

## From the University of *Life is Elsewhere* to Boris Čulina

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*Abstract.* I interpret Boris Čulina's paper, which depicts a relationship between a grandfather and a grandchild, by comparing it with Milan Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*. That leads me to a problem of how to interpret the photograph. Warning: this paper contains a frightening tale.

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—*A fellow who lives a narrow life*

*Makes me not his narrow wife!*

I was recently trying to imitate *Life is Elsewhere*, a novel by the famous European author Milan Kundera. It has various characters in it: a poet and his mother, also a father, a grandfather, a friend, an artist, and more. Only a mother and a father appeared in my imitation, which I put in the manuscript section of *PhilPapers*. My imitation loosely varied the opening of the novel. There are some memorable scenes later in the novel, with which I did not get involved.

One such scene is when the poet draws pictures. He is unable to realistically draw the head of a human being, so he replaces the head with the head of a dog. This is the artist's response:

...he observed that it was precisely the combination of animal head and human body which is so bewitching. For that fantastic union of worlds was obviously no accident; the profusion of drawings on this

subject clearly showed that the concept was a compelling one for the boy, something rooted in the mysterious depths of childhood. It would be a mistake to judge the child's talents merely by his ability to reproduce the outer world; anybody can learn to do that. (1986: 30)

I found the contrast between the poet's inability and the artist's interpretation very amusing.

Soon after attempting an imitation, I came upon a manuscript by Boris Čulina, warmly depicting a grandfather and grandchild relationship involving teaching mathematics, as well as learning from the grandchild. I felt criticized. Look, he has managed to put a grandfather-grandchild relationship in his paper! And jealous too, or envious if that is the right word: look at the lovely humanistic portrait. Also there were well-chosen examples of the child making inferences, as if Čulina were saying, "Anyone can do that, or learn to do that!"

At the end of the paper manuscript, just before the bibliography, is a photograph of Čulina's grandchild and some toy animals. A heart covers her face. I presumed that was a symbol of affection. But given that I was interpreting through the lens of a project of Kundera imitation, I suddenly realized that there is another interpretation. Some technical problem has occurred. The heads of toy animals appear but even with the switch to the medium of photography, the human face is absent, replaced by a heart symbol. All photographs of human faces with this camera result in the heart-face problem even. The heart symbol, conventionally the representation of affection, is now the symbol of the refusal of the face. None of these animals look very happy, by the way.

Well, it could be worse. Once upon a time, there was a little girl and she lived

in a house “on the continent” with some toys and some circle patterns too. And then she came to Manchester and she found an apartment with its door open. And she went in. There were some toys there, just like in her house. And some circle patterns too. Then the door shut. Fortunately the light was on. She inspected the toys carefully and said, “These are different from my toys. I don’t like them.” Suddenly a wicked old woman with various degrees and measuring devices appeared, and asked, “Why are you insulting the toys?” And the girl felt frightened! “You haven’t even seen the really bad ones yet,” said the old woman and then laughed wickedly. “I want to go home,” said the girl. “This is your home now,” said the wicked old woman. “Where’s the owner?” asked the girl. “He’s being hounded by the secret police after using the guest Internet at a university bench.” “There’s no Internet here?” “All you can think about is your Internet needs, you selfish girl,” said the woman. Then she beat the child.

## References

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