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# Grace Paley and Dawn Raffel: Writing on the Edge of Disaster

Brigitte Félix

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- 1 So much has already been written about Grace Paley's art, her creation of vibrant voices and resonant texts, her energetic storytelling in defiance of traditional forms, her unrelenting dedication to language as the core of her fiction writing, her "passionate commitment to literature [and] working relationship with society," to apply to herself the description she makes of Christa Wolf in an essay published in *Just as I Thought* (208). In an attempt to offer a slightly different perspective on Grace Paley's work, I have chosen to re-read "Mother," from *Later the Same Day*, in the light of a story entitled "Steam," written by contemporary writer Dawn Raffel and published in her latest collection of short fiction *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* (2010).<sup>1</sup>
- 2 "Mother" and "Steam," which are both first-person short narratives, share the same theme—the sense of loss generated by the death of each of the narrators' mothers—and a similar type of narrative development around the investigation of absence. In "Mother," the narrator juxtaposes memories of her mother in various places around the household with a few snippets of conversations between herself and her mother in the first part, and between her mother and father in the second part. Each part is brought to a close with a paragraph made of the same single sentence repeating the fact of the mother's death: "Then she died." In the two-page "Steam"—which is barely longer than "Mother"—the narrator begins with the uncertain news of the mother's death, followed by the description of how she busied herself by going to the swimming pool, then to the movies, as the explosion of a steam pipe prevented her from going to work in her office, presumably on the same day. In the second half of the story, the narrator describes herself at home, calling her sister, remembering an earlier telephone conversation with her mother a few days before her death, then listing what had to be done after her mother's death—organizing the funeral, cleaning and selling the mother's house. In the last lines, the narrator says that she calls her office, that she receives a message from her sons and, finally, that she is called by her sister. The story ends with their brief exchange

about the weather (“‘It’s raining,’ she said. / ‘Here, too,’ I said, ‘and I am so far away’” [65]).

- 3 The attention to form and language, and the intensity produced by narrative condensation and ellipsis are all strikingly present in the writing of Dawn Raffel, whose “Steam” reverberates with textual echoes of “Mother” while following its own original narrative and poetic path. Both stories’ subject matter calls to mind Maurice Blanchot’s statement about Kafka’s writing in *The Space of Literature*: “Art is a relation with death” because “death is the extreme” and “[a]rt is mastery of the supreme moment, supreme mastery” (91). While it can be argued that neither Paley nor Raffel aim at the kind of modernist mastery that was Kafka’s pursuit according to Blanchot, “Mother” and “Steam” can be defined by their “relation with death,” which is the central hypothesis of this article. We will see that the texts are not so much “about” that relation as made of and by it: the relation with death is not just thematic and autobiographical, it is a process by which the inseparability of writing and death is asserted.
- 4 The striking thematic resemblance between the two stories will serve as a starting point to analyze the idea of their kinship. The aesthetic composition of each text will be approached and highlighted by Blanchot’s considerations on death’s space in *The Space of Literature* and in *The Writing of the Disaster*.

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- 5 In an interview conducted by Kathleen Hulley in 1982, Grace Paley evoked her mother’s early death from breast cancer in ways that reveal the painfulness of the memory:
 

My mother’s death was really very hard... and very terrible... And it’s hard for me to deal with. I deal with it a little bit in ‘Friends,’ talking about dying... It’s just... that... she could have died! I have an awful lot of feeling about that. It’s pretty hard. 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)
- 6 The “little bit in ‘Friends’” is in fact the starting-point for the story—the dying and death of a woman named Selena, and how her women friends live through that experience. There is a discretely autobiographical hint at the suffering caused by the absence of the mother. It occurs in a single sentence spoken by the narrator, Faith, in a conversation with her friend Ann: “I think *Ma* sometimes and I lose my breath” (81), after which Faith deliberately switches to another topic, adding: “I decided not to describe my mother’s death” (81)—which Grace Paley actually never did in her fiction. As always in Paley’s stories, the speaking voice comes to life in the text thanks to the use of italics, a typographical convention for emphasis which signals both a special utterance—distinct from the rest of the narrator’s discourse—and a word. The abbreviated word “*Ma*,” as if it were mimetically interrupted by the loss of breath, carries the affect contained in the memory of the mother, and expresses the impossibility of speaking any further beyond *that* word. Curiously enough, Grace Paley does not mention “Mother” in her interview with Hulley. It is true that in a very condensed narrative, “Mother” does not deal at all with the mother’s agonizing death *per se*, but rather recreates in subdued tones—and sometimes deceptively lighthearted notations—the sense of emptiness and devastation left in the wake of the mother’s radical absence.

- 7 As a matter of fact, “Mother” distinguishes itself from the other stories published by Grace Paley for several reasons. In *Grace Paley: Conteuse des destins ordinaires*, Noëlle Batt proposes a classification of Paley’s stories and finds only three that she considers as “partially autobiographical” stories (39): “A Conversation with My Father” (in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*), “Love” and “Mother” (in *Later the Same Day*). While acknowledging the autobiographical reference to Paley’s own relationship with her mother, Paule Lévy underlines the poetic achievement of the text, which she considers to be the acme of Paley’s subversive literary aesthetics. For her, “Mother” is unique, as an elegiac tribute to the evanescent figure of the mother, and as an elliptic, stylized narrative whose simplicity and intensity are reminiscent of the quintessential grace of Japanese haikus. Lévy also argues that “Mother” has been rather neglected by criticism, compared with other stories, for instance those “starring” the character-narrator Faith, or the story entitled “A Conversation with My Father,” which attracted commentators’ attention because of its self-conscious metafictional aspects (Lévy, *Figures de l’artiste* 115; 123-27).
- 8 Might critics have considered “Mother” to be self-explanatory due to the transparent autobiographical reference? Or, rather, in spite of its deceptive transparency, does Paley’s writing keep opposing a “resistant form” to commentary?<sup>2</sup> The first hypothesis points to the types of critical approaches foregrounding referentiality, seeing through the words and sentences of the text to reach for “the world” lying outside. In keeping with Grace Paley’s rejection of the autobiographical as a significant ground for her stories,<sup>3</sup> this article will not try to look for “Mother” *out there*. The second hypothesis implies that the text’s elusiveness should be studied within the field of poetics and textual hermeneutics. Relying on the post-structuralist premise according to which, in Terry Eagleton’s words, “all literature is intertextual,” which means that “[a] specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it” (119), I propose to examine the resistant form of “Mother” from within the small intertextual “cluster” constituted by and with Dawn Raffel’s “Steam” and its own version of resistant form.
- 9 The recourse to intertextual interpretation deserves some explanation. As a method, it is defended by Monica Manolescu-Oancea in her groundbreaking article on Raffel’s work, “Dawn Raffel—A Family Portrait.” Counter-attacking the criticism leveled by William Irwin, in his article “Against Intertextuality,” at the potential looseness and abusive extension of the notion of intertextuality, Manolescu-Oancea insists that the reader’s subjective, more or less accidental, associations are “commonplace in the process of reading [as] the reader’s literary memory is stimulated by a given text, which is thus related to others” (5). The reader’s intuitive and personal associations between texts are also essential in making sense of a practice of writing by establishing a literary network: “[...] if one wishes to understand where Dawn Raffel comes from and where she stands in the American literary space, one needs to establish interactions between her texts and others, to insert her texts within a larger framework” (3-4).
- 10 Re-reading Paley’s “Mother,” then, is a way of getting at “Steam,” of making sense of the idiosyncrasies of its textuality, a way of taming the text’s isolated newness and placing it “on the map.” Conversely, the discovery of “Steam” brings the possibility of a new reading of “Mother.” The difference of “Mother” from the rest of Paley’s stories can now be seen as relative. When placed within this new family, “Mother” also becomes less “resistant.”

## Kinship

- 11 The fact that Dawn Raffel names Grace Paley among her influences does not cancel the methodological and hermeneutic value of the intertextual reading, which is not about “influences”; it simply provides an external validation, which remains rather vague:
- In terms of influence, I would cite most strongly the playwrights Edward Albee and Harold Pinter; when I started writing, I was immensely taken with their rhythms, pauses, ambiguities, rebuke to tradition. Also Coover, Robinson, Paley, Barthelme, Barth; all of whom animated me to invent, discard, challenge. Flannery O’Connor—that gorgeous desolation! (Raffel, Interview Manolescu-Oancea 3)
- 12 However, it is easy to list many common points between Grace Paley and Dawn Raffel, as confirmed by the interviews they have given. Like Paley, Raffel does not “write traditional plots” (Raffel, Interview with Manolescu-Oancea 2), and her stories tend to be short, partly for the same reasons given by Grace Paley—being busy with family life, making the best of not enough time. Like “Mother,” “Steam” has a strong autobiographical background corroborated by Dawn Raffel’s explanation that “*Further Adventures in the Universe* is a response to the death of [her] parents” (Interview Manolescu-Oancea 5), but that remains an external determination. In fact, we can even say that just as Grace Paley switches to fiction when she has to deal with a difficult subject,<sup>4</sup> so does Dawn Raffel’s “Steam” propose a series of narrative fragments that deflect the reference to the mother’s death and dissolve the autobiographical within the fictional environment.
- 13 Many of the stories Paley and Raffel write center around family issues and relationships. Yet, beyond the recognizable features and themes of the family story, the writing in Grace Paley and Dawn Raffel seems to be concentrated on the establishment of all kinds of relations. As Noëlle Batt notes in *Grace Paley* (16), in order to grasp the significance of Paley’s fictional universe one must rely on a “poetics of relation” that will highlight the variety and density of the dialogic interplay between the characters in the stories, between the narrators and the characters, the readers and the texts, between the fictional and the real world, between spaces, times, the languages embodied in numerous character-voices and the narrators’ discourses.
- 14 Grace Paley and Dawn Raffel are both deeply attached to the art of storytelling, to voice and rhythm in texts that tend to be concise, elliptical, and more often than not, open-ended. In her own words, Raffel’s “intention is to evoke and suggest and to honor mystery rather than to explain” (Raffel, Interview Manolescu-Oancea 1). In her tribute to Grace Paley (“Homage” 10), Paule Lévy reminds us of Paley’s playful rejection of determinism in the story “A Conversation with My Father” (where the narrator declares: “Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life” [*Enormous Changes* 162]), which she interprets as a breaking away from referential illusion, also leading to a “defamiliarization” of the storytelling process itself within the story.
- 15 Moving closer to textual features, the echoes between some titles of each of the writers’ collections strengthen their kinship: “Later the Same Day” and “Further Adventures...” convey the same impulse to continue (later, further), suggesting there is always more to reach out for. The grammatical symmetry of Dawn Raffel’s “Further Adventures in the Restless Universe” (adjective + noun- preposition- adjective + noun) is present in Paley’s “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute.” To take one last example, “Disturbances in the

Night,” from Raffel’s collection *In the Year of Long Division*, evokes the title of Paley’s first collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man*. More than just lexical repetitions, the titles are indications of both writers’ views of life and writing as an association and alternation of the ordinary, the everyday, the very small (“at the last minute”), with larger, more abstract perspectives transcending the personal, with the overwhelming sense of possibility and movement (“restless universe,” “enormous changes”). This tension is typical of the short story genre whose ambition, as Steven Millhauser describes it, is to “body forth the whole world,” turning the ancient Homeric *ekphrasis* into the art of storytelling, conjuring up the world within the word:

I take my cue from William Blake: “To see a world in a grain of sand.”[...] In that single grain of sand lies the beach that contains the grain of sand. In that single grain of sand lies the ocean that dashes against the beach, the ship that sails the ocean, the sun that shines down on the ship, the interstellar winds, a teaspoon in Kansas, the entire universe. And there you have the ambition of the short story [...].

- 16 Grace Paley’s and Dawn Raffel’s grains of sand are also made of the grain of words, the sounds of language and the rhythms of syntax. Grace Paley claims that “language is what the American language is about” and thus she writes about “a coming together of all sorts of languages” (Interview Hulley 19). Dawn Raffel’s subtle manipulations of syntax reveal her extreme attention to rhythm as a means of conveying a form of experience that semantics alone cannot translate. As she tells Manolescu-Oancea, she “studied musical tempos” when she was “learning to write,” and she likes to hear “the sound of language apart from meaning” (4).
- 17 In Raffel’s “Steam,” alliterations combine with appositions in rhythmic clusters, as in “information irretrievable, the windows blown” followed by “the street, laid bare, save for rubble” in the next sentence, which further join “the burial, bills” and a mysterious “dark bag”(65),<sup>5</sup> in which “papers and tissues” are placed. Words become objects upon which the inscription of mourning and death is transferred. Sounds and rhythms trace a line of affect in the text, like the words “door,” “way” and “doorway” in “Mother” (111-112). They can first be read as images for the mother’s death as a symbolical moment of passage, but their alternated repetitions return the reading to their presence as signifiers in the text. They are a form of insistence from within the writing; they intimate that speaking contains the paradoxical expression of the unspoken, as Blanchot argues:
- It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak—upon imminent and immemorial disaster—just as we say nothing except insofar as we can convey in advance that we take it back, by a sort of prolepsis, not so as finally to say nothing, but so that speaking might not stop at the word—the word which is, or is to be, spoken or taken back. We speak suggesting that something not being said is speaking: the loss of what we were to say; weeping when tears have long since gone dry. (*Disaster* 21)
- 18 We can only speak of what we could say if the words were not always already lost. In “Mother” and “Steam,” the “unspoken” speech is not so much the fact of “death”—since the verb “die” is even used twice—but the expression of the loss that the advent of death entails. As Dawn Raffel suggests, speaking of *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*: “Not all of the stories are about my family but they are about what we do with loss—in some cases not of people but of our self-concept” (Manolescu-Oancea 5). The idea that the text is *about* the loss of our “self-concept” is the condition imposed upon the writer according to Blanchot: “I cannot write unless death writes in me, makes of me the void where the impersonal is affirmed” (*Space* 149). The question of what she “do[es] with loss”

as a writer, of how she creates a “relation with death” in writing, has been given a literary answer in the form of the poetic genre of the elegy.

- 19 In *Semiotics and Interpretation*, Robert Scholes analyzes W.S. Merwin’s one-line poem, “Elegy” (from *The Carrier of Ladders*), which reads: “Who would I show it to.” The very brevity of the poem makes it resistant to interpretation. The title refers to a well-established poetic tradition, which the reader must know in order to grasp the significance of the text’s elliptic mode, a key to the significance of the text itself. For Scholes, contrary to such classic elegies as Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* or Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” Merwin’s poem is an “anti-elegy, a refusal not simply to mourn, but to write a sonorous, eloquent, mournful, but finally acquiescent, accepting—in a word ‘elegiac’—poem at all” (38). Focusing on the use of the pronouns “who” and “I” and on the conditional verb phrase “would... show to,” Scholes’ semiotic study of the poem leads him to the following series of deductions: 1) for the speaker/poet, the poem is a form of address, and there is one person worthy of being shown the elegy; 2) if this person did not exist, were absent or dead, which is implied by the rhetorical question, there would be no reason left to write the poem (39). As Scholes reminds us, “the whole elegiac tradition, like its cousin the funeral oration, turns finally away toward acceptance, revival, renewal, a return to the concerns of life, symbolized by the very writing of the poem” (39), so that by contrast “Elegy” is more than a “refusal to mourn,” it is “a refusal to elegize” (39). Assuming that “it” refers to the “elegy” of the title, the poem cannot but be as brief as it is, the paradoxical expression of an impossible poetic utterance, and finally an elegy for elegies.
- 20 Such a metapoetic reading, which links the refusal to elegize to the demise of a poetic form, is based on the intertextual view of literature for which a text’s ultimate but always deferred meaning lies in its dialogic relationship with other texts in an ever expanding “library of Babel.” Scholes himself suggests a limit to the intertextual play by contending that “meaning is also a function of human experience [...] and much of literature is based on attempts to generate equivalents for experiences that seem to defy duplication in mere signs” (35). Although the theoretical hegemony of the semiotic approach to literature in the 1970s had already receded in the early 1980s when Scholes still felt that he had to make the above qualification, the point about taking the “human experience” into account is not to return to the kind of intentional fallacy that consists in probing an author’s personal motives. The human experience referred to in “Elegy” is obviously that of mourning, death and absence, even before or beyond the establishment of intertextual connections. It is not only presupposed by the generic reference in the title; the text itself produces a “figuration”<sup>6</sup> of absence which tests the limit of writing: in order to *be* an elegy, the poem must undo itself as an elegy, flaunting its own impossibility in the form of a single, short, and unpunctuated line. That line’s tension towards silence is a figure for what Blanchot names “the disaster,” one definition of which is “what escapes the very possibility of experience —it is the limit of writing” (*Disaster* 7).
- 21 Yet, compared with “Mother” and “Steam,” the text of “Elegy” remains on this side of mourning. The conditional experience embodied in “would” offers the protective distance of imagination; it is a rehearsal in thought, an exercise in anticipation. By contrast, as stories dealing with the absence that comes *after* the disappearance, Paley’s and Raffel’s texts test the limits of narrative when confronted with “what escapes the possibility of experience.” “Mother” and “Steam” are about more than death, which is only a theme. They are “on the edge of the disaster,” which is always out of reach and

“disorients the absolute” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 4). Etymologically, Blanchot explains, the disaster is a “break with the star, break with every form of totality” (75). No wonder the “universe” becomes “restless” in “Steam,” where all kinds of accidents happen and where narrativity under the influence of the disaster, is in a state of “disarray, confusion” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 7).

- 22 Let us now see how the notion of “disaster” can be articulated with storytelling and narrative in “Mother” and “Steam,” and more specifically how it can lead to a distinction between two ways of being “on the edge of disaster,” how from loss as narratively embodied experience in “Mother,” “Steam” moves towards a more radical writing of the disaster, which is that of narrative itself.

## “Mother”: the temptation of Orpheus

- 23 The apparent simplicity of the title turns out to be deceptive, for the story it announces presents itself as a succession of elliptic scenes, a narrative montage of fragments of memories. Moreover, the reiterated announcement of the death of the mother (“Then she died” [112]) disturbs the conventions of realistic narration, thus showing the possibilities and the dangers of poetic (re)creation. Turning back a second time upon that which should only happen once is a transgression akin to Orpheus’ gesture, and “[t]hrough Orpheus we are reminded that speaking poetically and disappearing belong to the profundity of a single movement” (Blanchot, *Space* 156).
- 24 The opening words, “One day” (111), are those of traditional storytelling, but then the nature of the narrative becomes elusive. The temporal landmarks refer to moments, as in the evocation of the narrator’s late homecoming on a New Year’s Day—a mixture of precision (“4 a.m.”) and vagueness (what year?). The ellipses, accelerations, and manipulations of the chronology and temporal coordinates suggest that the story is not primarily a biographical sketch of the narrator’s life, but a narrative of time, as it passes in lives related to one another, and above all what can be remembered and assembled. About ten lines before the end of the story, the sudden emergence of the grammatical and discursive present (“I wish”— the present of the enunciation) in the sentence (“I wish I could see her in the doorway of the living room” [112]) reinforces the pastness of the past and the sense of loss.
- 25 The spaces where the mother is present—notably the doorways (111-12)—act as frames for remembrances that are instant and ephemeral pictures, like memory snapshots. The mother’s disappearance is equated with the loss of a series of familiar images, and since images are already only a representation of reality, the mother is doubly absent. The narrative can only recuperate images. The repeated words (“door,” “doorway,” “hallway”) create a network of associations as a way of activating the mechanism of remembrance—each memory has its own place, but the mother is definitely connected with the transitional place of the “various doorways” where the narrator places her flickering presence and scarce words.
- 26 Textual signifiers generate a space for time and being, as suggested by the visual echoes of “am” in the text: “AM radio” first, then “4 a.m..” The repetition of the two letters turns into an assertion of presence and life that symmetrically counters the double mention of the mother’s death. Becoming a “living room” for the mother, the space of the text integrates the lapses, the repetitions, the fragility and fragmentation inherent in the

process of remembering and writing about memories. Acute details, such as the “zinnias and marigolds” of the country garden (112), are part of the narrative stylization, but as details, their presence is a token of all that is absent.

- 27 The repetition of “Then she died” (112) structures the text, which is divided into two halves, each one starting with the lyrical expression of the narrator’s longing to see her mother, but it destabilizes the narrative. It goes against the linearity of realistic representation, but also, metaphorically, against time itself, showing the power of writing: the writer *can* make death happen twice, and can make the narrative begin anew once death has been pronounced. It seems that the usually singular event of death, which the repetition makes both imminent and immanent, can become the object of narrative mastery. But the sentence occurs both times in a single, isolated paragraph, which enhances the impression of pure consecution, adds to the narrative’s effacement of causality, its compression of time and events, and puts an end to narrative expansion while doubling the sense of closure, as “died” is the last word of the text. The narrator’s grasp cannot be maintained, and the control that she had exerted after hearing the song on the radio at the start—launching the series of reminiscences with the phrase “As a matter of fact”—now escapes and returns the narrator to the passivity of the recording of narrative succession: “Then she died.” The doubling of the sentence, like an impassable boundary, shows the disaster at work, undoing the possibility of narrative continuity and continuation: “This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 7).

## “Steam”: the disaster of the narrative

“The disaster, break with the star, break with every form of totality, never denying, however, the dialectical necessity of a fulfillment; the disaster: prophecy which announces nothing but the refusal of the prophetic as simply an event to come, but which nonetheless opens, nonetheless discovers the patience of vigilant language.”

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (75)

- 28 Dawn Raffel’s story moves away from the lyricism of “Mother,” first because “Steam” is a rather enigmatic and impersonal title. On the contrary, the title of Grace Paley’s story offers a figuration of the loss in the name “mother,” which can also be heard as a vocative, a calling, an invocation of the subject of and in the text. Nothing remains of the elegiac address in “Steam.” What Blanchot calls “the effacement, the extenuation of the subject” (*Disaster* 14) in the passivity that he associates with the disaster, is manifested in the narrator’s distance from the events, in the repeated refusal to name places, people or things, as in “I had just come back from a country, from visiting a country where things like this happened,” or “The boys sent a message from somebody’s gadget in digits and type” (65). The narrator’s tone is matter-of-fact, and the narrative can be as flat as the undetermined “surfaces” that the narrator wipes in an undetermined place: “In the morning I went to the swimming pool where I go when I go to swim laps” (64). Blandness prevails in many notations like “I called my office voice mail,” which can be paired with “The corporate hotline did not have an update” (65) a little further down.
- 29 To make sense of “Steam” as a title for the whole text, we have to consider it as a relational principle, as a power source for the narrative machine. Yet, the pressure of the

“steam” is as much on the reading as on the text, which gives the impression that some of the relations that can be established between the discrete episodes within the story are inconsequential, fragile, and end up increasing the dissemination of narrative elements.

- 30 The word “steam” refers to an incident that is detailed in the first half of the text: the explosion of a steam pipe that causes damage to the office building where the narrator works. The narrative motivation is there, but then, somehow, it evaporates... to condense further in another incident involving the leaking roof of the movie theater where the narrator goes after swimming, and where rainwater falls on the floor. The rain (the general weather condition, not the raining in the movie theater) is evoked in the brief telephone conversation between the narrator and her sister at the very end. There is some kind of watery chain from the swimming pool to the steam pipe exploding, to the rain falling into the cinema, like an accumulation of potential “deaths by water.” The underlying presence of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* surfaces in the general “ruin” of the fictional world, from the rubble in the street after the explosion to the wet seats in the theater, the dying actress in the movie, the burnt toast, the possibly unrecorded message, the stepfather who “lay dying” in Faulknerian fashion (another modernist fragment shored against the ruin of the narrative?), and finally the dead mother.
- 31 Compared with the mother in Grace Paley’s story, the mother in “Steam” is no longer a “central” character, but her marginalization renders her absence more conspicuous in the assemblage of the narrative sequences. She occupies two visibly limited spaces: at the very beginning, in the first two lines, when she calls her daughter, and on the second page where another conversation is quoted and where, as a character, the mother also dissolves into her own death and disappearance. At that very moment, the narrative becomes increasingly elliptic, and the degree of parataxis intensifies, as in the following paragraph: “The call came at work. I was not at my desk. This did not matter. I said they were wrong. My stepfather lay dying himself on his side of the bed, and he was quite hard of hearing. The housekeeper found her” (65). The heavy use of anaphora (“The call,” “they,” “her”) several lines after the last mention of the mother, and uncertain deixis (“This”), as well as the understated logic in the two clauses coordinated by “and,” contribute to disjoining the narrative when the presence of the mother also dissolves.
- 32 The explosion of the steam pipe can be construed as a diegetic metaphor, an objective correlative for the transfer of some violent affect from the inside to the outside, which cannot be otherwise represented, while the second part of the story shows the exploded fragments. The “explosive” material can be found in the incipit of the story:
- My mother called to tell me that today was her birthday.  
“I didn’t think” I said, “that you would be alive.”  
She wasn’t, of course. In the morning I went to the pool where I go when I go to swim laps. (64)
- 33 The first thing that is remarkable is the slightly awry interposition of “I said,” which separates the narrator’s utterance, enhancing the negative mode—which is predominant throughout the story—on the one hand, and the subject—the death of the mother indirectly presented as “not being alive.” Finally, “of course” introduces an element of logical reasoning whereas nothing in the text explicitly allows the reader to see why the narrator reaches such a conclusion. Since the narrative takes another turn right after that, we have no clue whatsoever until we reach the second, longer telephone conversation between the narrator and her mother. The narrator’s self-declared confusion (“I am off by a day, a week at most” [65]) further unsettles the fuzzy narrative

sequence of the first three lines of the story: first, the mother calls her daughter, then the narrator seems surprised that her mother is still alive and, in the next sentence (“She wasn’t, of course”), rectifies what appears to be an illusion, underlined by the ironical obviousness and allusiveness of “of course.” Constructing meaning against the “deconstruction” of continuity by the use of ellipses is always possible. We can assume that the immediate mention of “In the morning” after “of course” (64) suggests that the next day corrects the “disorder” created by the opening conversation, which, in fact, might have been just an imaginary one, with the mother brought back to life in a fantasy or in a dream. However, such rationalizations of the diegesis are also severely limited by the narrator’s self-confessed unreliability (“I have not told the truth” [65]).

- 34 The limit between the two parts of the text is provided by a sentence that contains an echo of Grace Paley’s “Mother”—unless we should consider that the echo itself is what makes the division become meaningful: “The star of the movie, a world-famous actress was dying and dying, *and then she died*” (65). Everything in that sentence indicates the disarray of narrative: the anonymity and allusiveness, the mock summary and cause and effect sequence in “was dying and dying, and then she died,” as if borrowed and amplified from Paley’s “Mother.” Another sentence offers a fainter echo of Grace Paley’s “I wish I could see her in the doorway of the living room” in “Mother”: “I wished just a little that I had been there” (64), mainly because of the use of “wish,” and the expression of regret (let us remember, though, that Paley’s “wish” was the more positive expression of a longing). The uncertainty as to what can be made of such connections questions the value of intertextual interpretation. But we can also read in “a little” the trace of some affect in language again, as in the texture of Dawn Raffel’s writing—the slight syntactical disjunction (“It was all of it cordoned” [64]), the nominal sentences, the reliance on rhythm, the slight “stutter” of qualifications (“the building, the high rise, that has my office in it”; “drops, great drops”; “from a country, from visiting a country” [64]). The local disruptions of the narrative come from the dissemination within the text of the unexperienced disaster, of what lies beyond the death of the mother, because the disaster is precisely “that which does not have the ultimate for a limit; it bears the ultimate away in the disaster” (Blanchot, *Disaster* 28). As a matter of fact, where Paley’s text ends with the semantically charged “died,” Dawn Raffel marks the distance at which the subject—reading and writing—is kept in the separate state of disaster by making “away” the final word of the story:

“It’s raining,” she said.

“Here too,” I said, “and I am so far away.” (65)

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The Body of Mother. A foregone conclusion, Mother would say.

The heart is a pump. In the end, it quits.

I will speak for myself There is no end.

I am calling and calling.

(“Beyond all Blessing and Song, Praise and Consolation,” *Further Adventures* 100)

- 35 When asked whether “writing help[s] [her] deal with death,” Paley replied that “if you’re a person who can’t deal with life, you’re not going to be able to deal with death.” For her, writing will not help you *deal with* death, but *think about it*” (Interview Hulley 38). Both “Mother” and “Steam” are the literary results of such *thinking*, the poetic enactment of a literary aesthetics which shows an awareness of that “terrible limit against which we are broken” (Blanchot, *Space* 148).

- 36 Grace Paley's storytelling in "Mother" is more *about* the edge of the disaster, whereas Dawn Raffel's "Steam" shows an experience with the disaster of the narrative. The notion of "disaster" we have borrowed from Blanchot is complex and paradoxical, but it does highlight the nature of the texts' "relation with death" which gives them their distinct meaning. Their intransitivity and resistance (to continuity, chronology, traditional narrative) is a function of that relation with death within the space of writing. As writing never ceases to reach an ever receding limit, "Mother" and "Steam" might also offer "an approach towards death under the cover of writing" (Blanchot, *Space* 91); as if reversing the terms, death could be a relation with art, "beyond all blessing and song, praise and consolation."<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Dawn Raffel is the author of another collection of stories, *In the Year of Long Division* (1994), a novel, *Carrying the Body* (2002), and a memoir, *The Secret Life of Objects* (2012). She has taught creative writing in the MFA program at Columbia University as well as in various literary seminars in the United States and abroad. She has also held various editorial positions—notably at *O*, the Oprah magazine, and at the Center for Fiction. She is currently an editorial consultant. For more information on her activities, see her website.
2. The expression "resistant form" comes from Kathleen Hulley's introductory article in the special issue of *Delta* dedicated to Grace Paley. She begins with the following description of the specificity and paradoxical characteristics of the writer's work: "Grace Paley is one of those writers whose importance one suspects from the first reading, but whose strategies are so resistant to commentary that the value of her artistic achievement dawns slowly. She is not apparently 'experimental,' yet her style is neither realistic nor naturalistic. She has no theory of writing; yet she sees the need neither for transition nor plot" (3).
3. In the Hulley interview, Grace Paley neither rejects nor fully endorses the autobiographical component of her stories, which is actually absorbed into a larger perspective—Paley is concerned not with the personal, but with the individual as part of various collective entities existing in the contemporary moment of her writing. In answer to the question: "In general, then, you prefer not to write about yourself?," she answered: "I don't not and I don't do. I write about the lives of women and men of our time" (24).
4. See the incipit of "Upstaging Time" in *Just as I Thought*: "I must tell you that at the first upsurge of a contentious or merely complicated concern, I'm likely to slip into a fictional mode. This is a way of thinking, a habit of thought" (289).
5. First introduced as "the bag," the narrator immediately qualifies the object as "a big, dark bag," a vague description whose interest lies not only in the denoted mystery, but in the undercurrent relations suggested by the tightening of the alliterative pattern (the "b," and the plosives /g/ and /k/) (65).
6. "Figuration" as opposed to "representation," to borrow Roland Barthes's distinction in *Le Plaisir du texte* (88). Figuration is intransitive and semiotic, whereas representation relies on the mimetic illusion.
7. The phrase is the title of the final story in Dawn Raffel's *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*. As Raffel explains, "it is an English translation of a line from an ancient prayer written in Aramaic, the Mourner's Kaddish, which praises God in the face of death" (Interview Manolescu-Oancea 6).

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## ABSTRACTS

À partir de la notion de « désastre », empruntée à l'œuvre de Maurice Blanchot, cet article propose une relecture de "Mother" de Grace Paley par l'intermédiaire d'une mise en regard avec une nouvelle de Dawn Raffel, "Steam". La notion de « désastre » peut en effet être articulée avec celles de récit et de narration dans "Mother" et dans "Steam" car elle conduit à distinguer entre deux manières d'être « au bord du désastre » : de la perte comme expérience incarnée dans la narration avec "Mother", on passe, avec "Steam", à une écriture plus radicale du désastre, qui est le désastre de la narration elle-même.

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