

Abstract

“I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig”: Nabokov and Currie on empathy for objects

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Beware of the man who works hard to learn some thing, learns it, and finds himself no wiser than before. He is full of murderous resentment of people who are ignorant, without having come by their ignorance the hard way. -*The Books of Bokkonon* (Vonnegut, 1965, p. 187)ⁱ

Barak Obama, former president of the US, suggested in speeches and interviews that a successful democracy requires informed skepticism and informed empathy. Analytic philosopher Gregory Currie supplies plenty of the first requirement but questions the possibility of the second. His 2011 essay “Empathy for Objects” reviews the work of the Empathists in order to reject two of their key theories: (1) empathy as pantheistic projection of an ideal self into the form of objects, and (2) empathy as a reliable instrument for accessing and inhabiting other minds and other lives. Instead, Currie posits bodily simulation as the means of “access” to objects and persons. He uses “simulation” to designate primarily (but not entirely) unconscious motor imagery created by neural activities that mirror bodily motions and even speed up lexical processing during imaginative explorations required by empathy. He posits that human neural activity simulates the internal qualities of objects of empathy (tree, load-bearing column, the painting “Descent from the Cross”) and concludes that simulation in this sense is neither inference nor perception but an emotion. He concedes that such “perceptual” emotion may affect aesthetic responses but concludes that philosophers cannot say much about it because it defies “the formulation of rules” and is thus not a reliable guide for responding to objects or persons. Currie’s argument rests on the nature of imaginative perception, a perceptual state Nabokov created so well in *Lolita* that some reviewers claimed to feel empathy for the book’s pedophile narrator Humbert Humbert. Currie is rightly cautious about the empathic process of claiming another’s desire as one’s own, but his discussion of empathy is oddly disembodied, de-contextualized, and almost atemporal. In his 1928 essay “Man and Things,” written in the heyday of Empathist theorizing, Nabokov also concentrates on the role of imagination in perceptions but emphasizes context, body, and temporality as the chief mediators in our empathy for objects and

persons. Like Currie, he uses the example of a painting, but his conclusions are rather different than Currie's. The difference is instructive, not just for recognizing the limits of analytic philosophy's usefulness for discussing empathy as the basis of aesthetic responses but also for noting ways in which Nabokov thinks of time's relevance to aesthetic issues and the ways he collects, labels, anthropomorphizes, and then animates certain objects in his subsequent works.

¹ I include the Vonnegut quotation as a form of self-criticism for the eyes of the philosophers attending the Symposium. The most unsatisfactory aspect of the paper I am writing is not just my spotty familiarity with analytic philosophy but the nature of the topic (role of imaginative perception in our aesthetic responses) which obliges me to introduce too many different — although related — topics in short order without being able to go into any of them in depth. I see this paper, despite its superficialities, as preliminary guide for a deeper discussion. At the moment, much of me is convinced by Prof. Currie, but I still don't believe him. I am fully aware that a broader, deeper, and more complex discussion of this topic is going on among professional philosophers, and I plan to become more familiar with the main currents of that discussion.



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