

HOUSE ORGAN

Grace

I was preparing to sit down and write this House Organ as a reflection on *Capitalism Nature Socialism's* ongoing series of dialogues within ecofeminism, but then Grace died, and so I decided to write about Grace Paley and the lessons she taught us about life, which includes ecofeminism.

Grace might have said something like that. Her sentences often ended with wiry turned phrases that shook the words that came in advance of them before they could settle in and congeal. When she was speaking this way she would punctuate with a little dance of her eyes. The package would make you smile and think, not always consciously, but to good effect. That life should include ecofeminism is not about to make one smile, but a thought or two on the subject may be useful.

Grace did not like abstractions that occluded reality. On the last occasion I saw her, in August of this year at her home in Thetford, Vermont, sitting outside before the landscape that swept gently down to distant mountains, she roused herself briefly from the lethargy that was overcoming her spirit to tell of a train ride in China during the late Mao years in which she and Bob were part of a delegation, many of whose members were consequential leftists. As the train chugged through the countryside she gazed through the window trying to take in the details of the landscape and the myriad activities of the peasants. But a gaggle of the leftists would have none of it. For them the occasion was another opportunity to fight the good fight as to the relative merits of Mao, Trotsky and Stalin and other leaders of the battle against imperialism. They were blind to anything so messy and “inscrutable” as the immemorial Chinese countryside. What mattered was arguing about big things like the mode of organizing the masses. . . .

But then a kind of cloud descended over Grace. She said, “I don’t feel so good,” and asked to be excused. She had to be escorted away. It was the last time I saw her and the only time we parted without that smile, Grace’s smile that contained and projected her name, a smile that graced a person and made him or her feel blessed.

Grace Paley was well celebrated during her later years with a procession of prizes, lectureships and so forth, but it is safe to say that while this was a recognition of the extraordinary achievement of her stories and poems, it only delineated the outer range of that achievement. This is because what she wrote about and transferred into words was the silent lives of women, lives whose centers will remain silent until the social conditions for bringing them into full speech are achieved.

In a 1982 interview Grace made this explicit:

GP: For a long time I thought women’s lives . . . I didn’t think I was shit, but I really thought my life as a woman was shit. Who would be interested in that crap? I was very interested in it , but I didn’t have enough social ego to put it down. I had to develop that to a point where I said, ‘I don’t give a damn.’ Women who have thought their lives were boring have found they’re interesting to one another

KH: Is that part of what you meant when you said something about your stories taking what is dark and hidden and recreating a balance in the world?

GP: Something like that. Stories illuminate. That's the purpose of a story for me. To shine a light on what's dark and give it light. And the balance is something else. . . . It's justice.

KH: What are you most interested in balancing?

GP: The dark lives of women. This is what made me write to begin with. And at the time I thought no one would be interested in seeing it. But I had to illuminate it anyway. If for nobody else, for myself and my friends.

This is both an affirmation and a critique of the Enlightenment, whose illumination overlooked the dark lives of women. In *The Magic Flute*, Mozart pushes against the limits of the Enlightenment with a spiritual message while sharing its perspective on gender. In the part of the *Singspiel* that ceases to be farcical or childishly reassuring, the part that skirts the abyss, Mozart counterposes the radiant deism of Sarastro and his Freemasonic disciples to the terrifying vengefulness of the Queen of the Night. The Good Father clothes his benign humanism in some of the lowest notes in operatic history, while the Dark Mother is made to wrestle with an impossibly high F₃ in an extraordinary aria whose challenge is to be sung so as to rescue musical beauty from an everpresent risk of shrieking. The Queen is a reincarnation of the *Erinyes* of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, those vengeful spirits of the slain mother, Clytemnaestra, who have to be put to rest if civilization is to proceed. *The Magic Flute's* Queen is the vengeful mother whose cherished daughter, Pamina, has been abducted, her love alienated by Sarastro, shown by Mozart to be reason's victory over the dark female. And Pamina, in escaping her mother, escapes becoming like her mother. Mozart represents her as the partner of her beloved, the youth Tamino; this she achieves by sharing his rite of passage, hewing a path for the equality of all the daughters who are to fight their way out of patriarchal tradition with its hysterical, shrewish, shrieking mother-figures. It is a lovely, endearing touch but raises a nagging question: just what happens to the dark mother made to vanish through the radiance of Enlightenment; where did she come from, and where will she go? In *The Magic Flute* the Queen of the Night is simply driven off by the fanfare of the coda as all unite behind Good Father Sarastro. In real history, however, the discarded Mother is to have considerably grimmer consequences, in ruined, neglected lives, and indeed, through the domination of nature.

Grace Paley experienced these consequences as the worthless and radically devalued lives of ordinary women. Her greatness lay in bringing a different kind of light to these dark places.

It was a gentle light that conveyed a shrewd dignity and stemmed from groundedness in the totality of existence. In an interview with Amy Goodman conducted four years ago, Grace said that life, for people like her, presented a three-part aspect. First, there was being a mother, bringing new life into the world and caring for it; second, there was politics, how to realize justice and put an end to war; and third, came one's work, one's self-expression, in her case, writing poetry and short fiction. These were not to be divided and put into slots,

the way work and domesticity are under capitalism, but seamlessly differentiated. Caring for others was politics and art; politics was caring and art; and art was politics and caring. Thus did the dark mother principle come into the day and take its place with honor and humor—this latter because the tripartite unity was also a source of irony and the deflation of ego.

Grace never met a label she didn't dislike, and I'm sure she would have winced at being called an ecofeminist. But to me, she exemplifies what we are trying to get at when that word is placed in the center of what *Capitalism Nature Socialism* tries to do, which is to bring ecosocialism into the world. Ecofeminism is the recognition that ecosocialism will be an empty repetition of the domination of nature unless gender is foregrounded. This means that we do not seek so much to take care of resources as of *life*. It means recognizing that for us, what we call life comes from the bodies of women; and the degradation of women, the darkening of their lives, is also the deadening of nature. The realization puts the notion of being "grounded" in a new light, as entering into the entirety of what is meant by "earth": nature in its practical, lived being. Thus the grounding of Grace Paley, like the "subsistence perspective" of Maria Mies and co-workers, are integral to ecofeminism, which is integral to ecosocialism.

The "world-historical defeat of women"—to use the term of Engels—is also the downfall of nature. And the resurrection of nature will not happen except through the restoration of women to dignity. Maria Mies traced the lesion back into its mythic Sumerian beginnings in her keynote lecture to the 2005 *Capitalism Nature Socialism* conference in Toronto, which was published in this journal in 2006. History begins with the slaying of the Great Mother, Tiamut, by her warrior son, Marduk; and Nature begins with the butchering of Tiamut's body and the strewing about of its pieces. Thus arose the sky and the earth and the places on it, suitable for the work of civilization and its organized systems of production, all under the tutelage of the Fathers. With this, the male became seen as the creator, and the female, whether as mere matter or Great Mother, his enemy. Mies writes: "In my view, therefore, one cannot safely speak of 'socialism,' 'ecosocialism,' or 'ecofeminism' unless one is able to understand why, when, and how nature was made our enemy. . ." [21]

And we should also understand those for whom nature is a friend, like Grace Paley:

What would happen
if there were a terrific shortage of goldenrod
in the world
and I put my foot outside this house
to walk in the garden and show city visitors
my two lovely rosebushes
and three remarkable goldenrod plants
that were doing well this year

I would say: Look!
how on each of several sprigs
there are two three dozen tiny stems
and on each stem three four tiny golden
flowers petals stamen pistil and the pollen
which bees love

but insufficiently

otherwise

 can you imagine the fields
on rainy days in August brass
streaking the lodged hayheads
dull brass in the rain
and under the hot sun
the golden flowers
 floating gold dust of August fields
for miles and miles

—Joel Kovel