

On Rationalizing and Oranges

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Every now and then, I have an out-of-mind experience. I start thinking about the big questions, the ones about time, life, eternity, the span of the universe. I think about my own life. I wonder if all existence only exists because I exist. I force my mind into the terrifying region of the inexplicable. If I think hard enough, I can reach the end of my own understanding.

It's like the best moment of a rollercoaster ride. When I'm right at the peak, about to topple over the edge, there's that fierce instant of panic and irrationality. The ride seems to disappear beneath me. For that split second, I am free falling, at the mercy of my own imagination.

If my mind strays too far into the unknown, I can simulate the same sensation. I topple right off the edge of my reason. I panic when I approach a concept beyond the scope of my understanding. When you breach this boundary, there is a bodily response that resembles one's stomach jumping at the top of a coaster. It's like the tiny moment between sleep and wakefulness when you are still falling.

It's a difficult terrain to navigate, the place in our psyches where reason and understanding dissolve, because to the logical mind, the absence of reason is the presence of chaos. Yet we have a strange habit of pursuing that boundary, a passion for discovering those moments of exhilaration and freedom that come with experiencing something beyond the confines of rational thought.

The writer Judy Ruiz is a great navigator of that boundary between rationality and chaos. In "Oranges and Sweet Sister Boy," she weaves a series of seemingly unrelated anecdotes, memories, reflections and metaphors into an essay primarily focused on her reaction to her brother's decision to undergo a sex-change operation. These elements of the essay are so immediately dissimilar that an initial reading leaves the reader confused and frustrated. The essay is so thick with mixed meanings, ambiguities, and latent metaphors that the act of *understanding* the narration becomes one of its major themes.

Upon first hearing from her brother about his sex change, Ruiz writes that “knowing how sometimes dreams get mixed up with not dreams, I decide to do a reality test at once” (226). In this notion of dreams tangling with “not dreams,” she immediately identifies a tension between the rational and the irrational, setting a precedent for the ambiguity in her perception of the two concepts that informs the essay. But other dualities collide; concepts appear in conversation with their opposites: real and unreal, crazy and sane, male and female.

The first person narrative voice, certainly Ruiz herself, is sometimes lyrical and graceful, at other times lavish and surreal. There are abrupt shifts where the writing becomes clear and straightforward, factual and analytical: “There is a pattern to this thought as there is a pattern to a jumpsuit. Sew the sleeve to the leg, sew the leg to the collar. Put the garment on. Sew the mouth shut. This is how I tell about being quiet because I am bad, and because I cannot stand it when he beats me or my brother” (228). Ruiz makes no effort to separate the literal from the figurative, and the narrative styles clash. In these places of collision, Ruiz writes about oranges. Here, her writing is factual and surreal at the same time, rendering it more or less absurd. It’s a literary grey area, where the real and the unreal meet to provoke us.

As readers, we have trouble understanding Ruiz’s writing because of a language of reason that would have us negate the innate contradictions, write them off as nonsense. After all, what sense can be made of something that combines the real with the surreal? Reason conflicts with ambiguity; something is either reality or fantasy, male or female, order or chaos, and must be identified as such. Or so we tend to believe.

But as Ruiz makes clear in her essay, much of real life defies this simplistic, boundary-driven logic. Her brother, for example, is a man who becomes a woman, and Ruiz herself, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, is also at least two people at once. The world she paints with the words of her essay exists in a state of surreal reality, the ultimate duality. It is terrifying because it is illogical; it makes us nervous because we as readers don’t know how to explain it. In an exploration of Ruiz’s essay, one principal question emerges: in a world full of innate contradictions, ambiguities and anomalies, how can we resolve the dispute between our rational brains and the *irrational* realities of life?

At its core, I see Ruiz’s essay as a discussion of “understanding how to understand,” a concept described by Matthew Goulish in his essay “Criticism.” Goulish writes in “2.3 The Example of Rain,” that “we understand something by approaching it,” and that “we approach it using our ears, our noses, our intellects, our imaginations. We approach it with silence. We

approach it with Childhood” (558). To really *know* something, we have to look at it wide-eyed, from every perspective. To understand her brother’s sex change, Ruiz steps out of the literal and examines it from multiple vantage points. She writes about her family’s history of sexual identity problems, she discusses her abusive father’s influence on her brother’s sexual development, but she also alludes to her own dark history of mental illness; she talks about cows, she talks about oranges, she talks about her father’s testicular cancer, she talks about Texas, she talks about androgyny and balance, the yin and the yang. If we look at Ruiz’s essay through the critical lens of “intellect” alone, if we analyze it using only logic and reason, we won’t get the full picture.

In any attempt to reach a state of knowing, liberating the mind is crucial. If we come into an analysis with only preconceived standards, boundaries and distinctions, we cannot understand a thing for what it is; we understand it in the context of our own pre-constructed system. We must allow Ruiz’s brother’s sex change to have a connection to cows, oranges, the yin and the yang. This open-minded notion may seem a little bizarre, but Goulish writes that critical thought, in the service of understanding, is allowed to be absurd. Goulish writes of essayist Thomas Merton, “And thus he liberated his critical mind to follow whatever might cross its path” (559). In other words, the writer freed his mind from the boundaries of critical, intellectual thought to understand concepts that were beyond logic and rationality. Ruiz herself tells us that rationality only gets us so far.

She writes that the rational force driving the brain is language. She cites an article by John Money, who performed the first sex-change operation in the USA in 1965. Money describes languages as “logical, coherent systems” yet “extremely variable”; he writes that “the same brain that thinks in words and symbols is also a brain that has to be freed up with regard to sexual turn-on and partnering. . . . The brain doesn’t seem incredibly efficient with regard to sex” (qtd. in Ruiz 228). Ruiz suggests that the fact that language is the *rational force* driving the brain also makes it a limiting force. The mind is in fact “language-bound,” unable easily to understand concepts not based in logic and reason (Ruiz 228).

The body, as Ruiz explains, is less rational. In reference to her brother’s sexual identity crisis, she writes, “Sex is of the body. It has no words” (228). Because of this fundamental difference, the language and reason of the mind clash with the physical impulse and sexuality of the body, putting the two elements of the self in conflict with each other. Ruiz’s brother’s sex change is a bodily manifestation of his inability to reconcile these two elements of the self. It is a step *towards* rationality, a rejection of a troubling duality. He can-

not label himself as both male and female, so he physically alters himself. He castrates himself to rationalize his feminine inclinations.

For Ruiz, this idea of freeing up the brain expressed by Money, a loosening of one's ties to rational, symbolic logic, is an attempt to bridge the gap between the mind and the body, to reconcile the differences between the two without eradicating their simultaneous presence (in Ruiz 228). Instead of understanding duality by denying its existence, we must understand it by accepting the absurdity of what culture has taught us to see as an innate contradiction.

Well, easier said than done. This notion of understanding by liberating our minds from the boundaries of logic and reason is certainly very poetic, but it is not an easy endeavor for a culture so fundamentally based on those very concepts. Words are the language of reason, and to gain understanding from a rhetoric that employs the use of contradictions and the absurd as tools of explanation seems impossible. But we must remember that logic and reason are merely conventions of our society, no different from heterosexuality. And just because something is conventional does not mean it's the only way, or even the best way.

In fact, by accepting the apparent absurdities and liberating our brains to accommodate them, we can understand a great deal *more* of Ruiz's essay. She writes, "I will tell [my brother] there's no perfect rhyme for the word 'orange,' and that if we can just make up a good word we can be immortal. We will become obsessed with finding the right word, and I will be joyous in our legitimate pursuit" (231). We understand what Ruiz means without really making sense of her words. The orange she describes becomes a metaphor for a level of understanding we cannot articulate, and finding a rational way to describe with words that level of understanding is as impossible as finding a rhyme for the word "orange." Perhaps Ruiz's joy is the exhilaration that comes from that out-of-mind experience, that moment like the one at the peak of a rollercoaster, on the edge of an understanding that you can actually feel more than you can explain. There is only a vague indication of this idea in Ruiz's words themselves, but on an instinctive level we sense their meaning.

If we read those words entirely for their literal meaning, they seem nonsensical. But we can comprehend more of her essay than we can translate directly. Her writing functions on the *instinctual* level; we understand it before we realize we understand it. However, as soon as we try to backtrack, try to understand *what* exactly we understood, the knowledge is lost in our attempts to rationalize it or to ascribe literal meaning to her words. We begin to feel a

bit crazy ourselves. It makes the reader question certain preconceived notions. If an alleged crazy person can write such a complex essay with such intention and grace, what does that say about the nature and extent of insanity? Can sane thought be a product of insane thought? Is that rational?

What we must come to realize through reading “Oranges and Sweet Sister Boy” is that, in addition to rational thought, there also exists a wordless, intuitive understanding that sees what the “language-bound” brain cannot (228). There is a latent understanding of life and reality inherent in Ruiz’s writing that she cannot express explicitly. But her language triggers an emotional response; it works on a different level than logical thought. It is a process that, as Ruiz puts beautifully, “makes the leap of mind the metaphor attempts” (229).

In her poem “First Chaldaic Oracle” Anne Carson writes that the best way to “know a thing” (7) is by “a cherrying of your mind” (3). *Cherrying* is not a real word, but by means of the very type of instinctual understanding the term describes, we understand “a cherrying of your mind” to be the kind of mental liberation Goulish discusses in “Criticism.” Carson’s poem continues:

if you press your mind towards it
and try to know
that thing
as you know a thing,
you will not know it. (4-8)

That is to say, if you force reasoning upon something, you will not understand it. Instead, we must “prague the eye of our soul” (24-25) and reach “mind empty” (26) towards the thing we are trying to understand. Carson’s poem validates our gut instincts, urges us to see that to know something is to look at it for what it is, without any preconceived notions of real or unreal, crazy or sane. She encourages us to veer away from rationality toward intuition.

In Ruiz’s essay, in order to understand the oranges, we must “prague the eye” of our souls (Carson 24). Ruiz writes that in an effort to help her brother, she will tell him to “begin with an orange,” which she describes as a fruit that is “mildly intrusive by nature” (226). She pushes us to read between the lines, to leap with the metaphor. In her reflections on oranges, Ruiz describes a woman she once saw biting into an orange like one would an apple. In another scene she describes herself peeling an orange, ripping off the pieces

of peel in messy chunks. Later, she describes her children sucking the nectar out of a hole she punctured in an orange with her fingernail.

The obvious message here is that there is *more* than one way to eat an orange. But of more importance, there isn't a right way and a wrong way to go about it, even though we may tend to believe there might be. It is rare that we find completely one-dimensional concepts in our lives; here is the truth in Goulish's words—things can always be approached from more than one perspective. What Ruiz's essay brings to Goulish's idea is a discussion of the social pressure to conform to conventions, conventions of sexuality, of sanity, but especially conventions of understanding. Even an act as simple as peeling an orange can be complex and varying, and the way each person eats the orange differently becomes a metaphor for how each person might *understand* the "orange" differently.

The process of understanding "the orange" makes one think about the literal act of eating an orange; it *is* an intrusive process, no matter how you go about it. It's messy and sticky; there is residue, trash; it has a strong smell; it has sections that must be separated. Eating an orange is a complicated procedure; it's complicated in the way exploring one's own identity, one's sexuality or sanity, is complicated. This complicatedness brings us back to the language of the mind. In her orange metaphor, Ruiz tries to make sense of, with words, an intuitive concept of the body that, in many ways, can't be rationalized with the language of the mind, can't be clarified with explicit, rational writing which, under such stress, becomes chaos on the page. We are left instead to understand through metaphor.

So much of real life lies between the lines of rational thought. The bigger questions are not the ones that can be answered on paper. They are what we tend to overlook or leave out—ideas that life suggests, hints at. That is very much the way Ruiz's essay functions, just as life does. The facts are word-bound, but the deeper truth, the confusion, the sticky messiness lies in the grey areas *between* the words. The oranges become a representation of the language of the rational mind in conflict with the language of intuition. We learn to trust Ruiz's nonsensical style of writing because ultimately we understand that it is her intention to be illogical, to grapple with the apparent contradictions that she herself is struggling to understand. To understand we have to submit to chaotic disorientation, but by doing so we can find clarity.

In a lot of ways, Ruiz's essay is the place where the real meets the surreal, where we find balance and an absurd kind of harmony. In our failure to make logical sense of her words, we discover a more beautiful meaning, a meaning our boundary-driven, logical minds shy away from. Her essay sug-

gests that maybe if we didn't make such concrete distinctions between those concepts separated by the boundaries of logical thought, we wouldn't chastise ourselves so much for not living up to unrealistic standards, real or surreal, male or female, crazy or sane. By trusting our intuition, by accepting the absurd, sometimes inexplicable reality of reality, we might find that the conventional boundaries of logic and reason only take us so far: sometimes they *stifle* true understanding. This is not to say that rational analysis never leads to truth. Goulish would remind us to approach the essay by means of its facts *and* its grey areas. Yet Carson urges us to see that sometimes, in pursuit of knowing a thing, a "cherrying" of the mind prepares us most.

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