

A Much Belated Response to Zoran Kuzmanovich, “I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig’: Nabokov and Currie on Empathy for Objects”

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I have to confess that I am not a good reader of Currie at all. I cannot assume what kind of reader he implies and what he expects of his reader. He often sounds provoking and challenging, and I am provoked and challenged to some degree, but I have never thought of any new idea or a new paradigm, which might be what Currie expects of his readers. However, this time, thanks to Zoran’s critical and amusing discussion, I had the best experience of reading Currie. Zoran’s insightful paper led me to consider Nabokov’s empathy, sympathy, and feelings to things.

It seems to me that one of the reasons of Nabokov’s affection to the porcelain pig is because he lost it. Unlike in the case of his childhood, homeland, and loved ones, in this case, he freely just abandoned it, not dreaming he would never forget it in the future. I think that his attachment to the pig is because of its triflingness, its absence and its unchangeability. As Brian cites in his lucid comment on Zoran’s paper, Nabokov defines art as “beauty plus pity,” for “beauty must die: beauty always dies. . . .” (*Lectures on Literature*, 251). Indeed, it would be difficult for us to love something durable like plain plastic even if it is a trifle. On the other hand, Nabokov cherishes the things in his memory, for they are lost (absent) from his world and, at the same time, they are in his memory unchangeable for good, like his schoolroom in Vyra.

A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (*Speak, Memory*, 77)

It seems to me that Nabokov’s feelings—both empathy and sympathy—and everything in the room could not be separated from each other. If Nabokov had not lost Vyra, he would not have kept the schoolroom as it is in the passage. Even if he had kept it, he would not have felt what he felt while he was writing it.

I was surprised to read Brian write in his comment on your paper, “The reader of ‘Signs and Symbols’ does not feel or simulate the son’s delusions, and is not invited to feel or

simulate them, but simply to understand them in a summary sense” (Boyd 6), and you reply that you partially agree (Kuzmanovich “Comment #6). That is not my reaction to the passage describing the son’s referential mania. Though I do not understand the son’s delusions, I partially experience his fear of them. Moreover, when I read, “Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees” (“Signs and Symbols,” 599), I remember how I felt watching the tall trees in my grandfather’s garden when I was a small child. In windy evenings, they looked to be violently moving their boughs and branches, as if trying to walk leaving the ground they rooted on. Though I was scared of them as they looked totally different from what they were in the calm daylight, I was also a little fascinated. What I felt is far from the son’s fear, which is towards the natural elements sharing the information about him and revealing his magnified secrets to the world.

Leona Toker indicates that his madness takes shape in the Holocaust era:

when the “dark gesticulation” transmitted awful messages, when nations, armies, classes, and societies conspired against the Jewish population, predatory spies watched its moves, and organized insanity conducted its destruction with such a scientific thoroughness that the very air it breathed seemed to be “indexed and filed away.”

(Toker 213-14)

We could relate his fear to that of the spies and denouncement threatening them in the era.

On the other hand, I have sympathy and empathy for the son’s terror, remembering the complex feelings I had for the trees. Like the son, I, as a child, personified the trees I watched. But by such personification, the trees in the story do not become

understandable like humans. On the contrary, they gain a kind of otherness or alienness beyond my comprehension.

I would like to ask about another example: “Now ‘happy’ is something extremely subjective. One of our sillier Zemblan proverbs says: *the lost glove is happy*” (*Pale Fire*, 17). What do you think the Zemblan proverb introduced by Kinbote causes in yourself for the personified glove? Empathy or sympathy, or we just enjoy the joke with no feelings? It seems to me to be another case of personification that makes it harder for us to analyze our feelings about the object.

Works Cited

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