

Fearing the Joys of Old Age

Contradictory Discourses of Aging
in Adelaida Gercyk's *On Old Age*

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INTRODUCTION

“I do not understand why people are afraid of old age.” Thus is the claim of the protagonist who, in the prose sketch discussed in this article, conspicuously idealizes later stages of life. Is she right – are people afraid of aging? While the demographic structure of societies undergoes a fundamental change in that more and more people are getting older and older and the achievements and discoveries of modern medicine are gradually extending life expectancy and the quality of later life, the dateless fear of old age remains deeply anchored in human nature. The idea of being “old” – implying “young” vs. “old” were two opposite poles without a fluid continuum between them – can in fact appear so intimidating and alien that some feel the urge to push it away. The comparison with others proves to be a useful tool for disidentification: as long as there are older people around us, “(being) old” constitutes an attribute that may apply to them – to *others*, that is – but never to ourselves; as such, “relations between *nonold* and *old* have been discussed in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Jönson 2013: 199; emphasis in original). It is the anxiety over this imagined and mythologized old age in ageist culture that blocks the view of growing old(er) as a gradual and life-long process rather than old age as the inevitable, frightening end of the spectrum.

One way of dealing with the fear of aging is to evaluate its possible advantages. Current treatments of the topic therefore often speak of “gains and losses” (see Karpf 2014) or even the “joy of old age” (see Sacks 2013), acknowledging its favorable aspects. This emphasis in the discourses of aging can be interpreted as a reaction to the growing number of what we consider to be “old people” and their heightened visibility in society as well as an expression of our innermost fears. It is also, of course, the result of a renegotiation of ageist stereotypes and views. Arguably in part a human coping mechanism, this nuanced, more sophisticated representation of old age has featured rarely in works of literature when compared with the abundance of one-sided negative depictions. There are, however, notable exceptions such as *On Old Age (O starosti)*, a prose sketch written by Russian author Adelaida Gercyk. In heavily idealizing old age, Gercyk’s protagonist exposes her own anguish over it. Having drawn a multifaceted picture of this kind, exploring age as a central category of our society, Gercyk was ahead of her time.

In the spirit of Foucauldian discourse analysis, the present paper understands age as being determined by dominant discourses. Initially grounded in social perceptions of a given period, the literary construction of the category “age” as explored here has the potential to fundamentally (re)shape them. Thus, the present analysis investigates how Gercyk negotiates these complex and contradicting discourses of age and aging¹ by viewing them through a lens of idealization (albeit one with cracks), implicitly criticizing the countless treatments of the topic that fail to grasp its complexity.

1 Age and aging are distinct notions that should be defined separately. While the former is interpreted statically, denoting a given point (e.g. the age of 84) or stage (e.g. old age) in life, the latter refers to the ongoing and lifelong process of growing older as a gradual transition. Although Gercyk’s sketch has the word *starost’* (“old age”) in its title, it does not focus exclusively on this particular phase of life, but frequently intermingles with *starenie* (“aging”) by including numerous descriptions of changes that accompany the aging process.

ADELAIDA GERCYK – THE FORGOTTEN RUSSIAN *SIBYL*

Adelaida Gercyk (1874-1925) is one of the lesser-known Russian writers of the early 20th century, an era known as the Silver Age of Russian Poetry (see Taubman 1994). Described by her sister Evgenija as thoughtful and introverted, Adelaida was primarily a poet, whose only anthology, plainly titled *Poems (Stichotvorenija)*, containing work from the years 1906-1909, was published in 1910 to great critical acclaim, being lauded by a significant number of the most relevant Russian poets of that era. Vadim Krejd (Kreyd 1994: 201) notes that it is doubtful that a poetry collection of any other Russian woman writer would have met with such favorable reactions at that time. Gercyk was a symbolist, employing a myriad of folkloristic and mystical elements and fairylike, magic motifs in her free verses, which are thus often characterized by an excessive level of abstraction and withdrawal from reality. This mythologization of everyday life in all its manifestations – led by a fantastic presence, the prophetic persona of the poet – earned Gercyk the byname “sybil” (*sivilla*), see the title of Natal’ja Boneckaja’s biographical portrait *Russian Sibyl (Russkaja Sivilla)*, 2006). Furthermore, Gercyk also wrote prose and produced a series of three autobiographical essay cycles that were published in Russian literary journals: *About That Which Never Was (O tom, čego ne bylo)*, 1911), *My Novels (Moi romany)*, 1913) and *My Odysseys (Moi bluždanija)*, 1915). In these collections, she processes experiences of life in the form of essays and sketches devoted to specific themes that can often be directly inferred from their respective titles, examples being *Guilt (Vina)* or *Beggar (Niščaja)*.

After spending the happiest years of her life – especially the time between 1915 and 1918 (see Pachmuss 1978: 318) – in Moscow, where she married Dmitrij Žukovskij, gave birth to two sons, befriended the up-and-coming poet Marina Cvetaeva, translated works of important intellectuals (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche and Selma Lagerlöf) into Russian, and collaborated fruitfully with her sister Evgenija while residing in “one of the major artistic houses in pre-revolutionary Russia, frequented by a glistening array of artists and intellectuals” (Burgin 1990: 358), Gercyk and her family had to relocate to the Crimean town of Sudak after the revolution and the civil war had broken out. There, they faced extreme poverty. In 1921, Gercyk was arrested and spent three weeks in prison, an incisive experience that she pro-

cessed in her last compilation of works, titled *Basement Essays* (*Podval'nye očerki*) and published posthumously in 1926. Gercyk died in 1925 of an acute nephritis; she was 51 years old.

The most complete collection of her work is the two-volume *Poems and Prose* (*Stichi i proza*) published in 1993; some of her poetry and prose was (re)published in *Sub Rosa* (1999) and *From the Women's Circle* (*Iz kruga ženskogo*, 2004). The majority of her work – including *On Old Age* – is only available in Russian. Scholarship on Gercyk has been sparse, in English-speaking circles almost non-existent. Catriona Kelly (1999: 130) calls Gercyk a “forgotten” poet in line with so many other Russian women writers and argues that it is the “admission to canonical status of two twentieth-century woman poets, [Anna] Akhmatova and [Marina] Tsvetaeva,” that has led to a “neglect of almost all other women poets.” Literature on Gercyk is restricted to biographical accounts (Boneckaja 2006; Burgin 1990; Dillon 1999; Kelly 1994, 1998; Kreyd 1994; Pachmuss 1978; Žukovskaja 2002, 2007) and few occasional examinations of specific aspects of her work (e.g. Kelly 1999; Obuchova 1997, 2000). As a result, no synoptic analysis of her oeuvre and its leitmotifs, its rhetorical devices etc. exists as yet. However, a series of nine conferences to-date (between 1996 and 2015) titled *The Silver Age in Crimea: A View from the 21st Century* (*Serebrjanyj vek v Krymu: vzgljad iz XXI stoletija*), led by Gercyk scholars Elena Kallo and Tat'jana Žukovskaja, has, among other things, contributed to a progressive analysis of Gercyk's work (see for example Gavriljuk 2002; Gorjunova 2009).

ON OLD AGE – A SUBJECTIVE EXAMINATION OF AGING

On Old Age is a prose sketch that was written and published in 1915 in the journal *Northern Notes* (*Severnye zapiski*) as part of Gercyk's third essay cycle *My Odysseys*. At the center of Gercyk's essays stands the “lyrical heroine” (*liričeskaja geroinja*) who expresses her feelings and thoughts on specific topics and frequently poses philosophical questions, subsequently attempting to answer them through reflection (see Kallo 1999: 16-17). *On Old Age* is a striking example of this: told from an insider's view, the uncharacterized and unnamed female protagonist – simultaneously function-

ing as the first-person narrator, the “lyrical heroine” – expresses her subjective sentiments on the topic of old age. Since a sketch of this kind lacks the clear boundary of fictional prose, the audience is tempted to equate the protagonist with the author herself (see for example Kravčenko 2012). Thus even though *On Old Age* represents a fictional work of art, its essayistic nature justifies asking how much of the narrator’s mindset corresponds with Gercyk’s ideas, or, in other words: how autobiographical is *On Old Age*? In an analysis of *Basement Essays*, Ol’ga Obuchova (1997: 316) claims that it is indeed Gercyk’s own views that constitute the heart of her prose:

The entire series of essays is embedded in a specific framework structure that is pre-defined by the introduction, a lyrico-philosophical monologue of the author [...]. The compositional core of the cycle is the figure of the author who is narrator and heroine at the same time.²

(Весь цикл очерков заключен в своеобразную рамочную конструкцию, заданную введением, которое представляет собой лирико-философский монолог автора [...]. Композиционный стержень всего цикла – это фигура автора, одновременно рассказчика и героя.)

Similarly, the unnamed protagonist’s “lyrico-philosophical monologue” about old age and the aging process in general embodies *On Old Age*’s common thread, tying together loosely connected scenes that barely reference each other. The sequence of three short situations that take place in different settings mirrors the consecutive stages of contemplation – from first coming into contact with the topic to an emotional discussion about its advantages and disadvantages to a confrontation with the reality of it – and allows for a logical development of the protagonist’s feelings while creating a natural narrative flow. Although in sum, *On Old Age* might leave an uneventful impression, the three depicted scenarios greatly contribute to the overall argument that the author is developing: in the first scene, taking place in a tailor shop, the heroine is looking at herself in the mirror, waiting for the seamstress to finish her work. She begins reflecting on old age, and her initial, overly positive attitude toward aging renders her unable to understand why other people are afraid of it. The second and key scene focus-

2 All translations are the author’s [D.M.], unless otherwise indicated.

es on a dialogue-driven argument between the protagonist and her friend in which the protagonist's one-dimensional views on age are challenged by a vastly differing opinion. While her friend raises problems associated with growing old, the protagonist adamantly defends her position. However, the fact that she experiences emotions such as anger and helplessness, almost bursting into tears during the discussion, implies that she, too, doubts that old age is exclusively advantageous. The third and final scene describes a gray and rainy day in the fall. An old peasant woman asks the heroine to read a letter to her. Here, the protagonist is confronted with the reality of old age, learning that some but not all of her assumptions and expectations hold true. She finally realizes that in addition to its joys, old age entails deficits, and she rejoices that she herself is not yet old.

THE DISCOURSES OF OLD AGE

Discourses of aging are – and always have been – diverse; moreover, they are subject to change as societal structures evolve and hierarchies and hegemonies are renegotiated. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the discourses dominant throughout Gercyk's lifetime differ fundamentally from contemporary ones. Alas, the perceptions of age and aging in late 19th- and early 20th-century Russia are scarcely explored, complicating both the social as well as the literary contextualization of the picture *On Old Age* offers. Irina Savkina (2011) identifies two archetypes of elderly women in the Russian cultural tradition, the *babuška* (“grandmother”) and the *starucha* (“old woman”), offering a survey of the different renditions of the former in selected works of Russian literature. Considering the *babuška* to be one of the most prominent Russian myths, she addresses some of its connotations such as asexuality, magical knowledge, ancestral memory, and authority of age (see Savkina 2011: 113), which are echoed by the leitmotifs Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (2014) lists in her study of the depiction of female aging in 20th-century Russian literature. Although a further elaboration of the social and literary discourses of aging at the time when *On Old Age* was created does not represent the purpose of this paper, it should be kept in mind that the picture drawn by Gercyk is deeply rooted not only in era-specific but also culture-specific contexts. As Thomas Hoisington (1998: xi) exemplarily notes:

Though much less prone to deny that they are growing older, Russians have a much narrower view of aging than we do in the West. [...] The fundamental idea, generally accepted in the West, of aging as a *lifelong* process, or, to turn it around, of life as a series of aging processes, is hard for Russians to grasp.³

These possible differences will not be factored into the analysis, which instead strives for a detailed description of the contradicting discourses that can be identified intratextually.

In his historical analysis of aging discourses, Gerd Göckenjan (2007) identifies four main types that date back to antiquity: first, he postulates (1) *praise* and (2) *admonishing* of old age as the conventional, diametrically opposed forms of discourse. While praise of old age is characterized by viewing the elderly as wise, experienced, venerable and virtuous, proponents of the admonishing sentiment see them as vicious, distrustful, cowardly, garrulous. In contrast, (3) *lament* and (4) *consolation* of old age constitute moderated discursive practices. As Göckenjan stresses, these types of discourse do not appear isolated from one another; on the contrary, they frequently co-occur, not only in global contexts such as societies but also in individual opinions and texts (2007: 128). *On Old Age* is no exception: Gercyk combines critical and pessimistic views of old age with idealistic, positive attitudes. It will be argued that in some passages of the sketch superficial praise is used to obscure the more critical view beneath it.

The following paragraphs will single out various aspects inherent in discourses of aging, showcasing how Gercyk's sketch addresses them. In doing so, they concentrate on the subtle discrepancies that unveil the complexity of the social construct that is (old) age.

DOES OLD AGE BRING SOCIAL AND PERSONAL RELIEF? WHO DECIDES WHO IS OLD?

One of the oft-postulated advantages of old age is the relief that is yielded by the difference in society's expectations of certain "age groups" (regardless of how these are defined): what is expected of an adult is not necessarily expected of an old person. While this might hold true, it in no way en-

3 Emphasis in original.

tails that *nothing* is expected of the elderly. Arguably a naïve oversimplification and common misconception, this is precisely the belief Gercyk instilled in her protagonist: in the sketch's first scene, she is absorbed in thought while looking down – both literally and metaphorically – on a seamstress who is kneeling in front of her, altering her skirt. Recognizably impatient, she equates what appear to be only a few minutes with infinity and is prompted to contemplate her own age. Still scrutinizing the seamstress's every move, she starts wondering which kinds of clothes she will be wearing in old age, leading her to the realization that – wardrobe being just one metonymical starting point for her thoughts throughout the sketch – old age will provide plenty of relief as growing old equals a simplification of life. As an old woman she will in fact possess only one blackish garment; when it is worn out, she will order the seamstress to sew an exact reproduction that she will not even need to try on – it will *simply* fit. Gramshammer-Hohl (2014: 133-134) points out that what the protagonist perceives as an alleviation of societal pressure is merely the implementation of a different norm as the elderly, too, are expected to dress and behave in a certain way: “She will always be dressed in black, and only on holidays will she be an old lady in light gray, dapper, good-looking, so she is nice for people to look at” (“И будет всегда чёрная, и только в праздничные дни светло-серая старушка, опрятная, благообразная, чтоб людям было приятно смотреть” [97]⁴). It is thus a new kind of socio-cultural expectation that the heroine is looking forward to, one that increasingly deindividualizes the elderly, seeing them as a bland mass branded by their stereotypically assumed “sameness”. In fact, the implications of the protagonist's thoughts are more far-reaching: she claims she will no longer stand in front of the mirror for hours; instead, she will dress in a particular way that she believes to be characteristic of old women, indeed even choosing the moment when she starts doing so. In other words, she herself will *choose* when – and if – she is old, staging herself as an “old lady in light gray” that is “nice to look at” (see Gramshammer-Hohl 2014: 240-241).

These external changes in clothing and general appearance echo developments of internal nature: as the contents of one's wardrobe are gradually simplified and rid of “youthful” colorful variation, the elderly mind is freed

4 The numbers given in parentheses refer to the corresponding pages of the text edition in Gercyk (1993: 97-101).

of unnecessary burdens as well. The protagonist characterizes her life – her thoughts and emotions – as chaotic, a weary trait that tires her but that will dissolve eventually, since old age brings with it “order, clarity, simplicity” (“порядок, ясность, простота” [97]). This is but the beginning of the protagonist’s affirmation of old age. In her eyes, it is the “liberation of everything unnecessary” (“освобождение от всего ненужного” [98]), which is why life “becomes happier, easier” (“Весело становится, проще” [99]), as is nowadays frequently postulated in discourses of aging (see Brooks 2014). Convinced of all the benefits of old age, the protagonist at one point even wishes her friend that she be old: “[...] and I genuinely wish you [old age; D.M.] as soon as possible” (“и я от души желаю тебе её [старость; Д.М.] как можно скорее” [98]). However, in the last scene of the sketch it becomes particularly evident that all the advantages previously listed are merely the protagonist’s subjective assumptions, probably even wishes of what old age might bring, for as she describes the old peasant woman, positive attributes are colored by negative connotations: order and humility thus become fossilization (*okamenelost’*) and ossification (“застыла её старческая душа” [101]) while the sought-after simplicity is viewed as oversimplification and, in effect, simplemindedness (*uproščennost’*) (see Gramshammer-Hohl 2014: 135).

OLD AGE AND DEATH

“And still, old age means dying” (“И все-таки старость есть умирание” [98]), counters the protagonist’s tired friend in the sketch’s key scene, addressing one of the most frightful common associations evoked by the idea of old age. The motif of mortality is exhaustively employed in *On Old Age*, as all forms of losses are – at least linguistically, considering Gercyk’s choice of words – interpreted as processes of dying.⁵ In the eyes of the pro-

5 The contextualization of Gercyk’s work within (mythopoetic) Russian symbolism could enrich an analysis of her literary approach to death. Although among symbolists, the theme of death “meant different things to different people” (Pyman 2006: 51), symbolism in general “stressed the new aestheticism and the truth of *dvoemirie* [a two-world system, D.M.], or the mythical correspondences between ‘this’ and the ‘other’ world” (Bethea 2012: 198, emphasis in original)

tagonist's ailing friend, the ability to suffer is not only gradually lost, it is *dying*: "The mind has become dull, I am getting old, the ability to suffer is dying" ("Душа притупилась, я старею, и умирает способность страдания" [98]). Even when not explicitly named, the idea of death is omnipresent in the friends' emotional dialogue: "the fire of life itself has *burned out*" ("догорел самый огонь жизни" [98]) and the most important moments in a person's life are "*fading like flowers*" ("как цветы, осыпаются" [99]). The notion of demise is deeply entrenched in the meaning of verbs such as "to burn out" (*dogoret*) and "to fade, wither" (*osypat'sja*). The process of aging is thus presented as a series of deaths. This resonates with Gercyk's choice to set the final scene in the fall, describing the scent of rotting leaves while the heroine comments that "heaven is near" ("небо близко" [101]).

The superficially optimistic protagonist – still stressing that "old age is blessed, natural, gentle" ("Старость – благословенна, естественна, кротка" [98]) – argues that it is certainly not the fundamental capacities of life that are dying, but only the negativity and self-centeredness that are stereotypically associated with youth: "Not the ability to feel and to live [is dying; D.M.], but living *like this*, feeling *like this* – greedily, tenaciously, only for oneself"⁶ ("Не чувствовать и жить, а так жить, так чувствовать – жадно, цепко, для себя" [98]). For Gercyk's lyrical heroine, the positive attitude toward aging appears irrefutable: when her friend mentions that traveling to Italy will be impossible in old age, she immediately devalues this dream of hers and focuses on its negative aspects, stating that with the relief and clarity of old age, "the haste of traveling *comes to an end* [literally translated: *goes out* like a fire]" ("погаснет горячка путешествий" [99]), again invoking a sense of fading of what was once most important. Even while seemingly agreeing that growing old requires certain sacrifices and that central aspects of her personality will in fact be *dying*, she refuses to view this as a downside: "Take the moment when you want to fall in

and served as a mediator between these worlds. Thus, it could be argued that this affinity to death affects symbolist depictions of old age, portraying it as a threshold to death. A closer investigation of this aspect does not fall within the scope of this paper but represents an interesting starting point for an analysis of motifs deployed in Gercyk's oeuvre.

6 Emphasis added [D.M.].

love, running out to the high school student under the moonlight for a date, or the ambition, or even the personal pain – all of that is dying away, not you!” (“Ну вот миг, когда хочется влюбленности, при луне выбежать к гимназисту на свидание, или честолюбие, или даже боль личная – это отмирает, а не ты!” [99]) This claim raises the question of what remains when all the moments and facets of our personality that once determined who we were are dead and gone. According to the heroine, “the love for the refined disappears, you start to value the simplest things: compassion, for example, more than wit, the simplest form of compassion, for the people, for the children...” (“Отпадает любовь к изощренному, начинаешь ценить самые простые вещи: жалость, например, больше, чем остроумие, самую простую жалость, как у народа, как у детей...” [99]). Despite her consistent idealization of old age, the protagonist displays unrest over the issue, which is evident when she begins her description of old age by defensively defining it *ex negativo*: “Old age is not stupor” (“Старость не тупость” [98]). Her strong need to advocate old age as a desirable stage of life and her inability to accept and even tolerate her friend’s contrary opinion indicate that she is attempting to convince herself of the joys of aging, possibly by lying to herself.

(OLD) AGE AS A SOCIAL CATEGORY

Even if old age is a stage of life some people yearn for, its imagined “starting point” – often and stereotypically pinned to a specific “milestone birthday,” such as the sixtieth, seventieth or eightieth, or the moment of retirement – is flexible and frequently delayed relative to a person’s current age (and likely their level of anxiety over aging). “Old” appears to be mainly an attribute used to define other people, not ourselves, so the thought of oneself passing the threshold of old age is repelled: “Only a few years – ten, rather fifteen, and I will grow old” (“Ещё несколько лет – десять, ну пятнадцать, и я состарюсь” [97]) thinks the protagonist, correcting herself in the process: while old age is certainly near, it is not *as* near as she had initially assumed. The innocent-looking word “rather” (a rough contextual translation of the Russian particle *nu*) followed by an overwriting of her initial estimation exposes the protagonist’s hesitation and insecurity concerning this issue. She not only redefines her idea of old age, but also her self-

image, realizing she might be younger than she had previously thought (see Gramshammer-Hohl 2014: 134-135). Even though she is looking forward to being old, there is a sense of relief that while joys of old age that lie in the future are undeniable, they in no way apply to her yet, as evidenced by the final words she uses to describe the emotional argument with her dissenting friend: “[we are] happy that for us, this clarity and simplicity of old age have not yet completely begun” (“радуясь, что для нас ещё не совсем наступила эта ясность и простота старости” [99]). Again, by commenting with “not yet completely,” old age – even though it offers attractive benefits – is defined as something that has not yet been reached. An idealization, it seems, is possible only from a distance.

“How do I come to know, when I am alone, that [old age] has begun?” (“Как узнаю я, когда я одна, что она [старость] наступила?” [101]) is the protagonist’s central question at the end of the sketch. To understand one’s own age without referring to that of others would indeed be impossible, for age is a fundamentally social phenomenon dependent on comparison, only constituting a category because there are different ages along a spectrum that allow for (dis)identification. It exists, as the heroine observes, only for us humans: “Only among people do we have this notion of old age” (“Только среди людей есть это понятие – старость” [101]). This human mechanism of defining (aspects of) one’s own identity on the basis of others is known as “othering” (see de Beauvoir 1949; Brons 2015; Tajfel 1981). Gercyk’s heroine in *On Old Age* compares herself not only to the old peasant woman – who, in a way, is the embodiment of old age – from the sketch’s third and final scene, but also to her ailing friend, for whom she feels deep sympathy (see Gavriljuk 2002: 59). They are “others,” instrumentalized as a tool for differentiation – from the protagonist’s perspective, they are (or might be) old, reassuring her that she is not.

There are diverging opinions concerning the question of cultural aging, with proponents of the social constructionist view claiming that (old) age is purely a social and cultural phenomenon and opponents arguing that changes in appearance and bodily functions “cannot be eliminated by any cultural change, no matter how significant” (Holstein et al. 2011: 50). However, as Calasanti (2005: 9) notes, recent scholarship “works to overcome [these] dualities [...], emphasizing bodies as simultaneously material *and* con-

structed.”⁷ Gercyk also seems to position herself somewhere in the middle: while she accepts that our bodies do inevitably age (see below), she realizes that the ways in which this aging process is perceived and dealt with – in the form of predominant discourses – is a fundamentally social matter.

At this point it should be noted that Gercyk strikingly posed this question – what is old age, what does it look and feel like? – again elsewhere. In her poem “If This Is Old Age...” (“Ešli éto starost’...”, 1925), written in the year of her death, a genderless speaker notices how he or she undergoes a change and doubts whether it can be ascribed to old age. This uncertainty stems at least partly from the fact that the transition is perceived as being largely beneficial, a quality not commonly attributed to aging. If this state is indeed old age, as the speaker hypothesizes in the first and final verses, he or she will gladly “accept” it (see Gramshammer-Hohl 2014: 130). Here, Gercyk suggests not only that the concept of age is unseizable and defies explicit definitions, but also that because discourses of aging are predominantly negative, focused on the notion of loss and deficit, society often shies away from associating old age with any possible benefits.

THE YOUNG MIND IN THE OLD BODY

Is it only our body that makes us old? Indeed, all of the positive aspects of old age mentioned by the protagonist throughout the sketch – clarity, relief, order, simplicity, purity, riddance of the unnecessary – exclusively refer to the spheres of the mind: the mental, emotional, intellectual. However, while the external effects of aging are not addressed directly, the narrator obviously still perceives them: in describing the appearance of the women she encounters, she confines herself almost exclusively to signs of old age as opposed to non-age-related traits. When, in the sketch’s third scene, she first spots the peasant woman from afar, she describes her as a “little, wrapped [in a headscarf; D.M.] old woman” (“маленькая, обвязанная старушенка” [99]). “Old” is clearly the most central attribute, as is evidenced by the use of the word *starušenka* in the Russian original: a diminutive form of *starucha* (“old woman”), which in turn is a derivation of the adjective *staryj* (“old”), it not only adds the meaning of “old” to “(female)

7 Emphasis in the original.

person,” but instead incorporates and even highlights it. In other words: by referring to the woman she sees as *starušenka*, the protagonist *reduces* her to nothing more than an old woman, even if the use of the diminutive might indicate it is intended as a term of endearment. As a direct consequence of this immediate social categorization, stereotypes and expectations are automatically activated. But as the protagonist is approached by this peasant woman, she realizes that her initial expectations are not met. And yet, her subjectively positive characterization is rich in attributes typically used to describe persons of old age:

Not as miserable as she appeared to me from a distance, even tough and decent in her fossilization, with deep wrinkles on her gray, bloodless face, neatly wrapped, stately holding her arm beneath a thick headscarf tied to her shoulders. Haggard, with fatigue and sorrow in her face, but a bright, tidy, honest old woman.

(Не такая жалкая, как мне казалась издали, даже строгая и чинная в своей старческой окаменелости, с глубокими морщинами на сером, бескровном лице, опрятно обвязанная, степенно держащая руки под толстым платком, надетом на плечи. Худая, с усталостью и заботой в лице, но ясная, чистая, честная старуха. [99-100])

In this passage, the protagonist contrasts the signs of bodily decay with desirable character traits, ending her description on an overly positive note that resonates with her previous observations about the advantages of growing old. In fact, it appears that she reckons old age means well by the mind, but not the body. In one of her final observations, the heroine claims that her “mind was growing younger and lighter in a body that was making [her] old” (“молодела, легчала душа в старюшем теле” [101]). This statement is telling for various reasons: by using the Russian present active participle *starjuščij*, literally “making old,” and assigning it to the body as an active executor, it is implied that we are passive and powerless prisoners of our bodies in the face of aging. It is the exterior that makes us (appear) old as “the outward signs of aging discount the person displaying those signs” (Holstein et al. 2011: 49). Our bodies, then, divorced from our minds, are “social texts” that are culturally shaped and given meaning (see Twigg 2004). They reveal not only to others whether we are old, but also to ourselves; they thus tell us how to feel about ourselves, how to see our-

selves, which is what Bryan Turner (1995) termed the *somatization* of the self. Gercyk plays with this deceptive power of the body when she introduces the protagonist's friend from the key scene by painting a detailed picture of her appearance that is loaded with stereotypes:

She lies there as if she had been thrown to the shore by a storm – weak and motionless. I examine the sorrowful wrinkles on her forehead, the bleak, lifeless skin, the hanging, feeble hand.

(Она лежит будто выброшенная бурей на берег – изнеможенная и недвижная. Смотрю на страдальческие складки на лбу, на бледную безжизненную кожу, на свесившуюся, слабую руку. [98])

It is revealed only a few lines later that her friend is in fact not old, whereby presumably at least some of the readers' established assumptions are contradicted.

In light of her earlier evaluations of old age, the heroine's closing statement that her mind was growing *younger* represents perhaps the sketch's most significant contradiction. Here, all the positive attributes she originally assigned to old age are negated as they are suddenly associated with *becoming young(er)* and *youth*; furthermore, the "growing younger" of the mind is in stark opposition with the "making old" of the body, thereby exposing the protagonist's true feelings toward old age.

THE FEMINIZATION OF OLD AGE

One final question that concerns the overall composition of the sketch shall not be neglected: is aging a female concern? Is it a "social convention that enhances a man but progressively destroys a woman," as Susan Sontag (1972: 29) radically phrased in her seminal article "The Double Standard of Aging"? Gercyk's sketch neither provides an answer, nor does it seem to even approach this major question, at least not explicitly. It is striking, however, that not only the protagonist, but also all of the other characters appearing in *On Old Age* are female. With the overall minimalistic secondary characters – the seamstress, the ailing friend, and the old peasant woman – Gercyk provides the protagonist with one female counterpart in each

scene who offers new impulses. It is undeniably a conscious artistic choice to discuss old age from an exclusively feminine perspective, thereby overlapping two markers of social identity: gender and age. It could be argued that Gercyk reflected critically on intersectionality long before this concept appeared in feminist theory. Without running the risk of overinterpreting Gercyk's decision, one can assume *On Old Age* would have looked considerably different had the protagonist and the supporting characters been male. Would old age even have been an issue then? Interestingly enough, in her later poem "If This Is Old Age...", Gercyk chose to employ a speaker not marked for gender whose observations could thus be meant to depict a more universal examination of old age. In any case, a broad and thorough analysis of Gercyk's works would be necessary to determine which roles genders occupy in them.

CONCLUSION

As the protagonist praises the myriad benefits of old age, her attitude toward it appears exclusively positive. That is, until she not only repeatedly positions herself as "nonold" and thus lets her fear of aging – a concept she claims is strange to her – shine through, but also reassigns the positive characteristics she first ascribed to old age to its polar opposite: *becoming younger*. In the introduction, the question was posed if people – as the heroine claims – really are afraid of old age. "The results show that for many the answer is yes," (Brunton/Scott 2015: 798) reads the conclusion of a recent psychological study about aging anxiety. The causes of this fear are numerous and manifold, as are the ways in which it manifests. Gercyk's protagonist in *On Old Age* chooses to idealize old age, a stage of life that she feels has not yet begun for her. As she paints a desirable imagined picture of her future self that does not end up corresponding with the reality of old age that she encounters, it emerges that her extenuation of aging is an expression of her fear, though possibly not even the fear of old age itself, but the fear of being afraid of old age (see Hoppe/Wulf 2000: 399). When mentioning the fear of old age, thereby admitting its existence, Gercyk's protagonist clearly distances herself from it, as is subtly visualized by the fact that it is enclosed in quotation marks: "I say that it [life; D.M.] will be lighter because at least there will be no 'fear of old age' that is poisoning

our feelings, keeping them under guard” (“Говорю, как будет легко уж оттого, что не станет ‘страха старости’ этого отравляющего, стерегущего нас чувства” [99]). By claiming that *then* there will be no fear, she possibly insinuates that this “poisonous” feeling is all too common to her and that it ends only when the object of fear – old age – is reached and experienced first-hand.

As has been pointed out, the discourses of aging have always been contradictory, and the dynamics created by the co-existence of opposing discursive strategies – praise and admonishing of old age being the most prominent ones – demand and thus introduce a great variety of ways to deal with this issue. What the little-known Russian writer Adelaida Gercyk accomplished in her sketch *On Old Age* is a subtle balancing act, a critical examination of the diverse ideas, emotions (with the focus on fear), and stereotypes inherent in discourses of aging. To think one could reduce the endless variations in experiencing old age to one universal definition would be oversimplifying the issue, as Gercyk realized. For exactly this reason, discourses of aging necessarily have to be contradictory, as they mirror quite different fantasies and realities of old age.

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