

Comment on Akiko Nakata, “Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. Moore Hidden in *Transparent Things*”

Brian Boyd, University of Auckland, May 17, 2021

In a 2000 paper, Professor Nakata has already done a thorough job of attempting to explain the explicit and riddling allusion to Wittgenstein in Nabokov’s 1972 novel, *Transparent Things*.¹ That was no easy task, since, as she shows there, nowhere else does Nabokov reveal any knowledge of Wittgenstein’s work, and indeed in 1966 he only attests to his then ignorance of Wittgenstein’s ideas. Moreover the Wittgenstein allusion in *TT* is highly specific, playfully and puzzlingly linked to Wittenberg, and of unclear relevance to the larger designs of the novel. In that earlier paper, Professor Nakata rightly and aptly links the “raining or . . . not raining” (*TT* 91) to a key passage with clear metaphysical implications in *The Gift*, Nabokov’s last Russian novel (published 1937-38, 1952), even if there is almost certainly no causal connection between Wittgenstein on “raining or not raining” in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1921) and *The Gift*’s emblematic scene of not raining mistaken for raining.²

In her new paper, Professor Nakata tries to show the likelihood of an additional allusion in *Transparent Things* to George Moore, Wittgenstein’s distinguished colleague in philosophy at Cambridge, through Wittgenstein’s interest in what he called “Moore’s paradox” (“It’s perfectly absurd or nonsensical to say such things as ‘I don’t believe it’s raining, yet as a matter of fact it really is raining’”).³ Unlike the Wittgenstein allusion, the possible reference to Moore is anything but explicit in *TT*, and given the “raining or not raining” passages in both the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, could be seen as superfluous.

Yet as Professor Nakata shows *TT* also has an insistent pattern of play on the words and letters of the name “Moore,” in the character Julia Moore, and other Moores, and in patterns connected with Romeo (including Giulia Romeo), and, she also suggests, another Shakespeare love-tragedy, *Othello*, *The Moore of Venice*, a play in which the strangling of Desdemona bears a relationship (obvious once Professor Nakata has pointed it out) to the strangling of Armande by Hugh Person at the center of *Transparent Things*. In the chapter of

TT ending with the passage “either raining or pretending to rain or not raining at all. . . . ‘Raining in Wittenberg, but not in Wittgenstein’” (*TT* 91), there is another pointedly featured and foregrounded “more”: recalling his earlier humiliating hike in the wake of Armande and three other young men, which he is now trying to relive, Hugh recollects that “he rested on a rock, and, looking down, seemed to see through the moving mists the making of the very mountains that his tormentors trod, the crystalline crust heaving up with his heart from the bottom of an immemorial *more* (sea)” (*TT* 89). *More* is the Russian word for “sea,” and Russian is Armande’s native language, not Hugh’s, so that both the echo of “immemorial” and the strangeness of the Russian “*more*” in this context bring the “Moore”-more pattern particularly close to the passage that *could* contain an echo of Moore’s paradox. And the two paragraphs that follow “‘Raining in Wittenberg, but not in Wittgenstein.’ An obscure joke in *Tralatitios*,” at the start of the next chapter, again return to the highly unusual “tralatitious” and to Julia Moore (92).

Given the prominence of the “Moore” pattern in the novel, and the relationship of Moore’s paradox to the “raining or not raining” options in *TT*, an allusion to Moore’s paradox could well be part of Nabokov’s design. Yet it remains unlike the undoubted Wittgenstein allusion, which stands out within the rather spare style of *TT*, so much less allusive than Nabokov’s two previous novels, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. But this prominent and provocative allusive riddle has not yet yielded the precise literary payoff that most of Nabokov’s allusions have, even in its Wittgenstein portion, let alone with the possible but much less distinct shadow of Moore.

In her 2000 paper, Professor Nakata refers to Nabokov scholar David Rampton’s adducing another Wittgenstein passage related to rain: “Can I say ‘bububu’ and mean ‘If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk?’” (*PI* 18e). I wonder if at the end of Chapter 23 of *TT* Nabokov has this passage in mind, *as well as* the later passage from *PI* that Professor Nakata cites (“One is inclined to say: ‘Either it is raining, or it isn’t—how I know, how the information has reached me, is another matter.’ But then let us put the question like this: What do I call ‘information that it is raining’? (Or have I only information of this information too?)” (*PI* 356)). For in the chapter that ends with the Wittgenstein allusion, Hugh hikes the mountainside above Witt in the hope of rediscovering the trail where he had walked with Armande, only to be deterred as “The grayness of rain would soon engulf everything. He felt

a first kiss on his bald spot and walked back to the woods and widowhood. . . . It was either raining or pretending to rain or not raining at all, yet still appearing to rain” (91). Partly because it is raining (and because his feet are causing him agony, and because he is not sure of the way or of the chances of retrieving anything of his past with Armande by means of the climb), Hugh turns back from his walk. Both Wittgenstein’s conditional “If it doesn’t rain I shall go for a walk” and his disjunction “Either it is raining or it isn’t” seem conflated here in Nabokov’s retentive and combinative memory—although even if that is the case, it is not clear what the consequences would be for the novel.

Professor Nakata has the frankness and courage to admit she does not have a clear explanation for Moore’s possible implication in *TT*, and the tenacity to try to discover more. My hunch is that the answer is more likely to be found in internal connections within what Nabokov has already supplied in *TT* than through research in the archive of the Society for Psychical Research at Cambridge. The passage under our attention, after all, describes the uncertainty about raining, or pretending to rain, or not raining at all, in terms that

certain old Northern dialects can either express verbally or not express, but *versionize*, as it were, through the ghost of a sound produced by a drizzle in a haze of grateful rose shrubs. “Raining in Wittenberg, but not in Wittgenstein.” An obscure joke in *Tralatitons*.

This incorporates the *word* “ghost”; a strong suggestion, via the *Hamlet* connection with Wittenberg, of the ghost in *Hamlet*; and it purportedly comes from a novel by R., whose ghost, we know from other inferences, is the main narrator of *Transparent Things*. The italics for “*versionize*,” too, seem connected with the second paragraph in the next chapter, where, on behalf of the ghosts interested in Hugh’s fate, the narrator writes:

The most we can do when steering a favorite in the best direction, in circumstances not involving injury to others, is to act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, the most indirect pressure such as *trying* to induce a dream that we *hope* our favorite will recall as prophetic if a likely event does actually happen. On the printed page the words “likely” and “actually” should be italicized too, at least *slightly*, to

indicate a *slight* breath of wind inclining those characters (in the sense of both signs and personae). (92)

But what to make of these provoking internal connections remains obscure.

One final comment. Moore and Wittgenstein both use the contrast between raining or not raining. Perhaps this has a long tradition in philosophy—perhaps all the way from Plato or Aristotle: does Professor Koyama know? In his autobiography Karl Popper, for instance, reports saying, in the discussion after Bertrand Russell presented a paper at the Aristotelian Society in 1936, that part of the problem in Russell’s attempt to find a principle of induction “was due to the mistaken assumption that *scientific knowledge* was a species of *knowledge*—knowledge in the ordinary sense in which if I know that it is raining it must be *true* that it is raining, so that knowledge implies truth”.⁴ Is this a tradition, a “meme” as it were, in philosophy, or is it that raining or not raining merely supplies a stark contingent disjunction that philosophers independently find useful?

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¹ "Wittgenstein Echoes in *Transparent Things*." *The Nabokovian*, no. 45, Fall 2000, 48-53.

² Nabokov, *The Gift* 312.

³ "Moore's Paradox." *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. Routledge, 1993, pp. 207–12.

⁴ Popper, *Unended Quest*, 110.