"I don’t understand how time passes": The Experience of Time in Grace Paley’s “Wants” and “Ruthy and Edie”

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The titles of Grace Paley’s last two collections of short fiction—Enormous Changes at the Last Minute and Later the Same Day—highlight the ubiquity of time in her stories. They point to the different temporalities she engages with while also hinting at the elasticity of time in her writings. Paley’s short stories may focus on a single afternoon or span over the course of years; sometimes, however, whole lives are collapsed into a single paragraph or sentence—a feat which the author acknowledges as a possibility offered by short fiction writing itself: “I think you can cover a lot in a short period of time. It’s one of the gifts of the short story” (Interview Hulley 50, emphasis in original). Thus in Paley’s very first story “Goodbye and Good Luck,” the narrator, “Aunt Rose,” relates in only a dozen pages her lifelong and complicated love affair with the actor Vlashkin, who for years remained married to another woman. When reminded by her somewhat guilty lover that “A woman should not lose her time,” Rose retorts: “Oi, Vlashkin, if you are my friend, what is time?” (10).

The question echoes throughout Paley’s fiction, in which “time” refers in fact to a vast array of meanings: “clock time,” “life,” “mutability,” “speed,” “rhythm,” “history,” and so on and so forth. Many of her characters find themselves wondering at the passing of time or bemoaning the brevity of life, particularly after the death of a relative: “whatever you do, life don’t stop. It only sits a minute and dreams a dream” (“Goodbye and Good Luck” 9); “haven’t we said that it had become noticeable that life is short and sorrowful?” (“Listening” 381). Furthermore, the private lives Grace Paley depicts often intersect with history on a larger scale, such as the “cruel history of Europe” which haunts the narrator of “The Immigrant Story” (238); or the Vietnam War protest that
unsettles Faith at the end of “Faith in a Tree” (192). None of her characters or narrators, however, can provide a definite answer to the question “what is time?” Viewed in narratological terms, the notion of “time” covers a range of different concepts—reading time, narrated time, narrative time—which interact to produce additional categories, such as those Gérard Genette has identified as “order,” “duration,” and “frequency” (77-182). Paley tends to subvert traditional narrative time or to expose its artifice with phrases such as “Then, as often happens in stories, it was several years later” (385) or “Once upon a time, as they say” (135). While time is a recurrent theme, it also shapes the very structure of her narratives, thereby raising the question of temporality in the short story. In an essay entitled “Suspected Narratives: The Short Story and Temporality,” Michael Trussler argues that the way we apprehend time in narratives has been shaped by the temporality at play in the novel: “One problem explicitly manifested by the short story pertains to the complexity of negotiating temporal experience through narrative. All narratives engage temporality in some way, but short fiction intimates how thoroughly our apprehension of historicity has been conditioned by sequential narrative forms such as the novel” (577). In the novel, the complexity of events and characters is generally conveyed through their juxtaposition and evolution in the course of the narrative, while short stories tend to focus on a single event, often a single time frame, which requires readers to imagine the larger context. This article seeks to address Grace Paley’s treatment of time in “Wants” and “Ruthy and Edie,” two stories written eleven years apart, in which temporality is problematized both as a theme and as a structural device.

4 In “Wants,” the unnamed homodiegetic narrator describes a casual encounter with her ex-husband as she goes to the library in order to return books she has been keeping . . . for eighteen years. Although the story is set at that specific moment, the conversation between the two characters as well as the narrator’s internal thoughts invariably hark back to their shared past as the characters argue over the demise of their marriage. As Paley commented in an interview, “[‘Wants’] really is about time, it’s a time story” (Interview Vernadakis and Dreyfus 350). This is apparent from the opening, which condenses a whole life in a few pithy sentences:

I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library. Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.


I said, O.K. I don’t argue when there’s real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.

The librarian said $32 even and you’ve owed it for eighteen years. I didn’t deny anything. Because I don’t understand how time passes. I have had those books. I have often thought of them. The library is only two blocks away. (129)

5 From the very beginning, the narrator is placed between two juxtaposed temporalities (“ex-husband,” “new library”). She is poised between past and present, old and new—a liminal situation which is also underlined by her sitting on the steps of the library, halfway between inside and outside. She is figuratively both out of time and out of place, neither in nor out, in a static intermediate position. Furthermore, the opening of the narrative is interspersed with figures: “twenty-seven years”; “$32”; “eighteen
years”; later on, the narrator mentions “how life in the United States in New York changed in twenty-seven years fifty years ago” (130). Such accumulation has a numbing effect as these quantities seem to detach themselves from the realities they point to. Expressing time through numbers is indeed meaningless for the narrator, as she readily admits (“I don’t understand how time passes”) even though she remains acutely aware of temporality.

In fact the story seems to present readers with two different conceptions of temporality: a linear, external measurement of time, on the one hand, a more fluid and subjective perception, on the other. This dual conception is discussed by Henri Bergson in *Time and Free Will*. The philosopher opposes mechanical, scientific time, which is measured by the clock and expressed in quantities, to the human perception of time as duration (durée). While scientific time has the appearance of objectivity, it misses in fact the very essence of time, which can be grasped by consciousness and intuition only. In Bergson’s opinion, scientists do not actually measure time, but space (the intervals between the hands of the clock), whereas “real” time lies in “pure duration,” which the philosopher defines as “the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (100).

In “Wants,” the narrator’s admitted failure to understand time may only reveal her rejection of mechanical time, as numbers fail to convey the experience of true duration. This is made manifest by the incongruous exchange that ensues between the two ex-lovers about what caused their marriage to end:

> In many ways, he said, as I look back, I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams to dinner.
> That’s possible, I said. But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn’t seem to know them anymore. (129)

The man’s preposterous and simplistic explanation points to a linear conception of time to which the narrator’s own chronology stands in stark contrast. Although the anaphora “then” in her reply tends to suggest a clear chain of events, the juxtaposition of punctual and durative events, the mingling of the personal and the national, of the commonplace and the remarkable, all contribute to a representation of the experience of time as flux, as interrelation between different periods and events. According to Bergson, our memories of past events and our perception of the present interpenetrate since our consciousness apprehends both at the same time. Therefore, when in the opening of Paley’s story the ex-husband retorts “What life? No life of mine” (128) to his ex-wife’s amiable greeting (“Hello my life,” 128), he deliberately ignores this state of flux, whereas the narrator acknowledges that it is impossible.

The characters’ opposite conceptions of time go hand in hand with radically different “wants.” The man accuses his ex-wife of not wanting anything, while he “wanted a sailboat” (130), and still intends to buy one. This materialistic desire is incomprehensible for the narrator, who casually dismisses possessions: “we had nice red pillows and things” (130). His wants are things you can own and measure while she has aspirations of a purely intangible nature:

> I want, for instance, to be a different person. I want to be the woman who brings these two books back in two weeks. I want to be the effective citizen who changes the school system and addresses the Board of Estimate on the troubles of this dear urban center.
I had promised my children to end the war before they grew up.
I wanted to have been married forever to one person, my ex-husband or my present one. Either has enough character for a whole life, which as it turns out is really not such a long time. (131; emphasis in the original)

These three paragraphs juxtapose many different tenses and aspects: enunciative present (“I want”), simple present to express the future (“the woman who brings these two books back in two weeks”), pluperfect (“I had promised”), simple past to express the future in the past (“before they grew up”), simple past with a passive perfect infinitive (“I wanted to have been married forever”), and gnomic present (“a whole life, which as it turns out is really not such a long time”). This suggests the range of the narrator’s “wants” while simultaneously plunging the reader into a whirl of antagonistic time frames, mimicking the complex way in which temporality is perceived by consciousness. Paley’s narrator proposes a perception of time characterized by a continuum defying chronological logic, which is most striking in this bittersweet musing: “I wanted to have been married forever to one person, my ex-husband or my present one.” Such confounding blending of past, present and future is reminiscent of Bergson’s conception of “pure duration,” which is “characterized by variety, even contraries, since it contains the whole past and present of the person experiencing it—unity and multiplicity” (Rohrberger 76).

“Wants” also reveals a constant oscillation between change and permanence, evolution and stagnation, which, again, can be felt in the very titles of Paley’s collections of stories—Enormous Changes at the Last Minute and Later the Same Day. Just as the author subverts linear chronology, she challenges the notion that change and permanence are mutually exclusive. When the protagonist returns her books to the library, eighteen years of overdue penalties are ostensibly obliterated with a check: “I gave the librarian a check for $32. Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will not do” (130). Yet the narrator’s inability to draw a line between past and present as well as her refusal to consider her ex-husband as forever “behind her” lead her to borrow again the very books she has just returned: “I checked out the two Edith Wharton books I had just returned because I’d read them so long ago and they are more apropos now than ever” (130). The telescoping of past and present, change and continuity thus creates a strange narrative loop. A sense of a cyclical time is instilled at the end of the story as the narrator is back on the library steps, in the liminal space where everything started and where she now reflects on what brought her to the library in the first place:

Just this morning I looked out the window to watch the street for a while and saw that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives.

Well! I decided to bring those two books back to the library. Which proves that when a person or an event comes along to jolt or appraise me I can take some appropriate action, although I am better known for my hospitable remarks. (131; emphasis in the original)

Once again the reference to different temporalities expresses a subjective perception of duration which emphasizes the elasticity of felt time: “how it went like nothing, you know, the tree grew, the husband’s gone,” declared Paley as she commented on the story (Interview Vernadakis and Dreyfus 351). At first glance, these last two paragraphs seem to express the narrator’s newfound determination to make “enormous changes” in her life. But she is actually reflecting on a moment situated before the events depicted in the narrative (“Just this morning”). Far from illustrating an evolution in
the story, the dénouement actually marks a cyclic revolution. The narrator finds herself exactly where she started, on the steps of the library, with the same two books she wishes to return again. Text and plot thus loop back on themselves, while change and permanence paradoxically describe one and the same thing. As Paley stated in an interview: “[A story] can curl around on itself, it can just fall down and slip out through one of the spirals and go back again. That’s the way I see. I see us all in a great big bathtub of time just swimming around; everything’s in this ocean called time and it’s a place” (Interview Lidoff 87). Time in “Wants” exemplifies this sense of a liquid temporality, which both narrator and reader experience as they are led back to the beginning of the story.

12 “Ruthy and Edie” is also a “time story”; or, following Paul Ricoeur’s definition, a “tale about time”: “All fictional narratives are ‘tales of time’ inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time. However only a few are ‘tales about time’ inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations” (Time and Narrative II 101). The story has a twofold structure. In the first section, the narrator recounts a scene that occurred “one day in the Bronx” (327): the two eponymous characters, who were still children at the time, are arguing about boys and bravery when a dog suddenly shows up and frightens them. In the second section, set “many years later” (329), friends are gathered for Ruth’s fiftieth birthday. The celebration is fit for a reflection on life and the passing of time. Now middle-aged, Ruth and her friends evoke anecdotes from the past and deplore the generation gap with their children. The first section is then revealed to be a memory that Ruth has been reminiscing about, since Edie remarks, alluding to the incident with the dog: “Ruthy, it wasn’t like that. We both ran in and out a lot” (330). While the characters recall the past, they are also concerned about the near future:

[Ann] was patting a couple of small cases and a projector on the floor next to her chair. Was she about to offer a slide show? No, she had already been prevented from doing this by Faith, who’d looked at the clock two or three times and said, I don’t have the time, Jack is coming tonight. Ruth had looked at the clock too. Next week, Ann? (330)

13 Just as in “Wants,” “clock time” is seen as an external constraint over which the characters have no control. Later in the story, Ruth declares: “We have only a couple of hours. (It was four o’clock. At six, Sara and Tomas with Letty, the first grandchild, standing between them would be at the door” (331). Paley instills a sense of anticipation in her story, as the ticking clock reminds the characters of how little time they have together. She brings into focus the ending of her story, which coincides with the arrival of Ruth’s granddaughter. As Susan Lohafer has noted, the short story is claimed to be “the most end-conscious of literary forms” (50) and “readers of short fiction . . . the most end-conscious of readers” (94). Paley, for whom “art is too long and life is too short” (Allen 130), chose the short story form for its concentration of events and perspectives. “Ruthy and Edie” juxtaposes the experience of time of middle-aged women with the naive perception of a very young child, Letty:

They would all love her new shoes and her newest sentence, which was Remember dat? Because for such a long time there had been only the present full of milk and looking. Then one day, trying to dream into an afternoon nap, she sat up and said,
Gramma, I broke your cup. Remember dat? In this simple way the lifelong past is invented, which, as we know, thickens the present and gives all kinds of advice to the future. (331)

Here again, the narrator emphasizes the interrelatedness of past, present, and future. In addition to this, she equates the acquisition of time with that of language. Letty is still struggling to pronounce words correctly, yet the phrase “remember dat?” allows her to conjure up the past. Time and language are thus intrinsically connected, as Letty is creating with language a time and a place that she can share with others.

The act of remembering is indeed prominent in the short story. The women gathered for Ruth’s birthday are playing their own game of “remember dat?”, rejoicing in their shared memories and recalling, for example, a demonstration they took part in years ago: “And then the goddamn horses started to rear and the cops were knocking people on their backs and heads—remember?” (333). It is language which shapes the way the characters experience memories: “If you said the word ‘city’ to Edie, or even the cool adjective ‘municipal,’ specific children usually sitting at the back of the room appeared before her eyes and refused to answer when she called on them” (332). Here words seem to conjure up the past in much the same way that specific sensations trigger “involuntary memory” for Proust’s narrator in À la recherche du temps perdu. However, Paley describes the social power of language only to expose its deceptive nature later in the story. Bergson also elaborated on this idea, arguing that language allows us to communicate our free-flowing inner state, but in an inaccurate and rigid way only: “our perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas occur under two aspects: the one clear and precise, but impersonal; the other confused, ever changing, and inexpressible, because language cannot get hold of it without arresting its mobility or fit it into its common-place forms without making it into public property” (129). Language is therefore both necessary for social life and fundamentally misleading, as the rest of Paley’s story demonstrates.

At the end of “Ruthy and Edie,” Letty arrives with her parents at six o’clock, just as her grandmother had predicted. The child makes a prediction of her own—“I’m gonna sleep in your house, Gramma” (334)—before playing the game of “remember dat”: “Gramma, I slept in your bed with you. Remember dat?” (334). But Letty soon realizes that something is amiss: her aunt Rachel, who was supposed to be there, is not present at the party. Ruth gives her granddaughter a hug and tries to explain:

Letty, she said as lightly as she could, She is supposed to be here. But where can she be? She certainly is supposed.

Letty began to squirm out of Ruth’s arms. Mommy, she called, Gramma is squeezing. But it seemed to Ruth that she’d better hold her even closer, because, though no one else seemed to notice—Letty, rosy and soft-cheeked as ever, was falling, already falling, falling out of her brand-new hammock of world-inventing words onto the hard floor of man-made time. (334, emphasis in original)

The use of the past progressive and the repetition of “falling” seem to stretch that moment in time. The last sentence of the story is also its longest, which contributes to this effect and gives it additional weight. In this pivotal moment, which amounts, in fact, to a fall from innocence to experience, language and time become dissociated. No naive belief is possible any longer in a sort of Adamic tongue based on the perfect coincidence between words and world. So far the little girl’s words for time had seemed to correspond to the specific events they described: “She was still happy to have found the word ‘remember,’ which could name so many pictures in her head” (334). Now she
is made aware of the divorce between signifier and signified. The shock that ensues is underlined by Paley’s suggestive choice of sonorities. In the final sentence, the gliding of the semivowel [w]—“world-inventing words”—gives way to the slowing-down effect of the nasal alliteration in [m]: “man-made time,” while the fluidity suggested by the —ING form and the paronomasia “world”/“word,” evoking interaction, gives way to the rigidity of the past participle “made.”

The last paragraph is of course an epiphany, a device that Paley usually eschews in her stories. Jean Pickering sees epiphanies as one of the constituents of the form, which she defines as “the moment of revelation that stands at the heart of the short story, the moment of insight that comes before language, constitutes a discrete moment of certainty in a nebulous universe” (53). Here, on the contrary, certainty is undermined as language breaks down. While this comes as a tragic realization concerning the child, the story nevertheless proves that “world-inventing words” shape its very structure. Paley chronicles the failure of language while demonstrating its power. Bergson remarks that although language solidifies into a fixed image our personal sensations and ideas, writers try to reverse this phenomenon: “We estimate the talent of a novelist by the power with which he lifts out of the common domain, to which language had thus brought them down, feelings and ideas to which he strives to restore, by adding detail to detail, their original and living individuality” (164). He argues that this effort is vain, however, for language cannot ultimately account for the life of the mind. Paley’s story explores this tension between the seemingly endless possibilities of “world-inventing words” and the limits of language.

According to Ricoeur, all narratives create a “fictive experience of time,” which he defines as “the temporal aspect of this virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text” (Time and Narrative II 100). Through the act of reading, the fictive world of the text and the actual world of readers collide, which ultimately alters the way readers perceive time, provoking what Ricoeur calls “refiguration.” In “Wants” and “Ruthy and Edie,” Paley’s use of tenses, rhythm, sonorities, and structure, combined with an underlying reflection on temporality, present us with a thought-provoking representation of the experience of time. She challenges our understanding of time by highlighting its fluid and fleeting nature and by exposing its inadequate and misleading expression through language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. “Narrated time” refers to the succession of events within the story whereas “narrative time” is the temporal structure of the narrative itself.
3. According to Genette’s classification, a homodiegetic narrator is also a character in the story he or she tells (252).
4. “La durée toute pure est la forme que prend la succession de nos états de conscience quand notre moi se laisse vivre, quand il s’abstient d’établir une séparation entre l’état présent et les états antérieurs” (Essai 74-75).
5. Even this simple chronology is challenged, however, as Paley uses both “this morning” and “that day” in the same sentence. This creates a subtle dissonance, simultaneously bringing near and distancing the same period of time.
6. “Les œuvres que nous allons étudier sont de telles fables sur le temps, dans la mesure où c’est l’expérience même du temps qui y est l’enjeu des transformations structurales” (Temps et récit II 151).
7. “[N]os perceptions, sensations, émotions et idées se présentent sous un double aspect : l’un net, précis, mais impersonnel ; l’autre confus, infiniment mobile, et inexprimable, parce que le langage ne saurait le saisir sans en fixer la mobilité, ni l’adapter à sa forme banale sans le faire tomber dans le domaine commun” (Essai 96).
8. “Nous jugeons du talent d’un romancier à la puissance avec laquelle il tire du domaine public, où le langage les avait ainsi fait descendre, des sentiments et des idées...
auxquels il essaie de rendre, par une multiplicité de détails qui se juxtaposent, leur primitive et vivante individualité” (Essai 123-124).

9. “Ce que nous appelons ici expérience fictive du temps est seulement l’aspect temporel d’une expérience virtuelle de l’être au monde proposée par le texte” (Temps et récit II 151).

ABSTRACTS

“Wants” et “Ruthy and Edie” sont deux « fables sur le temps » qui mettent en jeu la temporalité sur le plan thématique et structurel. Dans ces nouvelles où l’acte du souvenir est omniprésent, Grace Paley manipule les temps grammaticaux, le rythme et les sonorités pour étirer ou condenser la narration, créant au passage une représentation fluide de la temporalité. Elle donne à voir au lecteur une perception du temps caractérisée par un flux continu où passé, présent et futur s’entremêlent, rappelant la conception bergsonienne de la durée. Elle interroge également la relation entre temps et langage, ce dernier étant perçu comme un outil nécessaire mais fondamentalement trompeur.

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