

**Comments on Brian Boyd's Response to My Paper
"I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig":
Nabokov and Currie on Empathy for Objects"**

by

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Prefatory comment: I am very grateful for your detailed attention to my paper, Brian. There having been so few Nabokov conferences lately, Akiko's way of conducting this symposium is to be applauded for creating repeated opportunities to visit old friends and think out loud about those portions of Nabokov's work that remain enthralling for all of us who enjoy studying him seriously. If necessary, I will happily make these comments more formal when my health permits it, but it would be unprofessional for me to delay responding any longer. In your text, I have put the relevant **comment numbers in red** to make cross-referencing easier.

I am also pleased to see that our papers and responses and responses to the responses have initiated what I hope Popper would have seen as the process of improving our guesses though "planned gropings into the unknown." (*SB* 133) I am also happy to have that phrase apply only to me in this case. Lest our gropings be too random or just too blind, I am proceeding on the assumption that your version of my Currie and my version of your Popper are also linked. At the same time I must confess that I am only really familiar (and that by way of not-too-recently visited dissertation I wrote 33 years ago) with the underlying Kantian substratum of the Popperian quest for objective knowledge, so forgive me for starting there. Popper sums up Kantian theory of pure reason as the process whereby "our intellect does not discover universal laws in nature, but it prescribes its own laws and imposes them upon nature" (*CR* 94). He goes

on to characterize Kant's theory as "misconceived (CR 92) but at the same time concludes that is "a strange mixture of absurdity and truth" (CR 94). If I understand him correctly, he finds Kantian thinking in this vein absurd for the same reason you and I find Currie's thinking about art in his essay on empathy very unhelpful. Both my Currie and Popper's Kant make the mistake of seeing knowledge as "the necessary result of our mental outfit" (Popper's words): "we are not passive receptors of sense data, but their active digestors. By digesting and assimilating them we form and organize them into a Cosmos, the Universe of Nature. In this process we impose upon the material presented to our senses the mathematical laws which are part of our digestive and organizing mechanism." (CR 92)

Popper finds this idea absurd but at the same time recognizes the "truth" portion of Kant's "strange mixture." After "reducing [Kant's] problem to its proper dimensions," Popper sees Kant's Copernican revolution in thought as asking the same question his own philosophy asks "How are successful conjectures possible?" The answer, of course, is "Because we not only invent stories and theories, but try them out and see whether they work and how they work."

Comment #1 on "I don't think Nabokov's subject is *empathy with things* but *feelings for things*, so to me his essay and his ideas seem not to relate closely to Currie's argument." I disagree, but I hope the following strikes the right note rather than a defensive, didactic, and time-wasting one. If for Nabokov empathy is axiomatically a mental event that transpires only between humans, then of course there can be no empathy with things. However, although Nabokov does not use the word "empathy" in the essay, the word "and" of Nabokov's title, when coupled with the idea that "we lend our feelings" to things implies a certain kind of transaction or a two-way emotional investment to

create a “feeling with” rather than merely a “feeling for.” Consider this example: “In the lazy positioning of a woolen shawl draped over the back of a chair there’s something moping: oh, how the shawl longs for someone’s shoulders!” If the shawl provokes an “oh” from us, and if we see the shawl as “moping,” we cannot avoid the conclusion that there has been an attribution of human feelings *to* things not merely an expression of feeling *for* things, and since it has to be our feelings (who else is seeing the shawl as “moping”?), the process of sensing our moping in the spatial disposition of the shawl strikes me as an almost dictionary example of Herder’s *Einfühlung* : “The sensing human being feels his way into everything, feels everything from out of himself and imprints it with his image. . . . Hence, *Newton* in his system of the world became a poet contrary to his wishes.” I think Herder is referring to Newton’s comparison of gravitational attraction and repulsion to love and hate. I suspect that Currie started his discussion of empathy only with the late 19th and early 20th centuries to avoid accounting for Herder’s original notion of empathy since for Herder, empathy is a *par excellence* demonstration of the continuity between sensation and cognition, a continuity Currie for some reason seems to find especially annoying. Says Herder: “*Cognition and sensation are with us mixed creatures intertwined; we have cognition only through sensation, our sensation is always accompanied with a sort of cognition.*” [Herder’s emphasis] in Herder, “On Cognition and Sensation, the Two Main Forces of the Human Soul” (1775)]

Comment #2 on “As we encounter fictions, our knowing that characters do not exist as part of the history of the real world is less salient than our monitoring what the characters are doing and feeling, that’s all.”: Unless our reading also includes mortality salience for the very reasons you suggest when you write that “Kuzmanovich might have cited the so-called Terror Management Theorists.” Nabokov “monitors” those who may die or have died

more attentively, so I suspect that there is more mortality salience in this creative non-fiction Nabokov piece than initially meets the eye.

Comment #3 on “Wittgenstein’s conclusion is wrong. I challenge these claims.” Wittgenstein as summoned by Currie may very well be guilty as charged regarding images, but I seem to have done him a disservice. When revising the essay, I cut out too much here. What I cut pertained to Nabokov’s seeing the imagination as a form of memory that is not under the control of our but Mnemosyne’s mysterious will. While I recognize that your subsequent challenge is to Currie, Kuzmanovich, and Kuzmanovich’s Wittgenstein, what was also cut out is the simple explanation that by this point I was using “simulation” to designate any reception/mental representation/registration of sense data.

Comment #4 on ? “Man and Things” is not a fiction: it is an essay, a form that since its invention by Montaigne has foregrounded the author’s individuality, feelings, and reflections. This makes irrelevant Kuzmanovich’s claim that ..

I admit to trying to read as Currie suggests he does, though my way of doing it may not be proper Popperian conjectural testing of Currie’s claims. But there are other reasons for not seeing “Man and Things” as strictly an essay. If “Man and Things” is an essay, it seems to me to be of the creative non-fiction sort which admits narrators, poses, playful masks, performances. If you read the piece as a factual talk, do the facts not oblige you to see either Nabokov’s Uncle Ruka or his Uncle Konstantin Vladimirovich Nabokov as having died from “diphtheria”? I do not know what was the cause of KVN’s death. In your biography you give the cause of Uncle Ruka’s death as “angina.” Did the Nabokov family prefer the cause of Uncle Ruka’s death to have been diphtheria or are diphtheria and angina really the same in medical terms? Or were they so in 1916?

Comment #5 on “I do not doubt that brain activity accompanies the feelings Nabokov has for the porcelain pig, but would emphasize that the succession of feelings depends on Nabokov’s dispositions and experiences, reflected in but not caused, in a bottom-up way, by the neurophysiological activity within his brain.”: I completely agree that mapping “chemicals only” is if not the wrong at least the not-yet-ready -for-prime-time approach. When it comes to literary empathy, the explanatory power of current brain mapping techniques does seem to not move us much beyond phrenology in the field in which Currie is citing it as relevant. There may very well be a meaningful correspondence among the brain’s functional domains, the language of fiction, and motor-simulated empathy, but our current models are simply not sophisticated enough unless we are willing to claim that among the studies of macaques time is spent on telling and listening to stories of the complexity of *Pride and Prejudice*. So far, even David Perrett and Giacomo Rizzolatti, the pioneers of STS (superior temporal sulcus) studies among the macaques have not been willing to make that claim.

Comment #6 on “The reader of “Signs and Symbols” does not feel or simulate the son’s delusions, and is not invited to feel or simulate hem, but simply to understand them in a summary sense. Kuzmanovich agrees with my attitude, I think.” We agree only partially. To the degree that the reader recognizes that she has been in the mother’s mind for much of the story, the “identification” with the mother, specifically the mother’s empathy with “beautiful weeds,” is precisely such an invitation to sense the approach of “monstrous darkness” even in the seemingly innocent farming process of harvesting fields.

Comment #7 on “I must confess that I am mystified by Kuzmanovich’s citations, without objection, from philosophers: from Currie, from Wittgenstein, and now from Jaspers and Langer.”: Let me try to dispel the mystery or the fog of my deference to these philosophers. Once again, it starts with Kant.

Even Popper gives Kant credit for the idea Popper was expanding on, the notion that our theories are “the *free* creations of our own minds, the result of an almost poetic intuition, of an attempt to understand intuitively the laws of nature. But we no longer try to force our creations upon nature. On the contrary, we question nature, as Kant taught us to do; and we try to elicit from her *negative* answers concerning the truth of our theories: we do not try to prove or to *verify* them, but we test them by trying to *disprove* or to falsify them, to *refute* them.”

What Kant said was: “A philosophy of any subject (a system of rational cognition from concepts) requires a system of pure rational concepts independent of any conditions of intuition, that is, a metaphysics ” (MS, 6: 375).

I felt that at a certain level, Popper had “reduced” Kantian metaphysics too much and thus had, despite his emphasis on free creations of our minds and the presence of poetic intuition, left out or de-emphasized what Wittgenstein, Jaspers, and Langer bring to the table when it comes to certainty of confirmation and refutation. For Wittgenstein that is the “forms of life” theory that requires us to hear an “echo of thought in sight” (1945: §212); for Jaspers it is informational encapsulation, now known as the “frame problem” in artificial intelligence, and for Langer it is the idea that our language anthropomorphizes but (unlike music) still gets in the way of the intuitive organizing and form-giving functions of the senses. In *The Gift* Nabokov has Fyodor’s father use a metaphor to alert us to the possibility that our understanding of the conditions of possibility (of either truth or refutation) is not entirely free: “beware of letting our reason—that garrulous dragoman who always runs ahead—prompt us with explanations which then begin imperceptibly to influence the very course of observation and distort it: thus the shadow of the instrument falls upon the truth.” Conditions of intuition that

may invalidate empirical testing and thus a metaphysics seem to have been on Nabokov's mind as much as on the minds of the philosophers I invoked.

Comment #8 on “It does not seem, as Kuzmanovich describes it, that Nabokov presents us with the case where we prefer not to be imagining but cannot help it” (15), but rather that Nabokov is enjoying the challenge of deploying an anthropomorphization taken for granted in language as the basis for whimsical and deliberate imaginative, imagistic, extrapolation.” With your emphasis on the originality of Nabokov's time- and death-cancelling robust joy, I suspect we will continue to disagree on this matter. Nabokov's “thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern — to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal” is a thrill I would gladly seek and share. But that thrill in this essay seems outbalanced by things in the human environment seeking to commit suicide. That thought, when coupled with Nabokov's thoughts of our minds as boxes and our sense of time as a prison, has a cumulative effect on me countering the happiness and joy of being. I do think that the joyous Nabokov celebrating human consciousness outexamples the grieving Nabokov, but not by much, in part because I think Nabokov recognizes the sophism of the claim that “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.” The claim, by the way, is Wittgenstein's (1921: §6.4311). I also think that for Nabokov the trauma of grief is precisely the loss of the deceased's empathy.

Comment #9 on “Or, conversely, where there is pity, there is beauty, as in the boots of the now dead owner.” Would not the neighbour to whom/to whose boots you find VN (or his narrator) indifferent still have to be the source of the dying beauty and /or the object of pity? If the boots are the object of pity, then you may need to revisit your objections to seeing Nabokov's essay as being about empathy (feeling “with” rather than “for” things).

Comment #10 on “Wittgenstein’s insistence that the world is all that is the case also suggests that to the degree it gives us access to other minds language functions as a form of empathy” (18): how does that famous assertion imply this?” The general answer comes by way of Kant, Husserl, and Searle when they see language as that which gives us the only access to what is otherwise epistemically off-limits, the otherness of others. The specific answer is that when Wittgenstein’s famous comment is combined with Wittgenstein’s comment on grief cited in my essay, it implies that even though emotions/sensations are brute forces, beyond the will, immeasurable, and independent of reason it is the case that we still differentiate them. In the recognition of that difference as normative lies the possibility of our empathic and not merely vicarious receptivity to the world as it is experienced by others.

Comment #11 on “emotional intensities predate the invention of language and are both experienced deeply and witnessed clearly enough to render language both inadequate and superfluous, and in the case of grief the emotion is particularly allayed by *physical* sympathy (hugs, touches) of a primal primate kind...”. While I agree with you that language postdates grief and may not be adequate to representing the emotions of grief, language still seems to me a pretty useful tool for engaging and keeping the no-longer-here-and-now virtually present. My other point (borrowed from Wittgenstein) is that the “grammar” of grief forces our language into different language games/speech acts— self-repression, self-repugnance for remaining alive, denial, evasion, commiseration, commemoration, etc. But I won’t insist on this. In the form of life I exist in perhaps I have heard the virtualizing words *Вечная Память!* one too many times.

Comment #12 on “I am not sure that the idea that literature “requires acceptance of the magical” is a truth, and I am sure that it is not one of the things that some great literature, like Austen and Chekhov..”: There is plenty of paradoxical magic even in Jane Austen, starting with the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” That categorical and universal “must” premised of *the single man* is not only paradoxical because it is a statement about the social expectations for, and powerlessness of most *women* during the Austen era; within the larger narrative the sentence itself is the magician’s patter necessary to disguise the trick of introducing the much maligned Mrs. Bennet’s and retrospectively identifying this ironic view as hers. As a mother of five daughters in danger of going destitute if they remain single, whether she recognizes the irony or not, she cannot help but express this view and pathetically hope for its universality And I certainly take as paradoxical Chekhov’s positing fictionally that in times of great grief a horse is much better equipped to express what you call “physical sympathy” than any human beings my poor namesake encounters in that story.

Coda: Reading just under 2000 pages of Currie made me frustrated much of the time until I copied this into my notes and remembered it every time Currie seemed to make a provocative statement and then back off his initial position: “[W]orks of the *poets peacefully pasture side by side like lambs, those of the philosophers are born voracious beasts, and their longing to destroy is even like scorpions, spiders, and some insects, chiefly directed towards their own species.*”

I would not end on this quotation from Schopenhauer had you and I not known each other for well nigh three decades and not shared certain philosophical presuppositions about possible conceptions of objective

knowledge and certain readings of Nabokov by folks who had not read much Nabokov beyond *Lolita*. (Not to mention some first-hand knowledge of some voracious poets.) But I think our disagreements stem from my remaining more Kantian and less Popperian than you. Popper's way of thinking about knowledge requires that the purpose of intellectual engagement be refutation. So as to avoid feeling the full bite of Schopenhauer's figure, I prefer learning to knowledge, curiosity to certainty, and (these days) quest for survival to quest for truth. But whatever happens to be my intellectual starting point or destination regarding Nabokov, I prefer your companionship above all others, and I appreciate Akiko's giving me this opportunity to say so.

As for the really significant difference between Currie and Nabokov, it seems to me easily inferred from these two statements:

Currie in "Empathy for objects" (2011): "But motoric responses of this kind are not irrelevant to art and the aesthetic, **any more than sight is**. And if aestheticians had somehow forgotten or never noticed that colour, and the perception of colour, are relevant to painting, it would be an urgent obligation to point out their relevance. That is what I am doing with respect to motoric responses."

Nabokov in "PROF. WOODBRIDGE IN AN ESSAY ON NATURE POSTULATES THE REALITY OF THE WORLD" (1940): "But is visibility really as dominant as that in all imaginable knowledge of Nature? Though I personally would be satisfied to spend the whole of eternity gazing at a blue hill or a butterfly, I would feel the poorer if I accepted the idea of there not existing still more vivid means of knowing butterflies and hills."

For Currie who (to make himself convincing) must imagine a "nor irrelevant" double negative world in which furthermore he must appoint himself with the task of urgently reminding aestheticians that color is important to painting;

empathy, including bodily simulation, seems at best a subset of, or a parallel to sight but still does not amount to knowledge of that world. For Nabokov, empathy (sensed and shared vulnerability) of the world of people and things around us offers us a far more vivid sense of knowing that world.

Comment on Zoran Kuzmanovich, “I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig’: Nabokov and Currie on Empathy for Objects” empathy as vulnerability--?

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In responding to Akiko Nakata’s paper, I thought I was expected to be more formal than was actually the case; after learning that from Akiko, I became a little less formal in responding to Tora Koyama’s comment on my paper, although since I do not know Professor Koyama or the decorum of Japanese philosophical discussion, I couldn’t unbend much; I will try to be still less formal now, because I have known Zoran Kuzmanovich, as I have known Akiko, for many years. But not informal enough, as I see today from Zoran’s fascinating response to my own paper.

Zoran contrasts philosopher of art Gregory Currie’s 2011 paper “Empathy for Objects” (and Currie’s generally sceptical attitude to what we can learn from fiction) with writer Vladimir Nabokov’s 1928 talk or essay “Man and Things” in order to examine their contrasting attitudes to the way objects can “affect the sensibilities of those who engage with them” (1). His sympathies in this contrast clearly lie with Nabokov rather than Currie. I grant that Nabokov on his feeling for objects is much more convincing than Currie on empathy, simulation, or emotional response to fiction or art in general; but I don’t think Nabokov’s subject is *empathy with* things but *feelings for* things, so to me his essay and his ideas seem not to relate closely to Currie’s argument. [[See ZK’s Comment #1](#)]

I will challenge Currie as Zoran presents him more than I question Zoran directly; but I will refer to Zoran as Kuzmanovich, to equalize the terms in which I refer to the philosopher, the critic, and the writer, Nabokov.

I apologize for the length of this comment, but there seems little in Currie as presented here that does not deserve robust challenge all along the way.

Kuzmanovich's first quotation from Currie includes this: "One thing that people have said is valuable in literature is that we can learn about the human mind from it. But why wouldn't psychology lectures be a better way of learning that? I suggest we think about our relation to literature not in terms of learning but in terms of sharing an experience with the author" (2).

There are many reasons why psychology lectures are not a better way than fiction of learning about the human mind. Unlike the best fiction, psychological findings are often not "ecologically valid": that is, appropriate to real-life situations, as when subjects in a psychology experiment are asked to indicate their preference for one of two individuals represented by two photographs and rather pointedly different prose character descriptions or histories of the individuals, rather than people met directly in person and discovered gradually through interaction. Psychological findings are often disconfirmed in later replication studies; they often focus on things like reaction times and peripheral vision, of less interest to readers of fiction than engaging with human social and ethical predicaments as fiction invites. In a recent essay I have offered many more arguments against Currie's latest claims that we cannot learn about human nature from fiction.ⁱ

After Currie's question above, he suggests that "we think about our relation to literature not in terms of learning but in terms of sharing an experience with the author" (2). This seems most unhelpful. An author's experience in returning to her desk to continue a story, sharpening a quill or a pencil, inventing a new scene to develop the plot, finding the words needed, in a dictionary or thesaurus or the recesses of memory, revising them if they can be improved, and so on, has very little in common with a reader's experience of reading and inferring from an already-established written text. Imagining on cue is very different from inventing from scratch and refining cues to prompt imagination in others.

In Kuzmanovich's next inset quotation from Currie, Currie writes: "When people read action-related words, the motor homunculus is activated in appropriate ways, moving its feet at the sound of the word 'feet'" (4). If this were true, then my phrase "Currie writes" should have activated your motor homunculus either to move a pen or pencil or to type out words. Unlikely. If this were true, too, then when Austen's characters, whom she does not invite us to imagine with physical vividness, say something, prefaced or interrupted

or followed by a verb of speech, the speech production region of our motor homunculi should be activated as we read, but not whenever in a dialogue mere quotation marks indicate a new speech, without a verb of speech. I find these implications so implausible I will not wait for replication studies to show them wrong.

In general, Currie is misled here by the over-enthusiasm in the 1990s for the implications of the discovery of mirror neurons at the end of the 1980s. There is now doubt among psychologists about whether humans (as opposed to the monkeys of the original experiments) have mirror neurons, about what role they play within human neural processing, about whether they are evolved mechanisms or develop through associative learning, and so on: a good illustration why we might prefer to learn about human nature from fiction rather than from the fashions and fallible hypotheses of psychology.

In 1997, Kuzmanovich notes, Currie introduced the “hypothetical reader of fact” (5) to explain how we respond to fiction. As readers of fiction, we know characters are unreal, so, Currie argues, we cannot respond to their unreal situations, actions, and reactions, and instead simulate the reactions of a hypothetical reader who does not know the text is a fiction. This is psychologically and philosophically muddled and aesthetically disastrous. As we encounter fictions, our knowing that characters do not exist as part of the history of the real world is less salient [Comment #2] than our monitoring what the characters are doing and feeling, that’s all. Even when we hear true reports about real others we do not know, we have to imagine them (as shown by philosopher Derek Matravers in the case of all factual as well as fictional narrative, and by linguist Daniel Dor in the case of all language referring beyond the here and now),ⁱⁱ and we respond accordingly to the accounts of these others’ predicaments (a cancer diagnosis, a discovery of infidelity, and so on).

We have default responses to the situations of those we hear or read about, and that includes fictional characters, even if we know they are fictional, particularly as expert storytellers are expert at stimulating our imaginations to envisage characters in their situations. But we have those default responses even when there is little attempt to appeal to our sensory imaginations. There is a famous 1944 psychological experiment by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, in which viewers are shown without cues an untitled 90-second silent black-and-white film of two triangles and one circle moving about a plane (have a look at it on YouTube now, before reading on).ⁱⁱⁱ Nearly all viewers construe this as a story about the smaller triangle and the

circle, friends or more likely lovers, being cornered by the larger, bullying triangle, and viewers are pleased when the pair escape the frustrated bully. No viewer supposes these shapes are real individuals, nor do they suppose a “hypothetical reader of fact” or a “hypothetical viewer of fact” who thinks the shapes are real 2-D individuals, yet almost all viewers feel empathy for the threatened pair and relief at their fortunate outcome.

Kuzmanovich adduces Currie’s conclusion that “fiction-generated emotions, even when productive of empathy, are not genuine since they are not action-prompting beliefs” (5). But there are many cases where even true narrative generates emotions but does not prompt action: when a friend tells us, for instance, of another friend we do not know who has discovered their partner to be unfaithful. We may feel for the betrayed partner, but we do not act. The feeling of concern nevertheless remains real. On the other hand, we *can* have sensorimotor responses to fiction: we can laugh at an absurd situation, we can cry or gasp with emotion at an affecting outcome, we can tense up at a moment of risk for characters we care about.

Kuzmanovich then introduces, as a way of showing Currie’s treatment of his response to objects in art, Currie’s analysis of his reactions to Rubens’s painting *Descent from the Cross*: “When I look at Rubens’ *Descent from the Cross* with the right kind of attention I am made directly, non-inferentially aware of the heaviness of Christ’s represented body, and of the sense of strain represented in the bodies of the mourners as they lower the body” (7). Currie seems to underestimate drastically the amount of inference, even if unconscious, the mind makes in interpreting sense data, a psychological fact well known from optical illusions (the Muller-Lyer illusion, the Ames room, and the like). To disambiguate visual arrays our minds have to interpret a scene as three-dimensional (or as a two-dimensional representation evoking a three-dimensional scene), even if the impacts on the retina are two-dimensional. Oddly, although Currie invokes psychology lectures or textbooks against fiction, he seems to forget what psychology textbooks actually say.

And to infer effort in the personages depicted in the Rubens painting we have to infer much more: the weight of Christ’s body, the number of people supporting that weight, the likely proportion each of those figures takes of the total weight, to judge by their position, their physiques, and their degree of contact with the corpse and the shroud, and the stability of their support on the ladder or the cross. And, as Kuzmanovich notes, we also need to infer, from the cultural context of the story of Christ’s crucifixion, and of its depiction in other paintings, that those present are mourning a particularly

acute loss—a point he illustrates wonderfully by his example of the very different context of Winnie-the-Pooh’s reaching up for the honeypot. Moreover, motoric simulation of the kind Currie appeals to simply does not work, since there are eight live figures handling or about to handle Christ’s body, and in one simulatary system we cannot simulate eight bodies at once. Or do we sequentially simulate each mourner’s effort as we focus on each? But that does not seem to be what Currie suggests, in his “I am made directly, non-inferentially aware . . . of the sense of strain represented in the bodies of the mourners as they lower the body.”

Kuzmanovich notes that Currie’s “‘Empathy for Objects’ concludes with the claim that empathy for aesthetic objects does not differ from empathy for all other objects like chairs, trees, sculptures, and buildings” (8), and quotes Currie: “We need not be looking at a chair with aesthetic attention in order to activate a motor simulation of sitting on it” (8). In fact although we can readily imagine ourselves or someone else sitting on a particular chair we see, we do not usually engage a motor simulation of sitting on it whenever we see a chair. If that were the case our simulation system would be wildly overloaded when we entered a furniture shop or an auditorium with hundreds or thousands of chairs. And when we see chairs we could also imagine kicking them over, or simply moving them along the floor: if motor simulation were an automatic part of perception, why would these motions too not come into play? Once again Currie seems to be vastly overreaching with his appeal to mirror neurons and simulation.

Moreover I simply do not understand what Currie means when he writes of “empathy for objects.” Empathy is a sharing of feeling with others: in the words of Suzanne Keen, in her tough-minded *Empathy in the Novel*, “a spontaneous sharing of feelings, including physical sensations in the body, provoked by witnessing or hearing about another’s condition,” “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading.”^{iv} Unless we are animists we will not assume that a chair or another inanimate object has any feelings to empathise with. We can, if not as a routine concomitant or instant element of perception, imagine ourselves, say, sitting down on or sitting in a chair, but we do not tend to imagine the chair’s sensation on being sat on by ourselves, or a cat, or a sumo wrestler, because we assume the chair will feel nothing, although we can imagine that it may compress or creak differently under different sitters. We may feel something *about* a chair—its elegance, perhaps, in a museum of design, its inferred or

experienced degree of comfort or discomfort for a sitter, its age and condition, in a second-hand shop. But that is not “empathy” in any normal usage, and to equate such attitudes with what we may feel about a frail old woman, or a cat, or a sumo wrestler seated or about to sit down on the chair can only confuse.

Kuzmanovich writes: “Currie seems to be invoking Wittgenstein of *Zettel* to explain the difficulty: ‘§§627. It is just because forming images is a voluntary activity that it does not instruct us about the external world’” (8). Wittgenstein is no help. Images often arrive not voluntarily but spontaneously, most strikingly in involuntary memory, but also in dreams or hypnagogia or reverie. Kuzmanovich adds: “Wittgenstein reasons that because imagination, unlike perception, is controlled by our will, the imagery it provides can be only what we have put there and therefore such imagery cannot be productive of new information about the world” (9). **Wittgenstein’s conclusion is wrong.** If images do arrive voluntarily, that does not mean that we cannot learn from them, as Einstein’s thought experiments enabled him to reason about light, time, and frames of reference. And chemist August Kekule could also learn about the structure of the benzene molecule, if the story is true, from the *involuntary* image of his famous dream.

Kuzmanovich continues: “Of course, Currie (and Wittgenstein) are right: artworks are *objects* and they *represent* things, so our empathic responses to such objects are really responses to our own bodily-simulation-aided mental representations of such objects” (9). I challenge these **claims.** **[Comment #3]** A Bach fugue or sonata may be an object, but it does not represent a thing or things. And I doubt that bodily simulation aids much our responses to many a static painting, like a Vermeer, with its exquisite balance and interaction of light, shade, gleam, and reflection, or a Caravaggio, Kalf, Liotard, or Matisse still life. I doubt that bodily simulation aids at all in responding to most of Austen, whose fiction mostly pays little attention to physical detail or movement. And our mental representations are not “of such objects,” of the works of art, but of details and situations within them.

Midway through his essay, Kuzmanovich shifts to Nabokov’s description of his feelings toward objects, including works of art, in “Man and Things.” I feel an immediate release from Currie’s confusions and untenable conclusions to Nabokov’s clear understanding, of, for instance, the variety of reactions four different individuals could have to the one painting, according to their dispositions, histories, and circumstances. As Kuzmanovich comments, “Neurophysiology cannot tell the whole story here without perspectival subjectivity of the sort Nabokov enumerates” (11).

Kuzmanovich reports Nabokov's other examples of objects, not works of art, for which he has or might have strong feelings. One technical aside, here: Kuzmanovich refers repeatedly to "Nabokov's narrator" (12, 13, 14, 16). Despite recent narratological dogma, there are strong grounds for not positing a narrator in fiction, unless the author has specifically created a narrator distinct from himself,^v and nothing Nabokov reveals of the "I" referred to here distinguishes the writer from the sensitive, imaginative, reflective Nabokov. And "Man and Things" is not a fiction: it is an essay, a form that since its invention by Montaigne has foregrounded the author's individuality, feelings, and reflections. This makes irrelevant Kuzmanovich's claim that [Comment #4] "if we apply [Currie's] theory of reading to Nabokov's story about the porcelain pig, we must posit a hypothetical reader of fact who must in turn conclude that Nabokov's narrator is either pretending to be in love with a porcelain pig or simply deluded" (13).

Nabokov's feeling for the porcelain pig he won and abandoned and now laments abandoning do involve a whole complex of experience, a narrative of gain and loss or neglect and regret that, as Kuzmanovich insists, cannot be reduced to the kind of neurophysiology Currie wishes to emphasize. Kuzmanovich writes: "While it is possible that the love for the porcelain pig emerges strictly out of chemicals within the nervous system, it may also be possible that art records events and their meanings in the language of emotions whose cognitive dimension will emerge in due time" (13). I would simply note that "emerges strictly out of chemicals within the nervous system" seems to me simply the wrong level of analysis: I do not doubt that brain activity accompanies the feelings Nabokov has for the porcelain pig, but would emphasize that the succession of feelings depends on Nabokov's dispositions and experiences, reflected in but not caused, in a bottom-up way, by the neurophysiological activity within his brain. [Comment 5]

For reasons I do not quite understand, Kuzmanovich brings in the idea of delusion in the feeling of Nabokov (as I see it) or his narrator (as Kuzmanovich sees it) toward the porcelain pig, and compares it with the delusions of the young man in Nabokov's story "Signs and Symbols." He writes: "The reader of 'Signs and Symbols' would be a good candidate for an fMRI scan of her brain's pre-frontal and anterior cingulate regions, where the deluded young man would presumably be experiencing functional disconnections in his hyperdopaminergic activity." I do not think introducing technology or technical terms from neuroscience helps here in the least. 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. **[Comment #6]**

Kuzmanovich agrees with my attitude, I think. He writes: “Explanations of the way our nerves act leave out many features of our mental lives. What exactly is the immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig?” (14). The “immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig” is easy enough to imagine, simply in these very terms, especially as provided in the more detailed narrative in Nabokov’s essay, and especially if one has some knowledge of Nabokov’s sensitivity and sense of pity at loss. I don’t think it would be problematic in principle to specify such an “immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig” in neuroscientific detail, although no doubt it is technologically well beyond our current capacity. But it wouldn’t be very interesting, in fact, except as proof of the progress of our understanding of brain circuitry: it would reveal a process way more computationally complex than we could readily assimilate, with hundreds of excitatory and inhibitory flows and feedback loops, and wouldn’t tell us as readers, empathizers, and imaginers of the experience of others much more than, or probably even nearly as much as, “the immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig.”

I must confess that I am mystified by Kuzmanovich’s citations, without objection, from philosophers: from Currie, from Wittgenstein, and now from Jaspers and Langer. First, Karl Jaspers: **[Comment #7]** “Delusion proper [...] implies a transformation in our total awareness of reality” (14). I do not know Jaspers’s grounds for this improbable assertion. Kuzmanovich then quotes Suzanne K. Langer: “The very existence of ‘things’ is modeled on [man’s] own inward expectation of strains, directions, and limitations of his felt actions; the wholeness and simplicity of molar objects is that of his own soma” (15). This seems highly implausible to me: it is much more likely that the ability to manipulate, for instance, a piece of stone (as a projectile or a handaxe, say) or a piece of fruit provides a first image of “the wholeness and simplicity of objects.”

I am again with Kuzmanovich when he returns to Nabokov. He writes that Nabokov “also notes that the empathy generated by ‘lend[ing] things our feelings,’ that is, by projecting our own fears, hopes, desires, or griefs onto objects, also generates some risks” (15). Nabokov’s description “lending things our feelings” seems much more accurate than the word “empathy” (a word he does not use at all in “Man and Things”), and Kuzmanovich’s “projecting our own fears, hopes, desires, or griefs onto objects” (15) seems

more accurate still. But when Nabokov writes “It is as though I am surrounded by little monsters, and it seems to me that the little teeth of the clock are gnawing away at time, that the ‘ear’ of the needle stuck into the curtain is eavesdropping on me, that the teapot spout, with a little droplet poised on its tip, is about to sneeze like a man with a cold” (15), it does not seem, as Kuzmanovich describes it, that “Nabokov presents us with the case where we prefer not to be imagining but cannot help it” (15), but rather that Nabokov is enjoying the challenge of deploying an anthropomorphization taken for granted in language as the basis for whimsical and deliberate imaginative, imagistic, extrapolation: not something we cannot help, but something that needs an especially fresh and alert imagination to activate, unlike the dulled common sense blandly accustomed to taking routine terms for granted.

[Comment #8]

Kuzmanovich offers a sharp contrast between Currie’s and Nabokov’s views of narrative. He cites Currie and Jon Jureidini’s “one implication of this paper [“Art and Delusion,” 2003] is that the best example we have of a life pervasively experienced as narrative is the life of madness” (15). Not knowing their argument, I cannot challenge it, but the conclusion seems preposterous, even if I do not believe experience is narrative in form.^{vi} Kuzmanovich proposes that Nabokov suggests that narrative allows experience continuity and emotional depth. Nabokov imagines a neighbor’s boots, to which he is indifferent: “But were my neighbor to die tonight, what human warmth, what pity, what live and tender beauty would these two old, shabby boots, with their eyelet flaps sticking out like little ears, left standing at the door, radiate over me” (16). Kuzmanovich writes: “The dead man’s absence becomes an act of abandonment no different than the abandonment of the porcelain pig” (16). I do not read Nabokov’s paragraph this way. Rather, I would cite Nabokov’s famous “*Beauty plus pity*—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity, for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual.”^{vii} Or, conversely, where there is pity, there is beauty, as in the boots of the now dead owner. [Comment #9]

Wittgenstein comes to the fore in the closing section of Kuzmanovich’s paper, and to me, quite untenably. I simply do not understand what Wittgenstein attempts to imply in the conditional in his second sentence: “‘Grief’ describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life. If a man’s bodily expression of sorrow and of joy alternated, say with the ticking of a clock, here we should not have the characteristic

formation of the pattern of sorrow or of the pattern of joy” (17).

Kuzmanovich then cites Wittgenstein’s next fragment: “‘For a second he felt violent pain.’—Why does it sound queer to say: ‘For a second he felt deep grief’? Only because it so seldom happens?” (18) No, only for the reason that grief is a long process. “For a second he felt deep grief” is absurd for exactly the same reason as it would be absurd to say “For a second he grew up,” “For a second she lost weight,” or “For a second he aged.” And I do not understand when Kuzmanovich writes “Wittgenstein’s insistence that the world is all that is the case also suggests that to the degree it gives us access to other minds language functions as a form of empathy” (18): how does that famous assertion imply this? [Comment #10] Kuzmanovich speculates in a note that “Grief is also one more possible impulse for the invention of language, a not quite sufficient tool to share and decode chronobiological and emotional disturbances caused by human attachments to that which is no longer present but feels as if it is. Even now, language does poorly with uncontrollable physical grief over the mourned objects still felt to be present” (n22, p. 25). The idea that grief is an impulse for the invention of language seems implausible. Intense emotions from wild laughter or gut-wrenching grief are never reducible to language. These emotional intensities predate the invention of language and are both experienced deeply and witnessed clearly enough to render language both inadequate and superfluous, and in the case of grief the emotion is particularly allayed by *physical sympathy* (hugs, touches) of a primal primate kind and, in the case of laughter, amplified by sociophysical contagion (again, as in primate choruses). [Comment #11]

In his final significant move, Kuzmanovich, arguing against Currie’s more positivistic reading of our response to art, writes “one psychological truth literature teaches us is that it requires acceptance of the magical and the paradoxical” (18-19). I am not sure that the idea that literature “requires acceptance of the magical” is a truth, and I am sure that it is not one of the things that some great literature, like Austen and Chekhov, [Comment #12] for instance, teaches us. Kuzmanovich continues: “If there is such a mental state as a hypothetical reader of fact, it may very well be the means by which we simultaneously trigger and repress our consciousness of our own death” (19). I doubt not only that Currie’s “hypothetical reader of fact” exists in readers’ minds, but also that Currie himself thinks that it is a mental state. In discussing how we simultaneously trigger and repress our consciousness of our own death—certainly an issue in Nabokov—Kuzmanovich might have cited the so-called Terror Management Theorists, and perhaps physicist Brian

Greene's *Until the End of Time*.^{viii} Kuzmanovich concludes the paragraph: "fiction may very well be a form of magic that ushers death onstage while pretending that it is also possible to chase it off." I prefer not to see literature as magic, although it can have extraordinary effects. And while some fiction (and indeed much poetry) ushers death onstage while pretending that it is also possible to chase it off (an elegant formulation), much does not, like Austen and Chekhov, again, or the Shakespeare of *King Lear* or the Beckett of *Malone Dies* or much else.

I sympathize with Zoran's doubts about the adequacy of Currie's account of artistic response, although my own doubts would be much more frequent, at almost every formulation of Currie's cited here (but Currie has written work with much of value, especially, to my taste, *Narratives & Narrators*),^{ix} as well as at almost every formulation cited from other philosophers—all dubious assertions or pointless speculations, it seems to me. But I would not offer magic as a solution, even if Nabokov in particular has his magical side. Imaginative feeling-for, though, of the kind Nabokov showcases in "Man and Things," would seem much more promising, as I think Zoran agrees.

ⁱ Brian Boyd, "Learning from Fiction?" (review essay focused around Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 5:1 (2021), 57-66. DOI: 10.26613/esic/5.1.210

ⁱⁱ Derek Matravers, *Fiction and Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daniel Dor, *The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, "An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior," *American Journal of Psychology*, 1944 (57: 2), 243-259; see the film at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTNmLt7QX8E&t=22s>. For more background, see Bart Keunen, "Plot, Morality, and Folk Psychology Research," in Lars Bernaerts, Dirk de Geest, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck, *Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 175-97, pp. 175-76.

^{iv} Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xx, 4.

^v Brian Boyd, “Does Austen Need Narrators? Does Anyone?” *New Literary History*, 48:2 (Spring 2017), 285-308 (see n2, p. 304, for a long list of similar critiques), and “Implied Authors and Imposed Narrators, or Actual Authors?,” in Sylvie Patron, ed. *Optional-Narrator Theory: Principles, Perspectives, Proposals* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021, 53-71), and that volume as a whole.

^{vi} Brian Boyd, “Prompting Monopods: Or, The Options and Costs of Narrative,” *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 3:1 (2019), 33-35, doi: 10.26613/esic/3.1.114.

^{vii} Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark, 1980), 251.

^{viii} Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015); Brian Greene, *Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe* (New York: Knopf, 2020).

^{ix} Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).