he begins to suspect everyone in his neighborhood, including his own wife:

If my wife is stealing the garbage cans, in the night, while I am drunk and asleep, what is she doing with them? They are not in the cellar, I've looked (although I don't like going down to the cellar, even to replace a blown fuse, because of the rats). My wife has a yellow Pontiac convertible. No one has these anymore but I can imagine her lifting garbage cans into the back seat of the yellow convertible, at four o'clock in the morning, when I am dreaming of being on stage, dreaming of having to perform a drum concerto with only one drumstick. (194)

- 20 Throughout this story, specific numbers (of streets or buildings) and statistics impart a strangely mathematical, and poetic, rhythm to the narrative whose intensity increases as the story progresses:

On our street, fourteen garbage cans are now missing. The garbage cans from One Seventeen and One Nineteen disappeared last night. (*Sixty Stories* 193)

[...]

On our street, twenty-one garbage cans are now missing. New infamies have been announced by the One Thirty-one through One Forty-three-seven in a row, and on the same side of the street. Also depredations at One Sixteen and One Sixty-four. (*Sixty Stories* 194)

- 21 The perfect order imposed by the precision of numbers is at odds with the irrationality which progressively invades both the narrative and the diegetic space, as if the geometrical grid of the city had suddenly turned into some improbable maze like those imagined by the Dutch draughtsman Maurits Cornelis Escher.⁶ This impression is confirmed when the narrator devotes a whole paragraph to the description of a certain family living in the neighborhood, also part of the mystery "If I were ordered to imagine who is stealing our garbage cans, the Louis Escher family might spring to mind, not as culprits but as proximate cause" (*Sixty Stories* 195). Indeed, as the name Escher makes its appearance, the story slides into an indeterminate space where dreams and reality are now communicated through irrational pathways, and rats have taken control over the city. The present tense used in the last paragraph generates confusion for the reader between dreams and reality: "My wife drives groups of rats here and there in her yellow Pontiac convertible, attending important meetings" (*Sixty Stories* 196). Just as in the impossible constructions of Escher's drawings, the mathematical rationale proves to be only superficial, and the void left by the missing garbage cans can be viewed as a metafictional illustration of the discontinuity of the plot line.
- 22 Despite their differences Paley and Barthelme do seem to agree on the fundamental mutability of urban space, which informs the unpredictability of their texts. Moreover the numerous metaleptic transgressions in Paley's work as well as the dreamlike surreality in Barthelme's stories point to the fluidity of space and to the interconnections

between juxtaposed spatial entities. The text, just like the city, is the place where everything is possible.

- 23 It is also the locus where the principle of “not-knowing” makes itself tangible. This notion, which is developed at length in one of Barthelme’s essays (“Not Knowing” 71) and which gives its title to his collection of non-fiction writings (*Not-Knowing, The Essays and Interviews*), is central to his conception of artistic creation: “The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (12). This statement finds an echo in a remark made by Grace Paley at the Symposium on Fiction in 1975:⁷ “I can’t say that I’m presenting a truth when I write. I’m trying to understand something which I don’t understand to begin with. I begin by not understanding, and the tension and excitement for me and the tension that the reader may get also is in that not understanding and that pull away from not knowing to knowing” (qtd. in *Not Knowing* 71). Discussed in both Paley’s and Barthelme’s non-fictional writings, “Not-knowing,” which could also be called “serendipity,”⁸ accounts for many of their qualities: non-sequitur, digression or nonsense. The notion is particularly relevant when it comes to the representation of New York because of the city’s permanent state of mutability, which makes verisimilitude and unlikelihood collapse as conceptual categories. In Paley, the notion is mostly illustrated by the profuse interplay of voices. In Barthelme, the lack of logical links disrupts and disorganizes the plot line, thus enabling the leaps into the marvelous and the surreal.
- 24 Both Grace Paley and Donald Barthelme were particularly wary of theoretical discourse⁹ and viewed all attempts at formal categorization as potentially reductive. Still, language is at the very heart of their preoccupations and neither of them claims to “represent” the world as such. The city they present (rather than “represent”) is therefore a topographical entity which, in addition to its symbolic function in the story, is also the privileged locus of essential poetic and political transformations.

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NOTES

1. This is how Tracy Daugherty relates their encounter in his biography of Barthelme: “After writing in the mornings, Don took long walks around the neighborhood. Almost every day he’d see—usually on the corner of West Eleventh and Sixth—a short, wild-haired, cheerful but determined woman carrying anti-war signs, or handing out leaflets for political rallies, or wearing a makeshift smock painted with the words ‘Money/Arms/War/Profit.’ This woman turned out to be his across-the-street-neighbor, Grace Paley. Don knew her book *The Little Disturbances of Man*, published in 1959. [...] They’d meet in parks, one another’s apartments, or in church basements, mimeographing flyers. Purple stains covered Grace’s hands. Her politics were never abstract or ideological; they were rooted in motherhood and the activities of her block. Don admired this about her” (287).
2. My translation: “En substituant à la description une interrogation sur le fondement des mots, les écrivains américains inaugurent un nouveau mode de présentation de la ville, basé sur une impression réciproque entre un texte en formation et une ville en mutation.”
3. It was located on 10, Greenwich Avenue.
4. “I’ve called this collection *Just As I Thought*. I’ve left the articles, reports, and prefaces pretty much as originally written. The transcribed talks are another matter. They’ve required correction, clarification as they came from my indistinct speech on tape to the transcriber” (Introduction, *Just As I Thought* xi).
5. “Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him” (Hawthorne 45-46).
6. M.C. Escher (1898-1972) was a Dutch graphic artist known for his “impossible constructions” such as “Relativity” (1953) or “Ascending and Descending” (1960) in which the characters can be seen as either endlessly ascending a staircase or endlessly descending it. See his official website.
7. The transcription of this symposium, to which Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley and Walker Percy participated, is found in Barthelme’s collection *Not-Knowing, The essays and interviews* (58-82).
8. According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “serendipity” was coined in 1754 by Horace Walpole upon the title of the fairy tale “The Three Princes of Serendip,” the heroes of which “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in

quest of.” The dictionary defines it as “the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries” (1847).

9. Barthelme, however, is considered more of a “metafictionist” than Paley.

ABSTRACTS

Grace Paley et Donald Barthelme, qui entretenaient des liens d’amitié, étaient tous deux intimement convaincus que la vie (tant intime que publique) était indissociable de l’écriture. Leurs engagements politiques n’étaient nullement incompatibles avec leurs recherches formelles et la vie quotidienne était à leurs yeux une source perpétuelle d’émerveillement, d’incongruité et d’amusement. L’espace de la ville occupe dans leurs œuvres respectives une place particulière : pour Paley, New York bruisse de voix et de rumeurs qu’elle capture dans des récits à l’humour indéfectible ; chez Barthelme, le Village (Greenwich Village) offre un terrain d’observation que l’on trouve souvent au cœur d’essais et de chroniques acerbes ou tendres. D’un écrivain à l’autre, la notion de “not-knowing” circule, au point de définir l’un des axes principaux de leur poétique.

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Claire Fabre is a former student of the “Ecole Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud.” She is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University Paris-Est-Créteil. After writing her doctoral dissertation on Raymond Carver, she has published extensively on such contemporary writers as Grace Paley, David Foster Wallace, Mary Caponegro, Patricia Eakins, Christine Schutt and Nicholson Baker. Her research focuses on the aesthetics of the quotidian in contemporary short fiction.