Resisting the pull of plot: Paley's anti-sequence in the "Faith" stories

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1 Although Grace Paley has consistently refused to arrange her stories of the character Faith Darwin Asbury into a sequence, or to encourage any consideration of them as a potential novel, critics and readers in general do find links among them—consistently developed characters, the unfolding "story" of a family's "life" as children grow up, the writer-protagonist takes lovers, engages in political activities, cultivates friendships, and watches her parents' relationship deteriorate in the "Children of Judea" retirement home—inviting consideration of the stories' interrelationships as a sequence with a cumulative impact and meanings. In this respect they resemble a significant roster of story "groups" by other writers who have similarly resisted arranging their works with continuing characters and interrelated "life experiences" into novels or formal sequences.

2 Inevitably, however, readers pursue continuities in such stories both attempting to place them in sequences and to understand why they have not been either wholly separated, as by having different character names and settings, or unified into a more conventional sequence, cycle, or even a novel. In this paper I will suggest how Paley's Faith stories beckon to readerly "sequencing" and analyze the thematic and affective impact of such sequencing. Further, I will relate both the continuities and disruptions posed by the stories' not having been so sequenced to Paley's own identity as a Jewish feminist writer, protesting in her fictional forms the "minority" or "subaltern" status of her female Jewish alter ego by subverting and undermining readers' expectations of fictional development and closure in these "Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life."

3 Even though "unpacked" in recent criticism, the combination "Jewish feminist" may still seem oxymoron. Contemporary feminism must by its most fundamental social agenda pose multiple challenges to Jewish patriarchal religious tradition and everyday custom. Paley is fundamentally a secular writer, whose Jewish identity is broadly cultural rather than religious in nature. She carries Jewish moral values and attitudes into a New York
social setting of the late 1950's through the 1980's in which it is politically necessary to
tell women's stories as a means of drawing attention to their difficult situation, struggling
to fulfill conflicting personal, familial, and social demands. Paley herself, like her
protagonist, married among the goyim, in a paradigm of resistance or transgression that
also invites much speculation about the possible "autobiographical" nature of the stories.
Although Faith shares many of Paley's expressed ideas, it is more useful to see her, as
Paley does, as a kind of stand-in or emissary.²

In the Faith Darwin stories, beginning with the provocatively-framed "Two Short Sad
Stories from a Long and Happy Life" in her first volume, The Little Disturbances of Man
(1959), and extending through at least four stories in Enormous Changes at the Last Minute
(1974) and at least seven in Later the Same Day (1985),² a central character is created who
sometimes speaks and sometimes is characterized in the third person. Faith has two male
children, aged parents, a sister named Hope and a brother named Charlie, an ex-husband,
a male friend who becomes a lover,² and in several of the stories a second and third lover.
She has numerous female friends with whom she shares child-raising when they are
young, illness and impending death as they age. Her children grow up; she goes to China
with other left-leaning Americans; at one point she runs away from home for several
weeks and takes refuge with the black woman who currently inhabits her family's former
apartment near Brighton Beach: surely a novel could be made of this material—yet Paley
refuses the "obvious" fictional structure. Why?

Paley's resistance to developing the themes in a novelistic way, I propose, has to do with a
need to subvert the novel's often-noted tendency to justify "things as they are": the
culture according to its "mainstream" rules and formulas. Unable to mount a full-scale
war on the social norms, Paley sends up little explosive anecdotes that, even in
themselves, almost always refuse to be traditional "stories" with causal plots. The
assimilated Jewish culture of Faith's parents erects norms that the daughter has to fight,
even to the extent of shocking her father with the revelation (in "Dreamer in a Dead
Language") that she has three lovers (possibly a lie, made up to pay him back for his
devastating announcement to her that he wishes to leave her mother—whom he has, he
says, never actually married—in the retirement home and move back into the real world).
This second "Children of Judea" story is not, as Neil Isaacs has suggested (69) a reworking
of the material of the first ("Faith in the Afternoon"), but a different, and perhaps
cataclysmic, moment in the family history, with different perspectives on the political
and social environment.

"Faith in the Afternoon," the fourth story in Paley's second collection, is of particular
interest to my hypothesis because it gives Faith's family background, sets her up, in an
ironic way, as a possible character in a novel:

...her grandfather, scoring the salty sea, skated for miles along the Baltic's icy
beaches, with a frozen herring in his pocket. And [Faith], all ears [for hearing family
stories], was born in Coney Island.

Who are her antecedents? Mama and Papa of course. Her environment? a brother
and a sister with their own sorrow to lead by the nose out of this life...[ECLM 39]

She has two "fatherless boys," her parents now live in the "Children of Judea," over
the objections of all three of their children. A little further into the story, more exposition
is offered: "The Darwins moved to Coney Island for the air. There was not enough air in
Yorkville, where the grandmother had been planted among German Nazis and Irish bums
by Faith's grandfather, who soon departed alone in blue pyjamas, for death" (40-41). The
grandmother "pretended she was German in just the same way that Faith pretends she is an American" (41), in a significant locution that should alert us to Faith's resisting, subversive posture: she lives an urban assimilated life, plays the role of P.T.A. mother, plus those of abandoned wife and upright leftist, activist citizen with apparent willingness, but as the reader sees, full of ironic rage in her submission to some of these roles. Her siblings and parents, in fact, think she should get counselling: her father even offers to put up "a certain amount of cash" to this end. Faith's mother, on the other hand, has embraced her role of Jewish woman, "learned real Yiddish," and "as soon as all the verbs and necessary nouns had been collected under the roof of her mouth, she took an oath to expostulate in Yiddish and grieve only in Yiddish, and she has kept that oath to this day" (41). And, it becomes clear in "Dreamer in a Dead Language," she has initiated the move to "Children of Judea." As her husband says, "She thinks she's in a nice quiet kibbutz, only luckily Jordan is not on one side and Egypt is not on the other" (LSD, 28).

8 We learn also, in "Faith in the Afternoon," the summarized history of her marriage to Ricardo, his character (or lack thereof), the births of her children, and the breakup. A full five pages of the thirteen-page story are devoted to this expository summary--fine for a novel, but so disproportionate here as to constitute a flouting of short story conventions. After a break marked by asterisks, the "real" story of the title's afternoon begins with Faith's indirect announcement to her mother, on a visit to Children of Judea, that Ricardo has left her. Her mother blames Faith for the breakup: "Ai, Faithy, you have to do your life a little better than this"(44). A neighbor, nosy Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, rolls in for a visit, implicitly criticizes Faith for not visiting more often, and winds off into a narrative of her own son that ends in a criticism of the Darwins for closing their door at night ("for a ten-minute business they close themselves up a whole night long"), cutting off the cross-ventilation. Drawn into wool-winding for Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, Faith listens to the gossip and watches the traditional Jews walk by the open door of the room. The gossip retrieves moments from the Darwins' past: Mr. Darwin's confrontation with a gentile policeman who once tried to stop him from distributing advertisements for a Yiddish school, and her mother's spirited defense, shouting "Shut up, you Cossack!"--a "terrible expression, [shut up] ... to a Jew... a dirty word, like a sin, because in the beginning if I remember correctly, was the word!" Mr. Darwin had explained the event (48). Other stories, of Faith's contemporaries, are told, all having to do with some disaster--physical, economic, or marital--culminating in the story of the humiliation of Anita Franklin, "the sexiest girl in New Utrecht High" in Faith's mythology of her youth (52). Anita's abandonment by Arthur Mazzano, "the brilliant Sephardic Scholar and Lecturer," connects with Faith's own loss, and "the thumb of Ricardo's hovering shadow jabbed her in her left eye" bringing tears.

9 The story's conclusion, four pages long, is a parting conversation with her father. He innocently shares with her a poem he has written on old age which Faith describes as "A Japanese Psalm of David," comments on Jewish/Negro relations (most of the employees of Children of Judea are black), and his frustration with his wife's tolerance of the meddling, overbearing Mrs. Hegel-Stein. When, in response to Faith's plea that she has to get home to the baby-sitter, he rhapsodizes that babysitters are a "wonderful invention" that could allow a couple "to be lovers forever," she again bursts into tears, and he realizes her predicament. Sympathetic at first, he is finally exasperated, and turns from her tearful face in "absolute digestive disgust," a gesture unexplained but painfully clear to Faith and to us. Thus by the indirection of the various conversations, and the unadmitted pain that
Faith experiences during these interchanges, we gradually understand the narrative unity as both parents fail to support Faith in her time of need, not out of cruelty or indifference, but because they cannot understand her situation, locked as they are in generational, ethnic values and personal needs different from hers.

Moreover, we have had packed into the narrative an entire cultural and political situation: the American urban Jewish past metonymically represented in the setting of the Children of Judea, a past that goes back through Faith's own youth to that of her parents and her grandparents. Some of the characters mentioned here will turn up in other stories: Arthur Mazzano, his first name changed to Phillip, becomes Faith's own lover by the time of "Dreamer in a Dead Language." The tension between the parents over Mrs. Darwin's comfort in the Children of Judea and her husband's exasperation there becomes the main conflictual situation of "Dreamer," and reading "Faith in the Afternoon" prepares us emotionally for that story. Thus, although "Faith in the Afternoon" is certainly "complete" in its revelation and change from its opening situation, it has put out tentacles that penetrate deeply into most of the other "Faith" stories, and has given an exposition of a family who could easily be the subject of a novel.

The chronology of the Faith stories roughly follows the unfolding of the time period across which they were written, though condensed in the interval between the first two stories and the rest. These first stories, "The Used Boy Raisers" and "A Subject of Childhood"—gathered under the novel-spoofing surtitle, "Two Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life" in The Little Disturbances of Man (1959)—take place when Faith's children, Richard and Anthony (Tonto), are fairly young, the latter not yet in school. Their father, who has already left the family, appears in the story along with Faith's current boyfriend. Both men, and presumably Faith, are in their thirties (LDM 134). Thus it would seem that these stories are roughly "contemporaneous" with "Faith in the Afternoon" (1960). In "Faith in a Tree" (1967, in ECLM), Viet Nam is already an issue in the lives of Faith's female cohort, and Richard seems to be about nine or ten, while Tonto is several years younger.

By "The Long Distance Runner" (1974) which ends Enormous Changes, the boys are "quite old"—old enough to be left alone and cared for by Mrs. Raftery from across the hall and Jack, Faith's boyfriend. Men have been on the moon. Faith is around forty-two (ECLM 185) and has conceived a desire to run. She starts training in "the country... Connecticut," in the spring. At the beginning of summer Faith bids the boys goodbye and takes the subway to Brighton Beach, where she was raised. She runs first along the boardwalk, then turns inland, finding herself on her old street, suddenly in the midst of black people, young and old, some of whom tease and challenge her because she is fat and white. Encouraged by a Girl Scout to enter her old building, she finds herself in trouble when she foolishly and sentimentally offers to take the Girl Scout home to live with her and her sons. Fleeing the girl's would-be rescuers, she is unexpectedly admitted into her old apartment by black Mrs. Luddy, a single mother of Donald, a boy of six or seven, and "three little baby girls all about the same age" (194). Faith stays—improbably in the real world but fairly naturally in the story—for three weeks, trading wisdom about men, domestic culture and life in general with Mrs. Luddy, neurotically fearful of going outside. Finally, with Faith intruding into her children's lives too much as (an unwanted, white) surrogate grandmother, Mrs. Luddy wakes her up one morning and tells her it's "Time to go... Don't you think your little spoiled boys crying for you? Where's Mama? They standing in the window. Time to go lady. This ain't Free Vacation Farm" (201). Though Donald sticks up
for her ("Oh Ma, ... she ain't a lot of trouble"), Faith starts out running again, only to discover that, "In the three weeks I'd been off the street, jogging had become popular" (202), and numerous others are also running alongside her.

Once unique, she is now one of the crowd. En route home she runs through the playground of "Faith in a Tree," observing the mothers with little ones. "In order to prepare them, meaning no harm, I said, In fifteen years, you girls will be like me, wrong in everything" (202). Her return home is barely remarked, though later both boys and Jack ask her to tell where she's been. None understands: "What are you talking about? said Richard. Cut the baby talk. .... Anthony listened to me for a while. Then he said, I don't know what she's talking about either." Jack asks to have the story told twice, but in the end, "They all said, What?" (204). In the final paragraph, Faith draws the cryptic moral of her story:

A woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs. She finds the houses and streets where her childhood happened. She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next. (204-05)

Of all the "Faith" stories, "The Long Distance Runner" is the most complete and self-contained. Although the reader who knows the other stories connects the nearly grownup children with their other appearances, their earlier lives, and places Mrs. Raftery and Jack into their larger roles in Faith's life (there is even a reference to the parents at Children of Judea), these readerly activities are surpluses that complement the story, that give Faith a depth beyond what she could have in the story by itself. Paradoxically, they make her more "individual," and less the type of "a woman inside the steamy energy of middle age."

The Faith stories of Later the Same Day include not only "Dreamer in a Dead Language" (1977) but the two Zagrowsky stories, one of which Faith tells ("The Story Hearer"[1982]), and the other, "Zagrowsky Tells" (1985), is narrated by an elderly xenophobic Jewish pharmacist who ends up the loving caretaker of his half-black grandson. They are paired stories (though separated in the collection) in which Faith appears a rather self-righteous, insensitive feminist, and Zagrowsky, for all his male chauvinism and anti-black sentiment, comes off as genuine and passionate. At the end of his story, the women chatting on the playground intervene when (after a confrontation with Faith over his earlier racist behavior) he becomes irrationally angry at a young father who praises the beauty of Emanuel, the grandson Zagrowsky is raising because his daughter Cissie is schizophrenic. Perhaps feeling ashamed of their own earlier chiding, the women ostentatiously protect him from the young man. Faith not only commiserates, she kisses him before departing, laughing with her "pals" (LSD 175). Zagrowsky is left bemused, as Emanuel writes his name in the sand. We cannot avoid remembering that the boy's name means "God with us" in Isaiah's prophecy of how the Messiah will come.

Except for "Dreamer in a Dead Language" and "Friends," the other Faith stories of Later the Same Day have less intrinsic interest as individual stories: some of them are shorts, and others deal with Faith's "fact-finding" trip to Communist China and her casual affair with Nick Hegstraw "the famous sinologist." The story "Friends" (1979) --about the death of Selena, one of Faith's group, from cancer-- is another that has its own integrity but also extends and deepens Faith's story. It also contributes a specially poignant insight into eighteen-year-old Anthony's growing up and coming to realizations about life and death, truth and lies. His older brother Richard was coeval with Selena's daughter Abby, and Anthony knows that Abby died of a drug overdose (a fact that Selena has never taken.
in, recalling her daughter as the sweet childhood friend of Faith’s children). He queries Faith, “How come Selena never realized about Abby? ... Come on, you had to be blind. I was just a little kid, and I saw. Honest to God, Ma.” (88). Faith defends Selena perfunctorily, only to have Anthony scorn her dishonesty:

Here she goes with her goody-goodies—everything is so groovy wonderful far-out terrific. Next thing, you'll say people are darling and the world is so nice and round that Union Carbide will never blow it up.

I have never said anything as hopeful as that. And why to all our knowledge of that sad day did Tonto at 3 a.m. have to add the fact of the world. (LSD 88)

As she habitually does, Paley reminds us that "the fact of the world," the larger political world, surrounds and impinges on even our griefs. Reinforcing this observation, one of the three friends who have gone to pay a last visit to Selena picks up a man in the train home—to the chagrin and envy of her companions, including Faith. Paley’s enormous skill in weaving the tapestry of daily life, where quotidian behavior does not stop for illness and death, together with enduringly "true" generalizations about our society, ethnically grounded and gendered, is especially evident in this story, which both sympathizes with and judges the behavior and the self-deceptions of the characters.

While she clearly has in the Faith stories the materials for a novel, Paley equally clearly rejects the form as falsifying the issues that move her in contemporary life. As a feminist Jewish writer, Paley is an outsider with a special perspective on the dominant culture in which she lives, a culture crumbling from its own inconsistencies and inattention, a culture vulnerable to the guerrilla "warfare" of the Faith stories. As a woman, Faith resists and desires men; as a mother she raises her boys to be men (not that she could stop them, of course); as a friend she both aids and fails her cohort of women; as a daughter she deals with filial love and cultural separation. Each individual story is a kind of raid on the cultural milieu, sustained across the entire group of stories as a consistent backdrop against which the individual moments of revelation can resonate. Paley does not wish to abandon her Jewish culture, but rather to force its accommodation to the circumstances of a society in which social justice and individual fulfilment remain ideals, often subverted by individual greed and cupidity, realisable only in moments.

Like other writers of these strangely hybrid, marginal forms—stories interrelated but not physically linked in a "book"—, Paley senses herself to be in a position from which she can only seize power through a kind of deceptive acquiescence to the norms—of society and of writing. As the Jews and gentiles of Faith’s "neighborhood" strive to assimilate, to embrace the democratic ideal of judging everyone on individual merits, but are continually falling back upon the clichés and habits of their gender, ethnic, or age groups, Paley appears to be trying to conceal herself in conventions of storytelling that she flouts at every turn, nowhere more tellingly than in the Faith stories, the sequence that she refuses to allow to cohere, the novel that she sternly refuses to bring into being.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. As, for example, in Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand stories of the Burnell family or Sherman Alexie's stories of Victor Joseph and his family on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation in Idaho.


3. "In 'Demystified Zone,' I sent Faith to Puerto Rico as a representative of her PTA. ... Faith had worked for me in many of the short stories in at least three books, and I thought she'd do well with journalistic responsibility" (JIT, 125). See also Arcana, 3-5.

4. There are also several other stories in the 1974 and 1985 volumes in which an unnamed "I" may be Faith, as well as a number of stories focusing on Faith's friends and acquaintances; and two additional Faith stories in the miscellaneous volume—mostly essays—just as I Thought (1998).

5. Jack, who possibly becomes a husband at some point, and who leaves her later to have a fling with a younger woman; Faith also has at least one other lover while living with Jack.

6. We also see him on the verge of becoming Anna's lover in "Faith in a Tree," which "takes place" before "Dreamer."

7. For the dating of the stories' publication I have used Neil Isaacs' bibliography in Grace Paley, a Study of the Short Fiction.

8. One of them, Eloise, is two but small for her age, and the others seem to be twins.
RÉSUMÉS

Cet article étudie les "Faith stories", c'est-à-dire les histoires de Grace Paley dont l'héroïne est Faith Darwin Asbury. Parsemées dans trois recueils de nouvelles différentes, celles-ci s'étalent de 1959 à 1985. En effet, les histoires de Faith forment le roman que Paley n'a pas voulu écrire, car, prises ensemble elles contiennent les éléments nécessaires qui pourraient les rattracher les unes aux autres pour en faire un long récit romanesque. Auteur juif et militante féministe, Paley a toujours lutté pour les faibles ; aussi privilégie-t-elle les formes littéraires dites mineures : elle préfère composer plusieurs nouvelles plutôt qu'un seul roman.

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enseigne la littérature (Samuel B. and Virginia C. Knight Professor) et dirige le département d'Anglais à l'Université de Case Western Reserve, à Cleveland, Ohio. Elle a publié de nombreux articles sur la nouvelle. Elle a récemment travaillé sur une étude stylistique de nouvelles, fondé sur le respect ou non de la notion de l'ordre. Elle est, par ailleurs, l'auteur de l'ouvrage The Poetry of Randal Jarrel, et a aussi édité le volume Critical Essays on Randal Jarrel. Elle a enfin publié des articles qui examinent la relation entre des œuvres picturales et poétiques.