The becoming-black of a Jewish pharmacist: “Zagrowsky tells” by Grace Paley

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I'd like to start with a few preliminary remarks.

1° I never thought that « Jewishness » was a satisfactory category with which to label Grace Paley's short stories because in no way can the category cover what is specific about these stories. There is definitely some Jewishness in several of them. But more than that also. Moreover, the Jewishness in Grace Paley's stories does not imply the usual configuration of elements which immediately comes to mind when one thinks in those terms. It lacks for instance the religious element. In Grace Paley's work, Jewishness implies socialism and secularism as well as hermeneutics and humour.

2° But I was asked to think about Grace Paley's work in terms of « Jewish Identity » and I accepted the challenge as an opportunity to explore that « otherness » which is also part of the title of this colloquium.

3° Thinking of her short stories in these terms, I quickly chose to do a close reading of « Zagrowsky Tells », a story originally published in Mother Jones under the title « Telling » in 1985 and then collected the same year in Later the Same Day with the title: « Zagrowsky Tells ». Why? Because in a November 1987 interview with Grace Paley in Toulouse, when I asked her if she felt more comfortable with a female rather than with a male narrator, she gave me the following answer:

...I tend more to write from a woman's point of view but I do like to write from a man's point of view. I'll give you an example. One of the last stories of my last book, Later the Same Day, is a story again about this woman Faith who is in « The Used-Boys Raisers » and I had this idea that I wanted people to tell her stories. But one story is about an old white man who has a little black grand-son, and the way I had it was that she meets him and she starts to tell the story to her friend Jack. She's
telling the story. After three pages, I was totally stuck and I was stuck for two years. I knew much about the story but I couldn’t tell it, I couldn’t figure out the form for it so what I finally figured out was who the story teller was and it had to be the old man. I wanted her to tell it because my normal feeling was that she does all this work for me, I wanted to keep her going, this Faith woman but it was the old man’s story and it was ridiculous. So, for two years I waited, trying to jam the story into her, make her tell it. « Tell it, tell it », and she couldn’t because—it’s so simple—she didn’t really know what it was about anyway. No way I could make her know what it was about either. What finally happened is I realized this simplest fact: « it was the old man’s story, he had to tell it. So to answer you, I was extremely at home with this old man telling the story whereas with Faith, what would have been natural was totally unnatural and then wrong ».1

Why was it so impossible for Grace Paley to « make Faith know what this story was about » and to « make her tell the story »? This is the question I would like to answer now by trying to understand why in existential, narrative, and meta-literary terms Zagrowsky had to become the narrator.

I. In existential terms

The situations Paley explores in her stories are often touchy ones, the kind we might call “complex” in the sense that they combine in an unpredictable way determinist factors and aleatory ones, that they may either be maintained on the edge or fall on either side.

In « Zagrowsky Tells », Paley undertakes a difficult task, that of presenting a character who has been accused of racism and sexism by a bunch of young, radical women of his neighborhood and who is still judged accordingly by one of those young women 20 years later, who accepts some of these criticisms while rejecting others and yet still gains the reader’s sympathy because he is finally able to “shift gear” in the course of his life and do things that would have been inconceivable to him at an earlier period.

And yet, the young woman (no longer so young) who is facing him is not a “nobody” in Paley’s work since she is nothing less than Paley’s favorite character-narrator, alter-ego, persona, the one who has « done a lot of work for her »: faithful Faith herself whom for once we feel that, had she been the narrator, she would have been an unreliable one, so biased and full of prejudices against the old man does she appear here. Meeting Zagrowsky at the beginning of the story, she addresses him as if there is no chance that he might have improved or simply changed. No hope, no chance to change for poor Iz. Hearing her argue with him here, one might have the illusion of hearing the father in « A Conversation with my Father » with a strong effect of irony due to the change of positions of the characters from one story to the other.

Paley likes to build a story around the dispute a stubborn character has with others and see him change …or not change. She even theorizes on that subject in « A Conversation with my Father ». « Zagrowsky Tells » can be read as a kind of philosophical tale exemplifying the lesson of « A Conversation with my Father » which is that the “openness” of a situation does not depend on action and character but on point of view. Openness is always potentially at hand but it has to be desired and chosen; it is up to the author to make it emerge out of the manifold relations, combinations he or she creates among words, images, narrative programs...

The dynamics of the existential situation in « Zagrowsky Tells » is particularly unstable because it moves around a series of cliches and counter-clichés alternately performed on
the public and private scene. It plays with the co-presence of antagonistic elements, creating knots of tension which don’t have to be necessarily unknotted at the existential level, but have to be worked out on the narrative and discursive levels so that the literary work can play its part as « the noise of culture ».

There are at least four of these “knots”:

**First**, the fact that whereas culture reminds us that Jews as a people have been and still are victims of racism, the short story deals with a particular Jewish person found guilty of racial discrimination towards Blacks and Hispanics in his professional life, a case of what sociologists call unreflective racism.

**Second**, it so happens that the same man will find himself in the situation of becoming — with the help of « a black man with a green thumb » (the black gardener of the clinic where his daughter is staying)— the grandfather of a black grand-son. For cultural reasons, he first strongly resists this fact of nature but under the pressure of the doctors who take care of his daughter and most of all of his wife, he is forced not only to accept it but also to bring the child home with him and take charge of his education. And this little boy becomes “his little best friend”. Pragmatics has won over prejudices. As Zagrowsky says when he explains the situation to Faith at some point in the story: « You have an opinion. I have an opinion. Life don’t have no opinion. » (p. 158-159). And yet his first half expressed thought at the beginning of the short story: « I was standing in the park under that tree. They call it the Hanging Elm. Once upon a time it made a big improvement on all kinds of hooligans. Nowadays if, once in a while…No. » (p. 151), might make us wonder whether his ideas have changed as radically as his behaviour would suggest. The vigorous « No » that concludes the hypothetical statement, however, has to be given its full weight.

**Third**, Zagrowsky without being a womanizer, and without appearing to a European viewer as particularly sexist, enjoys the presence of beautiful women in his family and outside it. This is expressed several times in the story:

- when he sees Faith in the park and points her out to his grandson Emanuel: « Here comes a lady. She was once a beautiful customer of mine in the pharmacy I showed you. (...) She looks OK now, but not so hot. » (p. 151);

- when Faith reminds him of his wife’s beauty: « So...would I marry a mutt? » (p. 153);

- when he evokes Faith and her friends:

> You could see them walking around on a sunny day, dragging a couple kids, a carriage, a bike, beautiful girls, but tired from all day, mostly divorced, going home alone? (...) Sometimes, five o’clock I stood in the door to see them. They were mostly the way models should be. I mean not skinny —round like they were made of little cushions and bigger cushions, depending where you looked; young mothers. I hollered a few words to them, they hollered back. Especially I remember her friend Ruthy —she had two little girls with long braids, down to here. I told her, in a couple of years, Ruthy, you’ll have some beauties on your hands. You better keep an eye on them.

And he concludes:

> In those days, the women always answered you in a pleasant way, not afraid to smile. Like this; They said, You really think so? Thanks, Iz. (p. 156)

- and finally in the discussion he later has about what Faith —twenty years later and with a different historical point of view— calls sexism:

> She also doesn’t like how I talk to women. She says I called Mrs Z. a grizzly bear a few times. It’s my wife, no? That I was winking and blinking at the girls, a few
pinches. A lie...maybe I patted, but I never pinched. Besides I know for a fact a couple of them loved it. She says, No. None of them liked it. Not one. They only put up with it because it wasn't time yet in history to holler. (An American-born girl has some nerve to mention history.) (p. 165).

20 This “appreciation” of women, however, has a blind spot: the nature of his relationship with his daughter Cissy. He says:

When she was a kid you should of seen her. She's a nice looking girl now, even when she has an attack. But then she was something. The family used to go to the mountains in the summer. We went dancing her and me. What a dancer. people were surprised. Sometimes we danced until 2 a.m. (p. 154).

21 Or: « So close we were like sweethearts... » (p. 163).

22 Because of his daughter's illness, he eventually has to face the implications of this relationship and becomes self-conscious about the possible interpretations of the situation; he nevertheless allows himself a bit of irony: « I did something terrible! I loved my child. », before protecting himself from similar objections from Faith: « I know what's on people's minds. I know psychology very well. Since this happened to us, I read up on the whole business. » (p. 164).

23 Fourth, Faith plays a part here which she is rarely assigned in Paley's short stories. She usually is the flexible one, the understanding one. Thus, reading Grace Paley's stories, we have learned that we can trust Faith's judgment. But this time, the situation is different. And it takes some time before readers admit they have to modify their attitude towards Faith, surprisingly changed into « this lady Queen of Right (p. 164) ». This is a kind of internal twist which can be added to the others although it is of a different nature.

24 All the issues approached by Grace Paley in this story are very delicate ones: racism, sexism, incestuous feelings. Paley treats these issues without suggesting a resolution because they can't really be resolved except by simplifying them and thus distorting them, which she won't do. She deals with the complexity of the situations and the contradictions they imply. She does not reduce the multiplicity of causes to the false unity of a single cause. The edge is not always a comfortable place on which to stand but if this is where the truth is, this is where Paley chooses to be!

25 It would probably be very interesting to compare the reception of this story at the time it was written with present responses. I would bet it sounds still more daring to-day because of the pressure introduced by the standards of political correctness.

II. In narrative and discursive terms

26 In the difficult existential situation we have described, Zagrowsky has one accuser and no defender in the plot although one can certainly consider that his black grandson's presence and affection speak for him. We now understand why he had to be the narrator and focalizer of the story: to defend his case; thus the reader can have access to his secret thoughts and get a full view of the many facets of the character including those revealed by his sense of humour. In this way, the readers become implicated in his point of view and they can appreciate his development. As the daughter-writer of « A Conversation with my Father » says to her father: « Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life. » (p. 162). It is of course the author's responsibility to make this sound true.
We shall now examine the variety of discursive modes created by Paley and analyse their respective functions.

As the character-narrator of the story, Zagrowsky relates what happened (events implying actions, characters, places and times), and he does so for at least three distinct periods in the past: the immediate past of his meeting with Faith in the park; the faraway past of 15 or 20 years, when Faith and her friends were young mothers and Zagrowsky, a pharmacist delivering medicine to their sick babies after hours; and the middle-past of Cissy's sickness which takes place in a time between the two just mentioned. The discursive mode employed thus is a combination of narration and description.

In the course of the narration, he also reports his own words as well as those of other characters: Faith, his grand-son Emanuel, Faith's friends and the young man with child in the immediate past; Faith, her friends, his daughter Cissy, his wife in the middle and in the faraway past. The reported speech is either direct or indirect. He also reports his own thoughts, sometimes expressed in the form of a dialogue with himself: « Then I thought: Calm down Zagrowsky. Because for a fact I didn't want her to leave (...) » (p. 161).

In addition, Zagrowsky also offers a running commentary on what happens or has happened, on what Faith has just said or on what he has just noticed about her. There is a whole variety of such remarks:

- an abstract, general commentary: « Well, what can you do? Time takes a terrible toll off the ladies » (p. 151); « I was already thinking something else: The mind makes its own business » (p. 155); « Tell! That opens up the congestion a little —the lungs are for breathing, not secrets » (p. 161).

- a pointed, contextual commentary (which sometimes alternates with the dialogue) on what has just happened, or on the behaviour of other characters, Emanuel, for instance, when he closes his eyes tight because he does not want to hear: « Goddamnit, open your eyes. He stands still. He's thinking. I know his little cute mind... » (p. 152).

- a pointed commentary on his own commentary, for instance in regard to Faith: « [to Faith] You know my Cissy? // I see she knows something// Why not, I had a public business. No surprise. » (p. 153).

Most often, these comments seem to be part of a dialogue with an invisible partner as in the following examples:

. « Emanuel closes his eyes tight. Did you ever notice children get all mixed up? They don't want to hear about something, they squinch up their eyes. Many children do this. » (p. 152).

. « I bet she was. Is that a nice way to answer? » (p. 153).

. « Your wife is a beautiful woman. So, would I marry a mutt? But she was right. My Nettie when she was young, she was very fair (...). » (p. 153).

. « She says this like she means it but it makes her sad. How do I know this? Years in a store. You observe. You watch. the customer is always right, but plenty of times you know he's wrong and also a goddam fool. » (p. 154).

. « She doesn't even answer me. She says...you want to know what she says? » (p. 155).

. « But why should I leave her off the hook? » (p. 160).
We don't know who the addressee of either of these remarks is. Himself? An imaginary addressee? The implied narratee representing the reader? ...God? This “dialogue-on-the-side” is close to what commentators of Nathalie Sarrate called « sous-conversation » (« sub-conversation ») or what Bakhtine described as dialogism in the work of Dostoïevsky. It also corresponds to a certain Jewish tradition as Paley suggests in one of the essays of her last book Just as I thought where she writes about Coat upon a Stick by Norman Fruchter. Here is what she says:

I said dialogues. And there are dialogues. This is a very Jewish, constantly talking work. It believes that what happens inside a person's head is dialogue, not stream of consciousness, or third-person reporting. Free association is just right for psychology, but these Jews are made of history and they talk in long, hard sentences, especially to themselves. They are the tradition of argument and discussion learned in yeshivas and shuls. In the midst of ritual obedience they somehow keep the adversarial conversation going with themselves, each other, or with the God who has always been pressed to answer questions, to be responsive. 

The familiar, conversational style of the narrative voice neutralizes the distinction between narration and dialogue and Paley's choice to suppress all the typographical marks which signal and then isolate the dialogue from the narrative sentences emphasizes this effect. It brings together the different enunciative modes, establishes an unexpected continuity between the different levels of enunciation, creating an effect of “contamination”.

To bridge what I said before, what I am saying now, and what is to follow, I would suggest that the variety of discursive modes used by Paley at the narrative level is her own means of allowing the existential situations of her texts to carry the reader further and further into the convolutions of alterity.

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III. In meta-literary terms

What is finally at stake here is nothing less than the role and function of literature —its nature as a complex system and the power it derives from this complexity: resisting the human tendency to classify, simplify and polarize; building up a formal architecture that can persuade the reader not to judge but to understand, not to reject but to negotiate, to let oneself become an other, to experience through literature what Deleuze calls un devenir minoritaire, and which he defines in the following way in «Literature and Life», one of the essays of Critique et Clinique translated as Essays Critical and Clinical:

To write is certainly not to impose a form (or expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete (...). Writing is inseparable from becoming: in writing one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible(...) one does not become Man, insofar as man presents himself as a dominant form of expression that claims to impose itself on all matter, whereas woman , animal, molecule always has a component of flight that escapes its own formalization. (...) Even when it is a woman who is becoming, she has to become-woman, and this becoming has nothing to do with a state she could claim as her own. To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule —neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and non preexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form. One can institute a zone of proximity with anything, on the condition that one creates the literary means for doing so. (...)

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Becoming is always “between” or “among”: a woman between women, or an animal among others. But the power of the indefinite article is effected only if the term in becoming is stripped of the formal characteristics that make it say the (“the animal in front of you…”).²

When Deleuze uses this notion of « devenir » («becoming-») which he borrowed from Heraclitus and Nietzsche and re-elaborated in his own system (6), he considers it on two levels: first, the level of the character in a work of fiction, for example Ahab in Moby Dick whose « becoming » is the Whale (see the article quoted above but also « Bartleby; or, The Formula » in the same volume); second, the level of literature itself which is the « line of flight » a « devenir-minoritaire », that offers to both writer and reader.

These two levels can be found in « Zagrowsky tells » by Paley.

On the one hand, the character of Zagrowsky, the old Jewish pharmacist —an overly loving father, somewhat racist, somewhat sexist, but also a very generous person, appreciative of life, lucid, with a nice sense of humour and irony and a hypersensitivity to history— lets himself be carried away out of his self and out of his ideological prejudices, out of his culture and history by a little black child. This is what I chose to point out in my title as « the becoming-black of a Jewish pharmacist ». A dive into otherness of a different kind.

On the other hand, Paley the writer, obstinately refusing to simplify a touchy situation and faced with the necessity of creating the literary means to delicately unfold its complexities and contradictions, and translate all of its nuances, gives substance and texture to what Deleuze abstractly states in the same essay:

There are no straight lines, neither in things or in language. Syntax is the set of necessary detours that are created in each case to reveal the life in things.⁷

NOTES

3. The narrator’s speech in Notes from the Underground by Dostoïevsky would provide a good example of what we refer to here.
RÉSUMÉS

Il s’agit, dans cet article intitulé "Le Devenir-noir d’un pharmacien juif : « Zagrowsky Tells » de Grace Paley", d’étudier de quelle manière la nouvelle de Paley, saisie sur le plan de la construction existentielle du personnage, de la stratégie narrative et discursive et de la stratégie méta-littéraire fait écho à la notion de devenir-minoritaire élaborée par le philosophe Gilles Deleuze.

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