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Essay by Charlotte Van den Broeck

About oranges and humanity

Dearest Arnon,

A couple of years ago, at the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, I saw a little boy holding an orange and everything in me wanted to take care of him. The boy made of lines, oil paint and shadows, is seated on a wooden box, elevated with a burlap sack and looks, somewhat frightened, out of the canvas. The roughly woven pillow seems to prick his buttocks and the way he presses his pointy knees together reveals that he has something to endure. Perhaps being watched by his portraitist, Norah Neilson Gray (1882-1931), and the swelling self-consciousness that comes with it, is the reason for his discomfort. Perhaps a greater terror haunts him. Difficult to figure out where in himself he wanders during the obligatory seated session. Undoubtedly, he is a lovely little boy with a potted haircut, a vanilla yellow dress, patent leather shoes and a tender bag of yellow socks around his ankles. Yet it was not his appearance that evoked the aforementioned sense of pity, but rather the way in which he holds the orange, in his hands: receptive, and then, as if trying to keep himself whole before the gaze of the beholder, his right thumb nervously pressing into the skin.

It is usually the details that unmask, that make you fall in love too. I am thinking of one of your characters, Geniek Janowski, the patient firefighter from Heerlen in your novel *Good Men*. He falls in love with the half-crooked front teeth of a complete stranger – a moment of grace, because otherwise you pour quite a lot of misery on him in the book. Geniek is haunted by death, loses his infant son horribly to suicide, undergoes a transformative experience in a hen house, and is abandoned by his wife, who sees him as a pitiful dutch. After the divorce, he obediently follows her paternalising advice to “keep on fucking” by responding to a personal ad in the supermarket. In a newly purchased jacket and drowsy floral shirt, Geniek meekly sets out, like a kind of sad Pierrot messiah of the single men, on an organised internship that promises him a partner in Kiev. In the brochure, participants are advised to bring a souvenir from the region they come from. Geniek orders three Limburg pies (cherries, apricot and apple) from the best bakery in Heerlen, so that his future lover can already get to know the place he will have her fly over to.

I also wanted to take care of the patient firefighter with three drying Limburg pies in Kiev. Admittedly, he made me laugh at him more often.

Phenomenologist Henri Bergson (1859-1941) defines the comic character in 'Laughter', his study of humour, as follows:

“A comic character is comic to the extent that it does not know itself. Unconsciously, that is, invisible to oneself, but painfully visible to everyone else.”

People who don't know themselves make people laugh. You may wonder to what extent someone knows themselves – and consequently everyone is inevitably laughable – but I find it somewhat comforting that in the lack of self-knowledge we can at least please others. If all goes well, we can also count on some compassion. Perhaps that is a generous form of humanity. Sacrifice yourself for the laugh of the other. I've heard you say that in any case it doesn't help to take yourself, or the other person, too seriously.

I admire you for that nimble capacity for humanity. No matter how abject, threatening, sharp, vulnerable, touching or loving it may be in your writing in time, I feel that you always put the people in your work, around you, and your readers first and foremost in relation to that concept. Relating yourself to others is more interesting than judging. Literature par excellence can create that space and, at least I hope so, preserve it.

After all, according to philosopher Mikhail Bahktin (1895-1975), language is what, for the individual consciousness, is located on the border between itself and the other. I understand it like this:

I say, for example, 'orange' and with the sounds that build the word, I form the indication of a fruit in concrete reality. In saying there is the word and the fruit, the relationship of meaning, but, implicitly, also roughly my thoughts on the many ways of peeling. Brutally, fingernail in the skin, pulling out the cuts in all directions. Neurotic, making a start – focus – because the skin must be removed from the whole of the fruit without interruption. Neatly, with a knife, in four halves. I say 'orange' and I also say the pungent smell of its juice, which sometimes, hours after washing your hands, you can still smell on your fingers. I say the blue plastic bowl in the shape of a clown's head in which I was served my fruit as a child. I say the restless periods, when I bravely ate a daily serving of oranges, because I read somewhere that it would lower your cortisol level. I say the little boy with the oranges on the canvas at the Kelvingrove in Glasgow.

Although all these fanned-out private experiences, sensations and memories do not consciously surface when I say 'orange', they cover the meaning. “After all, the speaker,” says Bahktin, “populates the word with their own intention, their own accent, as they appropriate the word and adapt it to their own semantic and expressive meaning.”

How can the other then ever, exactly or roughly, understand what I mean? How can the word bridge the border in that case? Doesn't the language with which I want to interact keep the other person at a distance?

It could be the solitary inference of Bahktin's thesis, were it not for the fact that he is convinced that we need the other in the process of meaning just as much:

“The word in the language is half of the other.”



I say 'orange' and thereby appeal to your consciousness that the word receives, knows, remembers, colours, or is strange. In fact, I need your awareness to arrive at the meaning of orange. In addition, we jointly appeal to all oranges around the world and, diachronically, since the first fruit bore the name.

Somewhere in that wide, shared field of meaning we find each other, one and the other enter into a conversation. The assumption that together we have an equal share in the meaning of the word 'orange' presupposes a partnership, a relationship of dependence, a proof of humanity.

In his work 'The dialogic imagination', from which I pick these ideas, Bakhtin puts the conversation with the other first. Meaning is not given, but always arises in interaction – in negotiation if you will – with the other, the reader, the writer, the text.

If there's one writer around who's always willing to engage in conversation, dear Arnon, it's you. Annoyingly curious occasionally, but also with a disinterested open mind. A courageous writer is perhaps one who recognises their dependence on the other, or on their subject, and thus situates the work to be completed in the convergence of imaginations.

Norah Neilson Gray portrayed the boy with the oranges after a shift of her gaze. Early in her career she was a member of the Glasgow Girls, an Art Nouveau group of female artists in the early 20th century. After World War I, Gray abandoned the precepts of that movement and devoted herself to portraiture. Her experiences as a nurse in a field hospital in Liège had exchanged her interest in symbols and lines for a search for the 'essence' of the people – often women and children – she painted. That 'essence' lay in her emphasis on the hidden inner world of her subjects, in the conjecture, but also in her views on colour. At St. Columba's School for Girls in the Scottish village of Kilmacolm, where Gray taught, she was nicknamed 'the Purple Spot' because she was adamant that you could see colours in the shadows if you looked hard enough.

Anyone who only sees darkness has not looked well enough, you know that better than anyone. Making spots. With compassion. And never taking yourself too seriously. Some of Bakhtin's ideas would have been lost, though, because he tore paper from his notebook to roll cigarettes with.

Congratulations on winning the Johannes Vermeer Award, dear Arnon.

Love,

Charlotte Van den Broeck