

VIVIAN GORNILK

"The End of the
Novel of Love"

WHEN I WAS A GIRL the whole world believed in love. My mother, a communist and a romantic, said to me, "You're smart, make something of yourself, but always remember, love is the most important thing in a woman's life." Across the street Grace Levine's mother, a woman who lit candles on Friday night and was afraid of everything that moved, whispered to her daughter, "Don't do like I did. Marry a man you love." Around the corner Elise Goldberg's mother slipped her arms into a Persian lamb coat and shrugged, "It's just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor man," and she meant it. Love was the operative word.

It was a working-class, immigrant neighborhood in the Bronx. Most of our homes were marked by an atmosphere of emotional indifference, if not open antagonism. I don't think I ever walked into a house where I felt the parents loved each other, or had once loved each other. I knew early that the people around me had married out of a set of necessities stronger than the absence of passion. Still, everyone believed in love. *Our* lives might be

small and frightened, but in the ideal life, it was felt—the educated life, the brave life, the life out in the world—love would not only be pursued, it would be achieved; and once achieved transform existence; create a rich, deep, textured prose out of the ordinary reports of daily life. The promise of love alone would one day give us the courage to leave these caution-ridden precincts and turn our faces toward: experience. That was it, really. Love, we knew, would put us at the center of our own experience. In fact, only if we gave ourselves over to passion, without stint and without contractual assurance, would we *have* experience.

Oh yes, we in the Bronx knew that love was the supreme accomplishment. We knew it because we, too, had been reading *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* and *The Age of Innocence* all our lives, as well as the ten thousand middlebrow versions of those books, and the dime-store novels too. We knew it because we lived in a culture soaked through with the conviction that love had transforming powers: to know passion was to break the bonds of the frightened, ignorant self. There might, of course, be a price to pay. One might be risking the shelter of respectability if one fell in love with the wrong person, but in return for such loss one would be gaining the only knowledge worth having. The very meaning of human risk was embedded in the pursuit of love.

We in the Bronx believed as we did because for a hundred and fifty years in the West the idea of romantic love had been em-

blematic of the search for self-understanding: an influence that touched every aspect of the world enterprise. In literature, good and great writers alike sounded depths of thought and emotion that made readers feel the life within themselves in the presence of words written to celebrate the powers of love.



I remember the first time—it wasn't so long ago—I turned the last page of a novel and it came over me that love as a metaphor was over. The book was Jane Smiley's *The Age of Grief*. I'd thought it a fine piece of work, resonant with years of observation about something profound, but it struck me as a small good thing, and I remember sitting with the book on my lap wondering, Why only a small good thing? Why am I not stirred to a sense of larger doings here? Almost immediately I answered myself with, Love is the problem here. It's the wrong catalyst. It doesn't complicate the issue, it reduces it. My own thought startled me. I'd never before considered that love might dilute the strength of a good novel rather than gather it in.

The situation in *The Age of Grief* is that of a couple in their thirties who've been together ten or twelve years, living in some small city, the parents of three little girls. The narrating voice is that of the husband: grave, intelligent, trustworthy. One winter night, he tells us, driving home from a church concert in which the wife has performed—he at the wheel with one of the children beside him, she in back with the other two—he hears her

say, "I'll never be happy again." He looks at her face in the rear-view mirror. Suddenly he knows that she is having an affair, and all he wants is that she not confess.

What follows then is a wonderfully told tale of the months of family life that pass as the husband hopes to avert open crisis, and the wife wanders about like a sick cat, trying to muddle silently through her own sadness and suppressed desire. The climax occurs when the entire family falls ill with the flu and the husband sees them through so beautifully, so decently, that you, the reader, could weep, reading his scrupulous recapitulation of the fever that has at last overtaken them all. The day after the last child recovers, the wife bolts. And then she returns.

The genius of the narrative lies in the desperate calm with which the husband charts the weeks and months of unhappy suspicion, all the while a piece of unwanted knowledge is collecting steadily in him. "I am thirty-five years old," he tells us in the middle of his story, "and it seems to me that I have arrived at the age of grief. Others arrive there sooner. Almost no one arrives much later. . . . It is not only that we know that love ends, children are stolen, parents die feeling that their lives have been meaningless. . . . It is more that . . . after all that schooling, all that care . . . the cup must come around, cannot pass from you, and it is the same cup of pain that every mortal drinks from." There. He has said what he came to say, and said it quite clearly.

The final paragraph reads: "Shall I say I welcomed my wife back with great sadness, more sadness than I had felt at any other time? It seems to me that marriage is a small container, after all,

barely large enough to hold some children. Two inner lives, two lifelong meditations of whatever complexity, burst out of it and out of it, cracking it, deforming it. Or maybe it is not a thing at all, nothing, something not present. I don't know, but I can't help thinking about it."

The situation is worthy of Tolstoy or Flaubert or Wharton—a pair of protagonists moving into the long littleness of life, falling into chaos when one of them jerks in the wind for a moment, refusing to accommodate the stasis ahead—and while Jane Smiley may not have the skills of the masters, her gifts are nonetheless considerable. Yet, for me, *The Age of Grief* failed to grow large. The story moved me to sadness and regret, but it could not persuade me to the tragic or the inevitable. I found myself arguing with its premises.

It was necessary that I believe the wife is driven to risk all for an experience that promises to give her back a self she has failed to achieve in her marriage; but the conviction that such knowledge would be hers if she went off with the man she was now burning for refused to exert power over me. As the novella progressed I saw that I was thinking, If this woman leaves her husband for her lover, in six months she'll be right back where she started. There isn't a reason in the world to believe she will know herself any better with the second man than she does with the first. This passion of hers is a quick fix, a soporific. We've all been through it a thousand times. She's foolish to think love will save her. I certainly don't.

And then again, I thought, If she *does* go off, what is she actu-

ally risking? When Emma Bovary was loosening her stays with a man other than her husband, or Anna Karenina running away from hers, or Newbold Archer agonizing over whether to leave New York with Ellen Olenska, people were indeed risking all for love. Bourgeois respectability had the power to make of these characters social pariahs. Strength would be needed to sustain exile. Out of such risk taking might come the force of suffering that brings clarity and insight. Today, there are no penalties to pay, no world of respectability to be excommunicated from. Bourgeois society as such is over. If the wife in *The Age of Grief* walks away from her marriage, she'll set up housekeeping on the other side of town with a man named Jerry instead of one named Dave, in ten minutes make a social life the equivalent of the one her first marriage had provided her, and in two years she and her new husband will find themselves at a dinner party that includes the ex-husband and his new wife: everyone chatting amiably. Two years after that, one morning in the kitchen or one night in the bedroom, she'll slip and call Jerry Dave, and they will both laugh.

For this character to be hungering for erotic passion at a crucial moment when she's up against all that she has, and has not, done with her life struck me as implausible. She *had* to know better, I thought. On the other hand, if blissing-out was what the wife was up to, then the story could be made large only if the author of her being called her on it. But Jane Smiley wasn't calling her on it. She was using the illicit passion of the wife straight—as though she expected me, the reader, to accept erotic longing

at face value as an urgency compelling enough to bring into relief the shocking ordinariness of these stricken lives. But I did not accept it. I could not. I know too much about love. We *all* know too much. I could not accept as true that a love affair would bring the wife (and therefore me) to feel deeply the consequence of her original insufficient intentions. And that is why an otherwise excellent novella struck me as a small good thing. Embedded as it was in a convention, not a truth, the conceit itself prevented the writer from asking the questions necessary to deepen thought and action.



Only forty years ago most of us occupied a world remarkably free of direct experience. We grew up expecting to repeat our parents' lives; certainly, we repeated their platitudes. However much some of us may have acted the girl or the boy of advanced ideas, we all (secretly or otherwise) subscribed to Aristophanes' fable: somewhere out there was our fated "other half," the one true love that would rescue us from loneliness and drift. This expectation was central to our lives: what is otherwise known as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When love-and-marriage failed to deliver us to the promised land within, we became sad, angry, confused. We thought we'd been cheated. We still believed in love but clearly: you could make a mistake. You could take Wrong for Right, and then marriage not only failed to rescue, it became existential hell.

There was, of course, always divorce, but forty years ago

nobody we knew got divorced. We'd also heard about psychoanalysis (from movies and novels), but in the Bronx such treatment was taken as proof of irredeemable defeat—hardly a legitimate search for relief from the confusion in which many of us were passing our lives. As yet, there was nothing for it but to endure. We became fond of responding to irony in novels of love as one would to a finger pressed against the flesh near an open sore.

Good writers, of course, had the boldness to deliver border reports from the country of married sadness and anger, and these reports were received with morbid excitement. In the fifties John Cheever's stories of marital disillusion seemed profound. That famous climactic moment in Cheever when the husband *realizes* his wife holds him in contempt, or the wife *knows* the husband is committing adultery, these moments delivered an electric charge. The knowledge encoded in them seemed literally stunning, leaving the characters riven, their lives destroyed. Who, after all, could go on after this? Then came the shocker—the thing that made the story large, awesome, terrible—they *did* go on like this. The reader came to the last sentence and sat staring into space, the void opening at her feet.

The world was changing but it was not yet changed; that's why Cheever's stories had such power. Great-love-and-lasting-marriage was still the expectation upon which lives were predicated; until the moment the expectation dissolved out, it seemed immutable. We were living Cheever's stories, but we

did not know how to make any larger sense of things than he had made of them.

Then, within a generation, everything everywhere in the world conspired to *make* us know. Suddenly, there *was* divorce. And psychotherapy. And sex and feminism and drugs, as well as crime in the street. In short, it was the Fall of Rome. From one end of the city to the other. Even in the Bronx. Frightening, but exciting as well. We who had married for life were reprieved: at liberty to correct the mistake. We would fall in love again, and this time we'd do it right. Now we would discover ourselves, emerge into the fine, free creatures we had always known we could be. We got divorced, and we went into therapy. And this is what happened:

We loved once, and we loved badly. We loved again, and again we loved badly. We did it a third time, and we were no longer living in a world free of experience. We saw that love did not make us tender, wise, or compassionate. Under its influence we gave up neither our fears nor our angers. Within ourselves we remained unchanged. The development was an astonishment: not at all what had been expected. The atmosphere became charged with revelation, and it altered us permanently as a culture.

A couple of years ago, at dinner with a couple I've known for years—he is an academic, she a poet; he makes the money, she does not—I fell into some aimless exchange about marriage, in the middle of which the husband had occasion to announce

casually, "Of course, it's a given that the one who does the supporting holds the one being supported in contempt." The wife stared at him. He stared back. Then she gasped, "Henry! I can hardly believe you've said what you've just said." He looked at her, unperturbed. "What is it?" he asked mildly. "Is this something we don't all know?" Silence fell on the company. She looked bleak, he remained impassive. A minute later she said the equivalent of Pass the salt. I remember thinking, If life was still a Cheever story this would have been the climactic moment, but as it is now 1995 it is only a break in the conversation.

Henry was speaking a hard, simple truth we have all absorbed. Love, this truth tells us, like food or air, is necessary but insufficient: it cannot do for us what we must do for ourselves. Certainly, it can no longer act as an organizing principle. Romantic love now seems a yearning to dive down into feeling and come up magically changed; when what is required for the making of a self is the deliberate pursuit of consciousness. Knowing *this* to be the larger truth, as many of us do, the idea of love as a means of illumination—in literature as in life—now comes as something of an anticlimax. If in a story (as in actuality) neither the characters nor the narrator realizes, *to begin with*, that love is not what it's all about, then the story will know at its conclusion only what it knows at the beginning. Such a tale may establish sorrow and sentimental regret, but it cannot achieve a sense of the tragic or the inevitable. The panic with which people discover that the life they are living is the only one they are able to make—this

panic cannot be addressed if the major event in the story is going to be a new affair.

It is not that thousands of people aren't doing exactly what the husband and the wife in *The Age of Grief* are doing—of course they are, every hour on the hour. It is, rather, that their situation no longer signifies. It cannot provide insight, it can only repeat a view of things that today feels sadly tired and without the power to make one see anew. Somewhat like a going-nowhere analysis in which we recite again and again what we have repeatedly failed to act on. Such failure transforms insight into ritual. Ritual sustains the status quo. When a patient repeats an insight ritually he is living in bad faith: without intentionality: in thrall to passive longing. When a writer sits down to tell a tale based on experience that in effect has become "ritual," it is the equivalent of living in bad faith.

In great novels we always feel that the writer, at the time of the writing, knows as much as anyone around can know, and is struggling to make sense of what is perceived somewhere in the nerve endings if not yet in clarified consciousness. When a novel gives us *less* than many of us know—and is content with what is being given—we have middlebrow writing. Such writing—however intelligent its author, however excellent its prose—is closer to the sentimental than to the real. The reader senses that the work is sentimental because the metaphors are inaccurate: approximate, not exact. To get to those nerve endings a metaphor must be exact, not approximate. The exact metaphor is writer's gold.

A hundred years ago love provided such gold. When Lawrence, James, Stendhal, were writing, readers felt themselves in the presence of men diving down into the depths. For these writers love was a snake pit, marriage a menacing drama. Their insights were penetrated through with anxiety, their stories accumulated dread. Love, then, provided the context within which an enormous amount could and did get said. The writing promised self-understanding—that alone which gives courage for life—and it delivered.

Even fifty years ago—when most of us occupied a world free of experience—it could still deliver, and at the hands of writers who were good not great. In 1950, Rosamond Lehmann—in the 1930s she had been Jane Smiley's English counterpart—wrote a novel in which the central situation is that of a man who falls in love with a pair of sisters. He marries one, and within a few years begins sleeping with the other. This story, at the time, of the writing, struck readers as bold, thrilling, dramatic. I picked the book up a few years ago, ready to experience a literary curiosity, but I found the novel strong and memorable. Lehmann had made of the situation a remarkable context for the weakness of human intensity, and had let her characters live long enough to see that each of their lives had taken shape around the weakness. A novelist formed in a time when love was everything had used love to explore fully a flash of true insight. I turned the last page feeling penetrated by the pitifulness of life.

Could this book have been written today? Never. Its power is wholly dependent on the static quality of the world against which its characters are struggling. Everything they learn and do and become takes place against that restraint. It is because they cannot get out that the intensity builds and they break the taboo. The broken taboo allows them into themselves. That is how the story deepens.

Put romantic love at the center of a novel today, and who could be persuaded that in its pursuit the characters are going to get to something large? That love is going to throw them up against themselves in such a way that we will all learn something important about how we got to be as we are, or how the time in which we live got to be as it is. No one, it seems to me. Today, I think, love as a metaphor is an act of nostalgia, not of discovery.