

The Art of Aging

*“My face catches the wind
from the snow line
and flushes with a flush
that will never wholly settle.
Well, that was a metropolitan vanity,
wanting to look young forever, to pass.
I was never a pre-Raphaelite beauty
and only pretty enough to be seen
with a man who wanted to be seen
with a passable woman.*

*But now that I am in love
with a place that doesn't care
how I look and if I am happy,
happy is how I look and that's all.
My hair will grow grey in any case,
my nails chip and flake,
my waist thicken, and the years
work all their usual changes.*

*If my face is to be weather beaten as well,
it's little enough lost
for a year among the lakes and vales
where simply to look out my window
at the high pass
makes me indifferent to mirrors
and to what my soul may wear
over its new complexion.”*

- Grace Paley

A Prescient Exchange.

Each day, chatting with me like a friend, he would lay bare some unhappy scene from his past. I could not help being deeply touched at his accounts of the difficulties from which he had never extricated himself, and indeed could not.

[...]

Fyodor Mikhailovich always spoke about his financial straits with great good nature. His stories, however, were so mournful that on one occasion I couldn't restrain myself from asking, "Why is it, Fyodor Mikhailovich, that you remember only the unhappy times?"

Tell me instead about how you were happy."

"Happy? But I haven't had any happiness yet. At least, not the kind of happiness I always dreamed of. I am still waiting for it."

Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina

The Immensity of my Happiness

Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina

“What could this elderly, sick, debt-ridden man give a young, alive, exuberant girl? Wouldn’t her love for him involve a terrible sacrifice on her part? And afterwards, wouldn’t she bitterly regret uniting her life with his? And in general, would it be possible for a young girl so different in age and personality to fall in love with my artist? Wouldn’t that be psychologically false? That is what I wanted to ask your opinion about, Anna Grigoryevna.”

“But why would it be impossible? For if, as you say, your Anya isn’t merely an empty flirt and has a kind, responsive heart, why couldn’t she fall in love with your artist? What if he is poor and sick? Where’s the sacrifice on her part, anyway? If she really loves him, she’ll be happy, too, and she’ll never have to regret anything!”

I spoke with some heat. Fyodor Mikhailovich looked at me in excitement. “And you seriously believe she could love him genuinely, and for the rest of her life?”

He fell silent, as if hesitating. “Put yourself in her place for a moment,” he said in a trembling voice. “Imagine that this artist — is me; that I have confessed my love to you and asked you to be my wife. Tell me, what would you answer?”

His face revealed such deep embarrassment, such inner torment, that I understood at long last that this was not a conversation about literature; that if I gave him an evasive answer I would deal a deathblow to his self-esteem and pride. I looked at his troubled face, which had become so dear to me, and said, “I would answer that I love you and will love you all my life.”

Imperfect Knowledge

To write is to know something. *What a pleasure to read a writer who knows a great deal. (Not a common experience these days...) Literature, I would argue, is knowledge — albeit, even at its greatest, imperfect knowledge. Like all knowledge.*

Still, even now, even now, literature remains one of our principal modes of understanding.

[...]

Everybody in our debauched culture invites us to simplify reality, to despise wisdom. There is a great deal of wisdom in Nadine Gordimer's work. She has articulated an admirably complex view of the human heart and the contradictions inherent in living in literature and in history.

-Susan Sontag-

Bertrand Russel

The Good Life

Nature is only a part of what we can imagine; everything, real or imagined, can

Knowledge and love are both indefinitely extensible

be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation

therefore, however good a life may be

is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in

a better life can be imagined

the world of value Nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than

Neither love without knowledge

Nature. In the world of values, Nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad,

nor knowledge without love can produce a good life.

deserving of neither admiration nor censure. It is we who create value and

our desires which confer value...

It is for us to determine the good life, not for Nature —

not even for Nature personified as God.

The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.