“Project Narrative” talk (Columbus, November 7th 2011)

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Narrative, Embodiment, and Cognitive Science: Why Should We Care?

Introduction
My topic for today is “Narrative, Embodiment, and Cognitive Science: Why Should We Care?”, and my first move will be pointing out that no, I don’t think that this presentation will answer that question satisfactorily. I will be content, however, with having prospected some possible ways forward, posing problems rather than supplying instant answers.

As you know, the so-called “cognitive turn” has been hailed as the “next big thing in English” in an article published last year in The New York Times. I can’t say if this is an opinion actually held by some or if it is more of a journalistic idealization. But unlike those—if any—who see in cognitive science, and in science across the board, a panacea for the ills of the humanities, I am convinced that we should turn to cognitive science only insofar as it can help us make a more compelling case for the importance and value of the humanities. This is why I’m more interested in convergences than in the downright importation of methodologies and research questions. And one of these points of convergence is provided, as I will try to explain in the next minutes, by the discussion revolving around embodiment.

Here’s an outline of what I will do.

- In the first part of this talk, I will touch on how embodiment has been theorized within both the humanities and cognitive science in the last decades. My argument here is that we should avoid polarization between cultural and biological approaches to embodiment, focusing instead on how they come together in phenomenology—in our lived experience of the body.
- In the second part, I will test-drive some of the ideas that I develop more fully in my book project. Here my concern will be with the relationship between narrative as a representational artifact and experience. In particular, this section will build a theoretical framework for explaining how the reader’s embodied experience can be implicated in narrative texts.
- Finally, in the third part, I will survey some of most representative studies of the reader’s embodiment, pointing out their continuities and discontinuities. I will also give a demonstration of my own approach through a reading of a passage from Vladimir Nabokov’s novel The Defense.

1. Embodiment between Humanities and Cognitive Science
Bodies have been under the lens of humanistic scrutiny for some decades. A landmark of humanistic approaches to embodiment is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of
Perception, originally published in 1945. We’ll see that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has made a comeback in recent, second-generation cognitive science and is now quoted at length in any serious attempt to come to terms with the ways in which perceptual systems are embodied. Within the humanities, however, in the decades after the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s work phenomenological investigation gave way first to structuralism and then to poststructuralist thought, with the second wave of French theorists discussing the body as disciplined by societies, and finally with feminist and queer approaches to embodiment. At the heyday of “social constructionism,” as it came to be known, Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the lived experience of the body, taxed with essentialism, was replaced by the view that our bodies are shaped by societal, political, and—ultimately—discursive forces.

These are sweeping generalizations, no doubt, but they still reflect with some accuracy the way those poststructuralist positions have been received and evaluated in more recent times, during the slow ebbing of poststructuralist thought. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas, for example, argues:

> It has come to the point where the text metaphor has virtually . . . gobbled up the body itself—certainly we have all heard phrases like “the body as text,” “the inscription of culture on the body,” “reading the body.” I would go as far as to assert that for many contemporary scholars the text metaphor has ceased to be a metaphor at all, and is taken quite literally. (1999, 146)

Csordas is writing in 1999, in a critical historical moment, when poststructuralist thought still held some sway within the humanities but at the same time neo-phenomenological and embodied approaches were making their first steps within cognitive science.

In the same collection where Csordas’s essay appeared—a collection entitled Perspectives on Embodiment—David Couzens Hoy provides a neat statement of the philosophy of embodiment that was—and perhaps still is—mainstream in the humanities. Discussing the possibility that there might be bodily “invariants”—structures and patterns of bodily interaction shared by all human beings regardless of their culture—Hoy concedes:

> It is not necessary for Foucault to deny that there are invariants. Surely all human beings, whatever their culture or time, have felt pain. The more interesting question is how they have interpreted the experience of pain. . . . [Invariance] need not be denied altogether, but the very universality of such invariants may be so thin as to make them uninteresting, or too thin to answer the more interesting critical questions. (1999, 7)

If such pronouncements have become increasingly problematic in the twelve years after the publication of Hoy’s essay, it is also because of the arguments articulated by philosophers and cognitive scientists working within the embodied cognition hypothesis. These include psycholinguists like Lawrence Barsalou and Rolf Zwaan, cognitive linguists like George Lakoff
and Mark Turner, philosophers like Andy Clark, Shaun Gallagher, Mark Johnson, and Alva Noë, and even AI scientists like Rodney Brooks.

The key, however, is that this work does not deny that a full story about human embodiment would have to take on board the socio-cultural and political elements on which poststructuralist thinkers were concentrating. I would like to stress this point, as it is one of the most misunderstood aspects of cognitive approaches to the humanities—and of cognitive science in general. The level at which cognitive theories of embodiment operate is, surely, that of what Hoy calls the “invariants” of our bodily experience: the neural wirings, sensory apparatus, and sensorimotor capacities that we tend to share with our conspecifics. But these invariants look hardly unimportant, or uninteresting, to me. Indeed, the intuition behind cognitive approaches to embodiment—the intuition, at any rate, that we can draw from them—is that our fleshy, living body is as much a product of our cultures as a constraint on them.

When we talk about grasping the meaning of a sentence, for instance, we are modeling a cognitive process on a physical gesture. Other languages may not use this particular metaphor, but the pervasiveness of bodily metaphors for conceptual activities shows that the sensorimotor possibilities of our body inform human cultures almost to the same extent as cultures inform our body.

Philosopher Mark Johnson (2008) isolates five dimensions of human embodiment: the biological dimension, comprising the largely unconscious physical and chemical processes that sustain us; the ecological dimension, or the body in its relation with the environment; the phenomenological dimension, or the way we experience our body and its states; the social dimension, or the body as implicated in intersubjective encounters with other bodies; and finally the cultural dimension, or the body as a result of cultural learning and conditioning. These levels of analysis are, Johnson argues, irreducible to one another; but they are also deeply intertwined, to the point that every one of them depends in key ways on the others.

And yet, how does one go about examining all these aspects of our embodiment in their interaction and interrelation? The answer that I would like to provide in this talk centers on the idea that Johnson’s dimensions come together in our lived experience of our body in socio-cultural contexts—and that our engagement with narrative provides one of such contexts. Before moving on to narrative, however, I’d like to signal another remarkable convergence—this time towards phenomenology and theorizations of experience.

Embodied cognitive science explicitly acknowledges its debt to phenomenological thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty—and experience figures prominently in this tradition. In their groundbreaking *The Embodied Mind*, from 1991, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch have claimed that experience always involves a sense-making process, or an evaluation. For their part, philosophers of mind like Alva Noë, Kevin O’Regan, and Daniel Hutto have urged that
experience is an embodied exploration of the environment, and that it cannot be reduced to patterns of neural activation.

At the same time, feminist thought has been going back to its phenomenological roots in reaction to poststructuralist views of the body as discourse (see Lennon 2010). In 2005, Iris Marion Young argues for the utility of the concept of “lived body.” “Gender—she writes—is . . . lived through individual bodies, always as personal experiential response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common” (2005, 26). Finally, in his already mentioned essay Csordas sees in bodily experience a meeting ground for biological processes and socio-cultural meanings: whereas poststructuralist thought tended to reduce experience, including the lived experience of the body, to representation and discourse, his own self-styled “cultural phenomenology” seeks to explore “embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self” (1999, 154).

2. Narrative, Experience, Representation

Csordas’s distinction between representation and experience sets the stage for the second part of my talk, where I will offer a few considerations about the connection between narrative and the lived, embodied dimension of experience. Stories are commonly thought of as representational artifacts. The concept of “representation” figures in Porter Abbott’s (2008) minimal definition of narrative, underlying in one form or another nearly all accounts of narrative. Talk about storyworlds or fictional worlds, for example, is shorthand for a representational relation between the semiotic material of a story and a set of existents and events.

Consider Nelson Goodman’s classic theory of representation: “The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it” (1976, 5). This referential link is at the core of representation.

Now, the question is, can an experience be represented in the same sense as objects and events are represented? At first sight we’d be tempted to answer in the affirmative. How many times have we heard saying that a character’s experience is represented in a story—or in a painting, for that matter? But on reflection the question appears more complex than this. For, surely, a painting like Edvard Munch’s Puberty represents a naked girl, a bed, and a shadow projected against the wall. But is the girl’s experience represented in the same sense as those existents are? Is it an object referred to by the painting?

Here the philosophy of mind of Daniel Hutto can help. For, it turns out, the strand of embodied cognitive science to which he belongs—so-called “enactivism”—has also critiqued representationalist approaches to experience. Hutto argues that experience cannot be equated to the construction of mental representations of the world, as traditional cognitivists had it, since it involves interacting with the world in an embodied, hands-on way. We need to be aware, of course, that when philosophers talk about “mental representations” they are not referring to semiotic representations such as the ones I’ve been discussing so far. And yet, Hutto himself points to a possible common ground between cognitive and semiotic representations. Cognitive
representationalism, he shows, is committed to what he calls an “object-based schema,” and experience cannot be subsumed under this paradigm—because experience is an activity, a pattern of action and response, not an object.

A similar argument could be applied to semiotic representations. The experience of the girl is what we take Munch’s painting to express—it is the effect the pictorial representation has on its spectators. Here the old distinction between representation and expression comes to my aid. Experiences, and even the experiences that we attribute to characters, depend on the emotional and aesthetic impact of a representation on its users much more critically than the representation itself does. For a semiotic representation is nothing but the reference to a spatio-temporally locatable entity—be it an event or an existent.

Hence the need to account for the relationship between narrative and experience in more than representationalist terms. Monika Fludernik’s (1996) discussion of the “experientiality” of stories anticipates in many respects my treatment, in particular with regard to the embodied, evaluative dimension of experience.

From the perspective of embodied cognitive science, experience is an interaction with an environment. This interaction is embodied, because it involves the whole of our bodily being, from macroscopic movements and expressions to the microscopic chemical processes that underlie emotional reactions. But the interaction is also evaluative, since it is always already projected against a background of values—partly biological, partly socio-culturally acquired—that guide our engagement with the world. An experience can thus be understood only in terms of a network that includes both the object that is currently at hand and the repertoire of values and past experiential interactions that I call the “experiential background.”

These ideas apply equally well to the relationship between experience and storytelling. My preferred term for this is Wolfgang Iser’s (1978, 127) metaphor of “entanglement.” Stories do not refer to or represent experience, but they are entangled in it. What this means, concretely, is that the experiential impact of narrative depends on its drawing on the experiential background of its recipients.

I will have more to say about the background soon. For now, however, I would like to show you my network model of the experientiality of narrative.
As you can see, the experience provided by engaging with a story—the story-driven experience, as I call it—exists in the intersection between two tensions. The horizontal tension between the strategies of “consciousness-attrition” and “consciousness-enactment” concerns our stance towards the characters that appear in the story. It is an oscillation between a third-person stance, wherein we attribute some experiences to a character on the basis of expressive cues, and a first-person stance, wherein we enact—that is to say, imagine undergoing—the experience that we at the same time attribute to that character. I won’t have time to go into detail about this here, nor to show how this tension interacts with the other, vertical tension, between the recipients’ experiential background and the semiotic instructions. It is on the latter polarity that I would like to concentrate, since I regard it as more fundamental.

What are the semiotic instructions? The short answer would be that they are the representational properties of a story, the way it refers to a set of—real or fictional—events and existents. I like to think of them in terms of instructions because they invite the recipients of a story to imagine some states of affairs. But here comes the tricky part. The distinction between representation and experience is a mere abstraction, because in fact in natural languages representation is usually bound up with experience. When we refer to a set of events and existents, and especially when we string them together into a narrative, we always express, more or less implicitly, the way they interacted with our experiential background. In a word, we express an evaluation. But the key idea is that our evaluation works by pointing to the experiential background of the story recipients. A straightforward example: I wouldn’t be able to understand what my friend means when he describes flying in stormy weather as “terrifying” if I were not familiar with the experience of fear itself, and with the values that are put at stake by finding oneself in that situation.

In short, stories draw on our familiarity with experience by activating what psycholinguists call “experiential traces” (mnemonic traces left by past experiences), and the values that are entangled with them. In doing so, however, stories elicit responses from us that can be more or less consonant with the evaluations implicated in the storyteller’s act of narration. This back-and-forth movement between the story itself and our experiential background is, in my view, constitutive of experientiality.
Now, the problem is that the experiential traces “indexed” by stories are not all of a kind. This is where the idea of the experiential background comes in. We must do justice to the fact that experience is a unified field while at the same time accounting for the diversity in the experiences that we can undergo—and that therefore can be indexed by stories. The concept of the Background—with a capital B—comes from John Searle (1983), who in his theory of intentionality distinguished between a “deep” background, shared by all human beings by virtue of their perceptual and sensorimotor capacities, and a “local,” socio-culturally acquired background. I have tried to further specify this idea in this diagram:

The three inner circles contain experiences proper—mental states with distinctive, qualitative properties, as philosophers of mind would say. There is a way it is like to feel a pain in the ankle (this is what I call “embodied experience”), to smell the sea air (“perceptual experience”) or to be angry with someone (“emotional experience”). The two outer circles include, respectively, higher-order cognitive functions like language, long-term memory, imagination, and the like, and the socio-cultural practices, conventions, and institutions that provide scaffolding for our interaction with other people—anything from marriage to literary forms.

The intuition here is that even though cognitive functions and socio-cultural practices are not experiences in the strict sense, they still inform our experiential interaction with the world. Just a very simple example: fear has evolved as a trigger to “fight or flight responses” to events that involve dangers for the organism’s survival; but socio-cultural factors can hijack the same neural circuitry in order to produce feelings of anxiety—for instance, anxiety about speaking in public.
Up to a point, then, even basic, perceptual and emotional experiences are socio-culturally penetrated. On the other hand, as I have mentioned briefly in the first part of this talk, our conceptual apparatus is tailored to the human body, so that many of our expressions for abstract operations are modeled on more basic, physical gestures: we talk about “seeing” or “grasping” the meaning of something, being able to “follow” what someone is saying, and so on. The upshot is that all the levels of our experiential background are tightly interlinked, and that their interaction gives “depth” to our contacts with the physical and social world; we’ll have to keep in mind this point, as it will play an important role in the next part of this talk.

Before moving on, however, I’d like to stress that the back-and-forth movement between the semiotic instructions of a story and the recipients’ experiential background can involve experiential traces at any level of the background itself. Here are a few examples of how a story can draw on the three “inner” levels, taken more or less at random from the first pages of Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* (2005):

- Embodied experience (proprioception): “the movement is easy, and pleasurable in his limbs, and his back and legs feel unusually strong” (2005, 3).
- Perception (vision): “From the second floor he faces the night, the city in its icy white light, the skeletal trees in the square” (2005, 4).
- Emotion: “An habitual observer of his own moods, he wonders about this sustained, distorting euphoria” (2005, 5).

Readers of this story understand what is going on with the character because they are familiar with similar experiences through their own experiential background. They don’t have to imagine undergoing these experiences, of course; all they have to do is identify some expressive cues in the text and use them to attribute an experience to the character. But still, one can say that even in these simple cases the text relies on the reader’s familiarity with bodily experience to produce its effect on the reader. Sometimes, of course, stories can play with the recipients’ embodiment in much more sophisticated ways, bringing into play complex socio-cultural meanings. Before going into that, however, I would like to say a bit more about the cognitive mechanism that underlies our embodied engagement with texts, riding piggyback on the tension between the semiotic instructions and the experiential background. That is the topic of the third part of this talk.

### 3. Focus on Embodiment

Embodied cognitive science has only recently started to make its way into narrative theory—although Monika Fludernik’s (1996, 30) focus on the link between embodiment and experientiality is an important precedent. I’d like to mention here some recent essays that I consider fairly representative of this trend, including my own *Storyworlds* article (2011), on which I will elaborate at the end of this part. The first is a piece by Ellen Esrock (2004), published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* in 2004, discussing the possible involvement in reading of proprioceptive sensations (such as our awareness of our breathing activity). The
second is a forthcoming article by Czech scholar Anežka Kuzmičová, where she develops a nuanced account of the sense of physical presence in fictional worlds—a phenomenon often labeled “immersion.” Finally, we have another forthcoming article by Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese, one of the discoverers of mirror neurons. The authors put forward a hypothesis concerning the role of the mirror neuron system in imagining storyworlds, through the mediation of what they call “liberated embodied simulations.”

Indeed, despite their differences, one of the moves that all these studies make is establishing a correlation between the reader’s embodiment and a simulative mechanism. We find another significant convergence here. In recent years, the concept of “simulation” has been used in a related sense by psycholinguists like Rolf Zwaan and aestheticians like Amy Copland, Gregory Currie, and others; finally, it has been at the center of a heated debate within the philosophy of mind—the so-called “theory of mind” debate concerning the cognitive underpinnings of intersubjectivity. I won’t have time to go into this, but I think it’s worth stressing that the simulative theory of our engagement with other people and the simulative theory of our engagement with stories, despite sharing some assumptions, can be uncoupled.

The bottom line of the latter theory, in particular with regard to embodiment, is that readers respond to stories through an imaginative mechanism that allows them to simulate an embodied activity in “off-line mode”—that is, without significant behavioral consequences. In my terms, readers enact a physical movement or gesture without, however, actually performing it. The simulated actions can either correspond to a character’s actions, or can be simply implicated in the absence of figural consciousnesses—for example, in spatial descriptions. In both cases, the readers’ embodied imaginings fall in the “embodied” and “perceptual” circles of my diagram of the experiential background. In other words: in order to run embodied simulations of a movement either represented or implicated by a text, readers rely on their familiarity with embodied-perceptual experience and with its sensorimotor patterns. (“Sensorimotor patterns” is the quasi-technical term used by philosophers associated with the enactivist trend for the movements that accompany perception in the different modalities.)

Where the studies mentioned above differ is with respect to the degree of the reader’s awareness of this simulative activity. My take on this issue is that readers don’t have to be reflexively conscious of their embodied imaginings, just as we are not reflexively conscious of our embodiment in the flow of our interaction with the real world. We may invoke the principle of the so-called “transparency of experience” here (see Tye 2000). In normal conditions, we are not aware of the properties of our experience but only of the properties of the objects that we experience. It is when something disrupts the flow of our interaction with the world that we become reflexively conscious of our experience: for example, when I don’t have my glasses on and my vision becomes blurry. Likewise, readers become aware of their imaginings—and of their own bodily involvement—only in particular conditions—that is, when texts deploy devices that make it especially important, and rewarding, to attend to one’s own embodied simulations.
Another question that is worth asking in this connection is: where do the readers’ embodied imaginings come from? Of course, the thrust of cognitive approaches to the reader’s embodiment is that these simulations are not specialized, ad hoc responses to narrative texts. If I told you that yesterday I hurt my foot by stepping on a protruding nail, my hunch is that you would respond by experiencing something vaguely similar to pain—although not quite as intense. In some cases, this may even lead to a facial expression of pain. Both the experience of quasi-pain and its outward manifestation rely on imaginative mechanisms that are—on my hypothesis—largely analogous to the ones we bring to bear on our engagement with stories. The upshot is that embodied imaginings are built into our bodily experience through what we may call the “virtuality” of our bodies.

Talk about “virtual bodies” triggers associations with cyborgs and posthumanism, but in fact Merleau-Ponty saw our body as a “virtual center of action” (2002, 45, translation modified)—in his words—well before the computer age. The idea here is that our embodiment does not coincide with the material boundaries of our body, since it includes the imaginative threads that link us with the environment. Believe it or not, there is a vast scientific literature on how mentally rehearsing a physical exercise can actually improve our performance (see Hall 2001). What this shows is that imagistic thought is integral part of our embodied engagement with the world, very likely has an adaptive function, and precedes linguistic thought both ontogenetically and phylogenetically.

Engaging with narrative latches onto this kind of preverbal thought by way of imaginative simulations. This point sheds light on Thomas Csordas’s claim—in the exposition of his “cultural phenomenology”—that there is a dimension to embodied experience that runs deeper than linguistic and semiotic representations. At the same time, it shows how representations can give us access to this prelinguistic dimension.

Of course, saying that the embodiment of the readers’ imaginings always matters would be overstating the case. Perhaps in most cases it doesn’t make any difference. And yet, I would say that, when it does, embodied cognitive science provides us with a theoretical framework for investigating its consequences on the readers’ meaning constructions.

This brings me to the point that more clearly distinguishes my contribution to this debate from the similar studies mentioned above. As I highlighted in the second part of this talk, our experience is, at the same time, a unified field and a highly diversified one. Johnson’s five dimensions of embodiment span the whole range of our experiential background, from biological processes to socio-cultural practices. It is by virtue of the layering of our embodied experience that our relationship with the body is so complex, so emotionally and culturally nuanced. In a way, then, it could be argued that our body has a pivotal role in bringing the different levels of our experiential background into contact and interaction.
From the standpoint of cognitive linguistics, philosopher Peter Woelert (2011) comes to similar conclusions. Embracing the Husserlian view of the body as a “site of conversion,” Woelert argues that our body allows for communication between basic, bodily experiences and our conceptual apparatus.

I would go even farther than that and suggest that our embodiment is a testament to the living connection between our physical bodies and the body of our culture. This also explains why I don’t see cognitive approaches to embodiment as fundamentally opposed to the humanistic approaches that preceded them. On the contrary, I believe that our efforts should be aimed at meshing together these two lines of investigation.

Hence, on a much more modest scale my work seeks to explore the ways in which the readers’ familiarity with embodied and perceptual experience can be used by authors to bring into play higher-order, socio-cultural meanings and values. My terminology for this would be that stories can draw on the deeper circles of our experiential background—the embodied, the perceptual, and the emotional—in order to produce a “feedback effect” on the outer circle of socio-cultural practices.

Illustrating this point would require some time, but I’d like to give you an idea of how this works through a quick example from Vladimir Nabokov’s novel The Defense. Some of the interpretations that have been put on this work gesture towards a “beyond”—the otherworldly dimension that, according to Véra Nabokov’s often quoted remark, constitutes the main theme of Nabokov’s oeuvre (quoted in Boyd 1999, 253). At the risk of simplification, the argument of scholars like Pekka Tammi (1985) and Vladimir Alexandrov (1991) is that the protagonist—the chessmaster Luzhin—senses this dimension through the chess patterns that he discovers in the world. By contrast, my reading of the novel has it that Nabokov is indeed interested in this “beyond,” but that he points to it against the grain of the protagonist’s obsession with chess. In fact, Luzhin becomes so possessed by chess that he develops a blindness to the experiential texture of the world around him; all he sees is an endless series of chess patterns. In my view, through this negative lens Nabokov wants to show us that—paradoxically—a dimension beyond experience can only be reached via the intensification of experience itself, not via its negation. Some sections of Nabokov’s autobiography lend credibility to this conclusion.

Here, however, I would like to make a case for this interpretation by examining a passage of the novel rarely remarked upon by commentators—the transition between chapter 8 and chapter 9. At the end of chapter 8, Luzhin is on the edge of a nervous breakdown after an exhausting game with Italian chess grandmaster Turati. Through the use of a series of narrative and stylistic devices, including internal focalization, the reader is invited—indeed, almost forced—to simulate the character’s embodied and perceptual experience as he stumbles through Berlin on his way home. A long, internally focalized section culminates in this passage, the ending of chapter 8:
[Luzhin’s] legs from hips to heels were tightly filled with lead, the way the base of a chessman is weighted. Gradually the lights disappeared, the phantoms grew sparser, and a wave of oppressive blackness washed over him. . . . He stretched out a hand to the fence but at this point triumphant pain began to overwhelm him, pressing down from above on his skull, and it was as if he were becoming flatter and flatter, and then he soundlessly dissipated. (2000b, 95)

In the first sentence, we witness the character’s obsession with chess penetrate into the inner core of his experiential background—his proprioceptive awareness of his own body. But readers are more than external observers of Luzhin’s transfiguration into a chess piece, and of his final fainting. Being incapable of imagining what is beyond the distortion filter of the character’s perception, they have to stick to his altered consciousness—and are therefore likely to enact the experience that they, at the same time, attribute to the character on the basis of the textual instructions. At this point the chapter ends.

Chapter 9 begins by presenting the consciousness of someone who tumbles down, tries to stand up, and tumbles down again: “The sidewalk skidded, reared up at a right angle and swayed back again” (2000b, 96). The reader’s first impulse is, of course, to apply what Alan Palmer (2004) would call a “continuing consciousness frame”: linking this bodily experience with Luzhin, they would infer that the character has regained the senses and that he’s trying to get to his feet. In other words, the tendency would be to retain the frame through which readers had read the previous chapter, simulating the experience that they attribute to Luzhin.

However, we soon realize that there is something wrong with this attribution. The next sentence reads: “Günther straightened himself up, breathing heavily, while his comrade, supporting him and also swaying, kept repeating: ‘Günther, Günther, try to walk’” (2000b, 96). Who is Günther? We’ve never seen this name—or character—before, and through a garden-path structure we’ve been tricked into enacting his consciousness instead of Luzhin’s. As we read into the chapter, we learn that Günther is part of a brigade of Berliners who, after a drinking binge, run into Luzhin’s unconscious body, initially mistaking him for one of their companions. What is comical about this misunderstanding is that of course there is all the difference in the world between the distorted experience of a chess artist like Luzhin and the most lackluster of all altered states—alcoholic stupor.

Or perhaps I’d better say that there should be all the difference in the world. For Nabokov’s novel seems to cast doubt on this idea. By flinging the reader from Luzhin’s chess-infused embodied experience to the experience of a (previously unknown) drunkard, it asks us to equate these conditions. So that when we read that Luzhin’s fiancée “could not bear to think that everybody had taken his mysterious swoon for the flabby, vulgar sleep of a reveler” (2000b, 101), we may see through her sentimentality: remembering the perverse pleasure with which the narrator had lingered on Luzhin’s ‘limply floundering body’ (2000b, 97), we may conclude that his “swoon” is not in the least less vulgar (and more arcane) than the German revelers’. In turn,
this substantiates the claim that, for Nabokov, if there is anything beyond human experience, it
can be sensed only in and through the intensification of experience itself. Luzhin, like the
German drinkers—but with an ironic twist, given the great potential of his chess patterns—is on
the wrong track.

The point I’d like to highlight here is that the readers’ imaginative engagement with the
character’s experience, down to its embodied roots, is instrumental in reaching this
interpretation. This doesn’t mean that everyone will agree on this reading, of course. But it does
show that a deep connection can be established—in interpretation—between the reader’s
embodied simulation of the character’s experience and higher-order, socio-cultural meanings (in
this case, Nabokov’s “beyond”). By my lights, this reveals the layeredness of our embodied
experience—and how it can be played on by authors and readers through sophisticated strategies,
and with sometimes unpredictable effects.

**Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?**

In the way of a conclusion, I’d like to say a few words on the future prospects of the
narratological investigation into the reader’s embodiment. One possible avenue, of course, is that
of turning to empirical research. There are plenty of options on the market, from psycholinguistic
studies to neuroscientific brain imaging. Although I don’t want to rule out this possibility, I
remain a little cautious about its viability, for two reasons. On the one hand, the experimental
conditions often force researchers to frame their questions in a way that seems to pare down the
complexity of our interaction with narrative—and literary—texts. On the other hand, as many
neuroscientists would frankly admit, neuroscience is still in its infancy, so that we need to be
extremely careful about applying its methods to complex socio-cultural phenomena like
narrative.

On balance, as I hope to have made clear in this presentation, I’d recommend adopting a three-
pronged approach. First, we want research on the reader’s embodiment to be consistent with the
best theoretical frameworks developed within embodied cognitive science—frameworks that are,
in themselves, supported by empirical studies. Second, we want to be as close as possible to a
phenomenological description of the act of reading, as phenomenology alone can provide a
unified workplace where different aspects and levels of our experiential background converge. In
order to limit the arbitrariness that is usually associated with phenomenological criticism,
however, we also want to assign an important role to intersubjectivity and dialogue as means of
negotiating the reading experience. Finally, we want to be true to the interpretive methods that
are at the core of literary studies and that account for the experiential richness of our engagement
with literature.

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