

Response to Prof. Nakata's comments on "I am hopelessly in
love with this porcelain pig"

By Zoran Kuzmanovich

June 9, 2021

Thank you for your comments on my paper, Akiko. I will respond to them quickly, off the top of my head since I am now finally at the beach and far away from most of my library and roughly 50 years' worth of comments and notes on Nabokov's work less than half of which have been converted to easily portable electronic form. And I will use the same method I used in my response to Brian.

First let me start by agreeing with you about the process of reading Currie. You write: **[Comment #1]** "I have never thought of any new idea or a new paradigm, which might be what Currie expects of his readers."

I had a similar impression. I have not offered an evaluation of Currie's process, but, as Rafe McGregor puts it in his review of Currie's *Imagining and Knowing*, Currie's work "is exemplary of analytic philosophy at both its best and worst" since despite "rigorous evidence" and "impeccable logic" Currie's "findings are, on a charitable reading, a limited advance in the subject area." *Philosophy in Review* Vol. 40 no. 3 (August 2020): 104. The "new paradigm" often does not seem new or fully justified. Brian Boyd's critique of my paper Points out several examples of Currie's thought when it is not at its nimblest.

[Comment #2] "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.”

You and I certainly agree on that point. In fact, my main interest in the pig started when I noticed that Nabokov uses the indexical of presence “this” rather than the more semantically proper “that” to mark the pig’s absence. So, the plastic pig, absent in fact, nonetheless seems to be present enough. Your phrase “unchangeable for good” seems a good way of describing the fact that the long-gone pig is still affecting the nature of the narrator’s belief, emotion, self-knowledge, and perspective.

[Comment #3] “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).”

The partial agreement stems from the first part of the story where we are given facts about the son, but the attitude to those facts is not foregrounded. And then, we arrive at this passage after which it is no longer possible for me not to empathize with the mother.

And then came a time in his life, coinciding with a long convalescence after pneumonia, when those little phobias of his which his parents had stubbornly regarded as the eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child hardened as it were into a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions, making him totally inaccessible to normal minds.

This, and much more, she accepted-- for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case-- mere possibilities of improvement.

The switch from “his parents had stubbornly regarded” to “This, and much more, she accepted-- for after all living did mean accepting

the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case-- mere possibilities of improvement” is Nabokov’s application of what in Joyce studies Hugh Kenner calls the “Uncle Charles Principle,” an empathic “gravitation” of the narrator’s voice into the perspective and feelings of another character within the story. Initially we are told that the son’s mind is “totally inaccessible to normal minds.” But then it turns out that his mind is somewhat accessible to the empathic mind of his mother. Prior to that point, we are receiving information about each member of the family in what Brian calls “summary sense.” Hence my partial agreement with Brian. But once the Uncle Charles Principle delivers us into the mind of the mother sharing her son’s referential mania and thereby his sense of being persecuted, we cannot exit her mind and her sense of her family’s vulnerabilities. Prof. Toker sums up ways in which the family’s vulnerabilities are occasioned by their ethnicity at that historical moment, even though common ethnicity does not let the mother have full access to some aspects of her son’s suffering. For example, she clearly does not understand what is scaring her son in this figure (a detail of Peter Breughel the Elder’s painting *The Triumph of Death* (1522?): “afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree.” I thank Don Johnson for first pointing this detail out to me).

[Comment #4] 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.

Is it possible that instead of the son’s fear we share the mother’s understanding of, or feelings about her son’s sense of the world as an alien and evil menace?

[Comment # 5]: *the lost glove is happy*” (*Pale Fire*, 17)..... It seems to me to be another case of personification that makes it harder for us to analyze our feelings about the object.

I confess to never being quite happy with my understanding of that Zemblan proverb. There are mateless or single gloves across Nabokov’s work, but their sense of happiness often escapes me, so please read what follows with a great deal of skepticism. My observations are meant to be merely suggestive: Margot glove opens and closed *LID*, Krug drops one into the river after losing its mate, and if my memory serves, there are several lost or forgotten gloves in *Invitation*. However, the two places where the matelessness of the gloves does the most work to bring up questions of empathy and sympathy are *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*. In *The Gift*, Zina plays with one during a tryst, Yasha’s father wears one for the eczema he gets after Yasha’s suicide, and a man on a moving train deliberately drops his other glove after accidentally dropping the first one because he wants to make the finder of the accidentally dropped glove happy to have found a pair of gloves. In *Speak, Memory* Miss Norcott loses a white kid glove, and young Nabokov’s inability to find the glove makes him unhappy, an unhappiness that would soon become “inconsolable” when Miss Norcott is summarily dismissed for lesbianism (Boyd, *Russian Years* 52). If the glove had been found (or kept) by Miss Norcott’s lesbian partner, the older Nabokov, intent on seeing chance as choice and accident as a part of a pattern, could very well imagine it as a happy glove, in the same way Kinbote’s loss of one publisher secures him another one, the “touchingly carefree and chummy,” “good old Frank” whom Kinbote would like to see as a “permanent fixture” in his life. The white glove (this time the footman’s) is linked in *Speak, Memory* with the light brought into Nabokov’s life by another switch in governesses since it accompanies the departure of Miss Robinson and the arrival of the unwanted Mademoiselle. So there may very well be a private pattern of single gloves linking the finding and losing of mates, trysts, and change,

but at the moment I am unable to account for such a pattern in a way I find fully convincing.

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

Akiko Nakata

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 [Comment #1] 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). [Comment #2] 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.

[Comment #3] 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.

[Comment #4] 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? [Comment # 5] 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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