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Once a feminist: On Reading Grace Paley

Lynne Segal

Though we do it again and again, it is always challenging re-entering the past to grasp anew texts that helped weave the feminist trappings some of us have sported for around forty years now – their threads knotting, unravelling, refurbished, as we try perhaps to keep pace with, or know we are seen as lagging behind, successive academic styles or activist struggles. No single text leaps out for me, returning to the 1970s, that decade when I secured my feminist foothold, the stance that provided one way of surveying the world ever since. Instead, I see an expanding torrent of words, sounds, images, ones used eventually so successfully for taking in, disseminating, solidifying, new worlds for women to enter. They were to be spaces where women’s differing interests, fears and desires could figure as significantly as those of men, with feminists forging a new vernacular to delineate the questions perplexing so many of us entering adulthood in the 1960s: ‘What is man that woman lies down to adore him?’¹

‘Man’, ‘woman’, were words we could still play around with then. We used them, even though feminists already had some inkling of their slippery meanings, which so often evaded us when we tried to pin them down ourselves (leading to splits and squabbles), even as their old designations enraged us, surveying how they had been fixed and assigned to us by the world at large (creating most feminists’ lasting suspicion of biological approaches to sexual difference). ‘What is man that woman lies down to adore him?’, was a crucial question, back then when I was a young woman.

Ironically, it was my own faithless lover of the time who gave me the text it came from, Grace Paley's very first prose fiction, *The Little Disturbances of Man: Stories of Men and Women at Love* (1973). More interestingly, and just like the tales of her fellow American, Tillie Olsen, these were stories that had been written in the 1940s and 1950s, hence by women significantly older than my post-war generation, now demanding 'women's liberation'.ⁱⁱ They would be rediscovered and read avidly by us twenty years later.

What was so exciting about Paley's vivid, spiky prose was not just that she wrote in a sparkling New York Jewish, or Yiddish, idiom, and always from a woman's perspective, but simply that she was such a unique lyricist of domestic life. Just as she intended, Paley's prose filled the women readers who quickly became her followers with energy and delight. We identified with the feisty, loquacious single mothers who kept reappearing in her tales. These mothers could handle the fretful moods and misdemeanours of their young brood, the deficiencies, desertions and reappearances of the men drifting into and out of their lives, with continuous, wry humour, interrupted by only sporadic outbursts of helpless rage, between surges of passion and desire: men and women *at love*, was the suitably disordered subtitle of her tales. Introducing a compendium of her published stories in 1994, Paley commented on her own early writing, and that of Tillie Olsen and just a few other women writers of the 1950s:

I was a woman writing at the early moment when small drops of worried resentment and noble rage were secretly, slowly building into the second wave of

the women's movement... This great wave would crest half a generation later, leaving men sputtering and anxious, but somewhat improved for the crashing bath. Every woman writing in these years has had to swim in that feminist wave. No matter what she thinks of it, even if she bravely swims against it, she has been supported by it – the buoyancy, the noise, the saltiness (1994, p.xi)ⁱⁱⁱ

As so often, Paley gets it exactly right. Today, I see myself again in the 1970s, a single mother, in the midst of the boisterous bustle of a collective household of women and children, laughing out loud at her stories. Her humour was totemic of how many of us wished to be seen; her descriptions of the tears and laughter of women's domestic lives encapsulating so much that we wanted the world to recognize about the significance of women's undervalued labours of love.

Her age, twenty years ahead of most second-wave feminists, made Paley all the more admirable. It is, of course, Simone de Beauvoir, fourteen years Paley's senior, who is rightly seen as second-wave feminism's leading foremother, her texts and life making her, if only for a short while, the exemplary figure. At least, she was the consummate mentor until many began to question Beauvoir's own ambivalence towards everything seen as 'feminine'. In a lighter, more mischievous tone, Paley's periodic writing, alongside her continued activism, from the 1940s right through to her recent death, sixty years later, kept her a beacon for feminist admirers. Her followers never lost faith in her credentials. And certainly, Paley embraced womanhood almost to a fault, at times, perhaps, overstating the contrasts between those men of the world and her fictive housewives and mothers, whose daily life loved to embellish.

Paley was an ardent feminist, but she was also, first and foremost, an activist, pacifist, radical egalitarian, and collectivist anarchist. Her outlook harmonized perfectly with the dominant political spirit of Anglo-American feminism in the 1970s, one, sadly, which hardly resonates with the pervasively more pessimistic mood of contemporary recessionary, wantonly militaristic times. The socialist, utopian banner has frayed. It is seen as naïve, if not idiotic, for many entering adulthood as the twentieth century drew to its ominous close, with global poverty and ethnic tension escalating. This is all the more true for the women now climbing ladders of corporate or bureaucratic power, even as class, ethnic and geographical divisions become ever more deeply and dangerously etched, positioning different groups of women, figuratively, worlds apart.

For older feminists, having reached the age Paley was when we first encountered her in our youth, revisiting her writing offers renewed rewards. In recent years I have returned to that earliest text, to those *Little Disturbances ...*, savouring, afterwards, much that I barely recalled from before, both on the ambivalences of ageing and on the strong stance that she, a quintessentially Jewish writer, promoted on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From the beginning, Paley had offered her readers intimations of ageing, in a far gentler and more respectful way than the culture at large. Memorably now, in the opening narrative of her first collection, ‘Goodbye and Good Luck,’ written in 1955, an ageing woman cheerfully recalls the joys of her youth: ‘I

was popular in certain circles, says Aunt Rose. I wasn't no thinner then, only more stationary in the flesh'.^{iv} Shifts of the flesh are dramatically delineated by Rose: 'I noticed it first on my mother's face, the rotten handwriting of time, scribbled up and down her cheeks, across her forehead back and forth—a child could read – it said, old, old, old'.^v And yet, this is not a tale of woe, for Rose, despite her weight and her wobbles, retains the capacity to love again: the story ends with her returning to an old lover she had adored but forsaken half a century earlier, because he was married, now that he has become a widower.

Shortly before her own tragically early death, in 1992, the British novelist Angela Carter asked Paley why she had never written anything about the menopause. Pondering her friend's query in an article written a few years later, Paley reflects that being more than twenty years older than the movers and shakers of Women's Liberation, the menopause and the movement arrived together in her life, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This meant that she moved on from the waning civil-rights and anti-war work of previous decades, to savour the 'wild, delighted' activities of her many new friends in women's liberation:

The high anxious but hopeful energy of the time, the general political atmosphere, and the particular female moment had a lot to do with the fact that I can't remember my menopause or, remembering it, haven't thought to write much about it ... I've asked some of my age mates, old friends, and they feel pretty much the same way. We were busy. Life was simply heightened by opposition, and hope was essential ... If I were going through my menopause now, I think I would remember it years later more harshly.^{vi vii}

Paley always thanked the women's movement for enabling her 'to cross the slippery streets of indifference, exclusion, and condescension' more cheerfully, giving her an enduring sense of political purpose and solidarity.^{viii} That solidarity included her grief over the embattled lives of Palestinians in Israel's Occupied Territory. From her very earliest writing, Paley worried about the consequences of the formation and ever-expanding state of Israel, both on the Palestinians, whose land they continuously confiscated, and on the hearts and minds of Israeli Jews. Indeed, in that same first collection, she has one of her favourite characters, Faith Rheingold (whose life most closely resembles Paley's own), suddenly start rowing with her former, and current, husband, when all three are cheerfully gathered together in her home:

You know my opinions perfectly well ... Don't laugh ... I believe in the Diaspora, not only as a fact but as a tenet. I'm against Israel on technical grounds ... once [Jews are] huddled in one little corner of a desert, they're like anyone else ... Jews have one hope only – to remain a remnant in the basement of world affairs'^{ix}.

The Jewish diaspora, however, increasingly embraced Israel, while Paley moved in the opposite direction, becoming one of the founders of the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1987. She spoke out on this issue until the very day she died.

There is much more to say, but let me conclude with this thought. Paley often acknowledged all she had gained from feminism, in her lifelong passion for women's independence and sexual freedom. But if her life and politics, from middle age onwards, were rejuvenated from encounters with second-wave feminism, let me assure

her spirit, wherever it rests, that my life has been constantly refreshed, its political compass steadied, by encounters with the writing of Grace Paley.

ⁱ Grace Paley, 'A Subject of Childhood', *The Little Disturbances of Man*, New York, Signet, 1973, p.143.

ⁱⁱ In particular, see Tillie Olsen, 'I Stand Here Ironing', from her powerful collection, *Tell me a Riddle*, London, Faber & Faber, 1961.

ⁱⁱⁱ Grace Paley, *The Collected Stories*, New York, Noonday Press, 1994, p.xi.

^{iv} Grace Paley, "'Goodbye and Good Luck,'" in Paley, 1973, p.9.

^v *ibid*, p18.

^{vi} Grace Paley, *Just as I Thought*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1998, p. 285.

^{vii} *ibid*. pp. 286-288.

^{viii} *Ibid*, p.287.

^{ix} Paley, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, pp. 131-2.