

**Laude for György Konrád
on the occasion of his 75th Birthday**

By Job Cohen, Mayor of Amsterdam

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Contemporary academic literary criticism has it, that a novel eventually is no more than ‘a world in words’ – just like a painting is nothing else than the material it consists of. The actual book, that view holds, is offered to the reader as a puzzle of random prejudices and private impressions, moulded by a mind that in itself was formed by an immeasurable set of influences. The writer as a unique personality, with strong personal views, the writer as a genius, if you like, is dead. The artist is a craftsman – and the only value the artefacts he made possess, lay in their utility for the user. The reader, ultimately, sits down with a collection of words and sentences, screaming to be deconstructed into the preliminary and non-personal conditions that have helped determining them – into what according to the latest fashion are no more than ‘representations’.

It is a strange vision, wildly unfamiliar to the devoted reader. In its deliberate presentation of the book as an object, without aesthetic, moral or humane dimensions, it is cynically propagating the ultimate hollowness of the literary endeavour to engage with private emotions and public questions. It does, in its clinical pose of detachedness and unbiased disengagement, remind me strongly of contemporary public discourse.

Just like no one in his right mind ever would take the trouble to visit an art gallery in order to check up with the latest developments in paint and canvas, no serious reader would, even in his worst tired and sarcastic mood, would consider the novel he just picked up, as a fresh invitation to enter a world of words. By the end of the day, that is a silly and dangerously snobbish idea. An open and critical mind is not synonymous to a disengaged mind: on the contrary.

There is, notwithstanding the pretension of contemporary criticism, so much more to the novel and its author than analysis alone can disclose. Why, for instance, is there such a close relationship discernible between the rise of the novel during the last three centuries and the growth of the city into a metropolis?. Ever since the early nineteenth century, there has been a lucid and intimate relationship between the development of the modern novel and the city. If we follow the path of the novel from Balzac and Flaubert, via Joyce and Döblin, to the novel as it is profusely written and read widely nowadays, we easily note the intriguing relationship between literary imagination and urban experience.

The novel is the response to that experience. A multitude of impressions, of insecurities and curiosities, calls to be ordered into a sensible and tolerable idea. The modern novel introduces both the intimate voice of the city dweller and the polyphony of the many voices he hears, it is the novelists attempt to come to terms with the heterogeneous and multiform experience of metropolitan life. Novelists know that, readers know that – and in case they forgot, there is always Walter Benjamin to remind them. The contemporary novelist is a city dweller, a ‘flaneur’ walking the quays as much as the boulevards, the alley ways as intensely and lovingly as the tree lined lanes.

But he is no camera. He is no journalist or photographer pretending to register what he sees as objectively as he can. What makes him a writer is his intense and emotional relationship with what he sees and experiences. And therein, one always finds a moral dimension – it is the dimension of engagement, far away from any vulgar sort of programmatic thought. The writer is a personality, intensely present in his writing.

True readers know this, the many readers you have in this country, in this city, Mr Konrád, know it. They need the intimate and solitary experience of reading to come to terms both with their private lives and their social ideas. The writer’s imagination is an acute invitation to enter the minds and moods of other people. It is a lucid and slightly pushy reminder to open one’s mind. Reading and writing both are done alone, in solitude, but they both permanently confront us with the social character of our lives. Literature, in other words, has a strongly moralistic dimension – of course without ever being petty or pedantic.

‘There is no object of art more beautiful than the big city,’ Mr Kalligaro, the narrator of your novel known here as *Het Verdriet van de Hanen*, reflects. Indeed, it is – and that ought to remind us. In all your novels urban life has a prominent part to play. Most of them are set in cities. In your recent work the narrator is the hardly disguised alter ego of the writer. He is a walker in the city, just like yourself. He is an observer, lingering on terraces or in cafés, preferring the coffee house often to his study or studio, embracing the arbitrary meeting and impressions of the street and the square to the sole obsessions of the inner eye. He is a social being, an open mind flourishing from its own openness.

But not disinvolved, not unconcerned, not without a permanent awareness of the fragility of what he considers to be good and beautiful.

‘The opposite of concentration may be defined as carelessness, sloppiness and egotism,’ Mr Kalligaro notes.

In your brief booklet on Amsterdam, written a decade ago, you painted a picture of this city that I recognize and love deeply – as many of us do. It is a city of easy going people, living together in relative peace, with no more than superficial worries about their future or their fellow citizens. It is an ode to Amsterdam: it sings her praises as an open, a tolerant city, a city in which people pay each other ‘mutual respect’, a city in which ‘freedom of religion and consumer freedom are each other’s presupposition.’

That was not easy praise, written in the tourist’s vein. ‘I don’t blame the citizens of Amsterdam to be angels’, you wrote, ‘but I know pretty many cities whose inhabitants are far more big mouthed and less civilized.’ And: ‘it is a city of manifold beauty, striking the eye by their moderation.’ ‘My eyes are enjoying the richness of human colours, many more than I can perceive in Budapest or Berlin.’

That impression would nowadays be considered by some as weirdly short-sighted, as the expression of a false ideal rather than an existing reality. How could you be so dramatically deluded, how could an ordinarily penetrating observer and sharp witted writer fall into what is nowadays so often considered as a propagandistic idea of weak willed people.

Or were you not?

Amsterdam and its citizens got involved into a mood that is much wider than this city alone – and they have paid their due. It is a preoccupation often presented as a state of insecurity and of fragmentation, of rapidly changing dimensions in the relationships between people among themselves and their relationship with their city. The ideal of mutual tolerance was aggressively demolished as a disguise for harsh indifference, the openness of its culture as the facile space its elite created for itself. A number of dramatic or dramatised events demonstrated a deep insecurity. I consider that as a moral insecurity, the confusion of ‘citizens’ that became ‘inhabitants’ since their idea of citizenship disclosed a lack of maintenance. In its disengagement it resembles the idea that a novel is ‘a world in words’ alone.

It is here that your work comes to remind us: we should read your pages on Amsterdam within the context of your other work. The walker in the city may walk with a pencil and notebook alone, back in his hotel-room or in the bookshops he passes we can find his magnificent and rich oeuvre contained in many volumes. That work evolved from the meticulously constructed fables you wrote in the heyday of communist dictatorship in Hungary, into the calm reports of ordinary life, the thoughts and impressions a reflecting observer painstakingly wants to share with his readers. In them, the novelist

almost seems to become a chronicle writer, the historian of daily life – as a writer, a father, a husband, a friend, and as a citizen.

His sensibility resembles a seismograph, but with none of the unproblematic objectivity of such a scientific instrument. The difference lies in the memory, the remembrance of things past that is so uninterruptedly present in your writing. Not only are these your private memories of the dramatic and tragic experiences of the twentieth century, the Holocaust and communism, on a deeper level there is the alert awareness of the fragility of the present. Your work is a permanent reminder of how vulnerable the goodness, justness and beauty of a really civil society are. Here is a pen moving on paper in order to remind us, not by preaching parsimoniously, but by carefully showing detail and perspective.

‘There is no object of art more beautiful than the big city’. But many of the words and expressions in which we used to reflect on that beauty, vulnerable as any work of art and needing the same careful maintenance, have become hollow. Abuse and confrontation have disclosed their emptiness.

Can we do without them?

Tolerance and openness, of a society as much as of its citizens, need in themselves not to be considered as manifestations of indifference or egotism. They are often the outcome of carefully kept values and maintained relationships. But given the conceptual confusion, it is here that we need assistance - the help of creative minds, engaged imaginations and, ultimately, grand examples. If citizenship is both a necessity and an ideal, we should point out the examples amongst living citizens, of complex forms of engagement and responsibility.

‘Outstandingness’ is not in the eye of the beholder alone, and neither is good citizenship: it is a reality. It is here that literature, literary imagination, comes to help to public life. The walker in the city reminds us of what we may lose by demonstrating us the perspective of the present in his books. When political words become hollow, when public discourse hardens itself because of the perceived emptiness of long kept ideals, literary imagination is the instrument to re-open our minds and redefine our values.

I can not give you any other tribute, Mr Konrad, than one in words – which, however appropriate to the writer you are, always is shallow compared to the importance we attach to your work. I therefore shall but give, but ask: stay in our midst, keep reminding us.

We desperately need you.

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