

From: Shoko Miura

Thank you, Akiko, for your fascinating study of *Transparent Things* (*TT*) relating it to Wittgenstein's philosophical arguments on time. I must also thank Dr. Chonabayashi's questions and Brian Boyd's answers for focusing on Nabokov's opposition to determinism. The exchange gave me a rich source for contemplating the expressions of time in Nabokov's novels and short stories.

My question for Akiko (and, for that matter, Brian, Zoran or anyone following this symposium) is about the terms "simultaneity" and "coincidence" in Nabokov's works such as, for example, "Vane Sisters" and *Ada* regarding Nabokov's anti-deterministic idea of death. I assumed from the Boyd-Chonabayashi exchange that these two terms would reflect Nabokov's refutation of determinism as well as his affirmation of the power of the imagination to transcend the prison-like limits of time. In my understanding of determinism, the past is a sequence of causes that determine the future. Therefore, the present in which we live and think we are making our free choices to form the future is an illusion and we are powerless to change or create the future.

It was therefore intriguing for me that Akiko pointed out in Moore's lecture the use of the present tense for what we would normally use in the past tense, and how Wittgenstein responded to what he called "Moore's paradox": "I don't believe it's raining, yet as a matter of fact it really is raining." As Akiko suggests, Nabokov makes clear his knowledge of this paradox by mentioning a joke including raining and Wittgenstein, and Hugh's subjective thoughts of whether the rain is falling toward the end of Chapter 23 of *TT*. Wittgenstein's point is, of course, that it is a paradox only if the first person is used as the subject, but the paradox depends also on the use of the present tense in the two statements: "I don't believe" and "it is raining." If the first statement was "I didn't believe," there is nothing paradoxical in the sentence. Moore's paradox therefore necessitates the subjective viewpoint existing in the present. This seems essential to Nabokov's concept of "simultaneity" and "coincidence" (an unpredictable occurrence, without predetermination by a cause). If the present tense can be used for what happened in the past, we regain our freedom from the deterministic concept of time. If a narrator could freely exist in both time

present and time past of the story, this is possible.

Then, what does Nabokov's idea of death have to do with his negation of deterministic causes? In *Ada* and *TT*, do the characters' deaths occur without a predetermining cause? Lucette drowns because of what Van and Ada had done to her. In contrast, Hugh Person's death apparently is not related to what he did to Armande. I'm merely guessing that, since Nabokov allows for the possibility of ghosts—who are presumably free of time—narrating stories like “Vane Sisters,” there must be a reason for the difference. Could anyone enlighten me?

From: Akiko Nakata

Thank you very much, Shoko, for the inspiring question regarding deterministic causes in relation to the tense problem that Moore's paradox aroused. I will try to think about the problem of determinism and free will in *TT*.

In the beginning of Ch. 24, Mr. R., a ghost narrator, denies determinism and causal relation:

Direct interference in a person's life does not enter our scope of activity, nor, on the other, tralatitiously speaking, hand, is his destiny a chain of predeterminate links: some “future” events may be likelier than others, O.K., but all are chimeric, and every cause-and-effect sequence is always a hit-and-miss affair, even if the lunette has actually closed around your neck, and the cretinous crowd holds its breath. (92)

As you say, Hugh's death apparently is not related to what he did to Armande while Lucette dies as the result of her suffering what Van and Ada did to her. Indeed, the cause and effect is not so obvious in *TT* as in *Ada*, but we could think that possibly Armande causes Hugh's death.

First, one of the reasons Hugh decides to revisit Switzerland for the last time—not knowing it would be the last, though—is that Armande has appeared repetitively in his dreams, whose settings are Swiss mountains

and Italian lakes, not in an American winter. Armande seems to behave in the way that the ghost narrator explains how they (ghosts) can influence their favorites. He insists they can only indirectly lead their favorites to go in the best direction “by a breath of wind” or by “*trying* to induce a dream that we *hope* our favorite will recall as prophetic if a likely event does actually happen” (92).

Second, we can find Armande among the flames in the lethal fire, and moreover, she finally pushes Hugh to death in fire and smoke.

Now flames were mounting the stairs, in pairs, in trios, in redskin file, hand in hand, tongue after tongue, conversing and humming happily. It was not, though, the heat of their flicker, but the acid dark smoke that caused Person to retreat back into the room; excuse me, said a polite flamelet holding open the door he was vainly trying to close. . . . and he realized before choking to death that a storm outside was aiding the inside fire. (103)

The flames happily mounting the stairs remind the reader of Armande and her athlete fellows. The flamelet seems Armande, the only woman in a party of sportsmen, who is once called “the little one” by a member (50). “Excuse me” also relates the flamelet to Armande, who once absents herself with the polite apology during the first date with Hugh (54). The other character who uses the apology in the novella is Tamworth, Mr. R.’s secretary, but we do not know whether he is dead at the time of the fire, and even if he is dead, he cannot be called “flamelet.”

There is no description in the text illuminating that Armande feels resentment at her death and wants to revenge herself on Hugh. However, if we remember that most women around her criticize “her rather pathetic little tricks of attack and retort,” her aiding with the death wind may be understandable for the reader (64). For Hugh, it is a tragedy that he strangles his loved wife while he is dreaming a nightmare, never in purpose, but for Armande, it is nothing but a violent, cruel murder, and she could think that the perpetrator must be punished. From the viewpoint, Hugh’s death can be also the effect of a cause.

On the other hand, it is not easy to say how much Hugh's death is deterministic. As we have seen above, the ghosts seem to be able to indirectly influence their favorites, and Armande succeeds in leading Hugh to return to Switzerland by appearing in his dreams. Hugh is conscious of something or someone warning him to leave Witt for somewhere else, but he disregards the warning and dies during the night. As the narrator says, "after all it was for him to decide, for him to die, if he wished" (99).

The ghosts can see freely through the spaces and existing time—present and past—but they can see future only partially, as the ghost narrator admits at the beginning of the novella, "the future is but a figure of speech, a specter of thought." (1)

Could anyone enlighten us?