

The Role of Ghostly Influences in Nabokov's Transparent Things (In Honour of Professor Yukito Nakano On the Occasion of His Retirement)

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The Role of Ghostly Influences in Nabokov's *Transparent Things*

Brian T. Quinn

Introduction

Throughout the works of Vladimir Nabokov one can find numerous references to ghost, spirits, spectral images and shadows both in his earliest works in Russian as well as right up until his last stories written in English in the 1970's. In Nabokov's novels and stories it can even be said that many of the characters who supposedly die in his tales do not, in fact, completely disappear, but often return to haunt the protagonists to varying degrees. Therefore, if the reader carefully looks for the presence of such ghostly beings throughout the novels of Nabokov, he will be quite surprised to find them appearing almost everywhere to some extent. In addition, one of the most important aspects of such lingering spirits is that they frequently possess the ability to influence the course of events. However, Nabokov is very careful to keep such ghostly presences as invisible as possible even though, at the same time, he often provides the reader with constant hints regarding their ghostly activity. In many of Nabokov's most famous works the "glow" of a lost father (such as with Fyodor in *The Gift*) or a lost love (Mira in *Pnin*) often represent a spiritual presence which can either be positive or negative depending on the circumstances.

This brief study will attempt to show how the presence of ghosts plays an overwhelmingly important and critical role in the development of Nabokov's second to last novel, *Transparent Things*, published in 1973 just four years before the author's death. It will also be demonstrated that this short novel provides great insight into the workings of spirits throughout Nabokov's entire oeuvre. Besides indicating some of the

many instances in which spirits can be found hovering around Nabokov's heroes, it will also be shown that many of the living characters who die in the course of the novel do not disappear but continue to live on, so to say, as supernatural spirits who still possess a faint influence upon the actions of the living.

The brief novel or novella *Transparent Things* was very poorly received by critics and was most frequently attacked as being just another of the author's stylistic games. Andrew Field labels it as something which is no more than "an overly cute retelling of Nabokov's life and career."¹⁾ However, it appears that many critics have simply misunderstood the objectives that Nabokov originally set out to achieve in this work. Nabokov later even stated that "various ghosts intrude upon the novel."²⁾ Bearing this in mind, let us take a closer look at the text and see what role ghosts actually play in the novel's development as a whole.

When reading *Transparent Things* on the superficial level, the story first appears as a rather straightforward tale. The protagonist of the story is a man named Hugh Person (which we later discover is actually an acronym for You, Person) who works as an editor for a large publishing company and has just returned to Switzerland in order to retrace and rediscover his own past. He is repeatedly shocked, however, to discover that the reality or actuality of his past does not quite mesh with that of his memory.

In classic Nabokovian fashion the story unfolds in a kind of reverse fashion in which numerous minor incidents get a thorough presentation (such as the invention of pencil lead) while events that would normally be considered major events (such as the murder of his wife and his ensuing eight years in prisons and mental asylums) get very brief mention. The reason for such a literary strategy has to do with Nabokov's concern for that which lies below the superficial text. What is of much interest is that throughout the novel Hugh Person, who as mentioned previously is

1) *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* p. 368.

2) *Nabokov & Others* p. 175.

a professional editor, attempts to edit the text of his own life (or reality) and this effort is continually contrasted to the texts of the famous writer named "R." who also happens to be the writer whose works Person edits for a living. These two texts can then be further contrasted to the text the reader deals with as presented by the narrator and finally compared to any ulterior motives of the author, Nabokov, regarding his overall designs toward the text.

Typical for the works of Nabokov, the reader is therefore faced with multilayers of text through which he must try to find some sense and meaning. It is not my objective in this paper to analyze the various layers of text since I believe that the reader can much more clearly comprehend the author's ultimate intentions if the reader but looks closely at the presence of ghosts and the role they play in the story itself.

Right from the first paragraph the novel opens with the narrator speaking out from beyond in the mysterious ghostly world. Various ghosts are already present but only one main ghost will accompany both Hugh Person and the reader along the novel's journey. Most of the ghosts we encounter want the hero, Hugh (i.e., they want to kill him and bring him into the netherworld with them), and throughout the story they continually try and bring him across the threshold from the world of the living to that of the dead. The story begins with the narrator/ghost trying to help and guide Hugh, who has apparently already died, through the difficult transition to the hereafter :

"Here's the person I want, Hullo, person !

Doesn't hear me

Hello, person ! What's the matter, don't pull me.

I'm not bothering him. Oh, all right.

Hello, person (last time, in a very small voice)

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, Penguin Books 1975) p.7

Much later in the novel we realize that this narrator spirit is none other than that of the deceased author "R." We are able to recognize him by his

trademark tendency, as a non-native English speaker, to mercilessly mangle and misuse common idiomatic English, especially cute little fixed idioms. There is no doubt, however, that the story starts with a congregation of spirits trying to help poor Hugh Person to meet his fate.

Since Hugh Person has supposedly just died, we learn that he has not yet learned how to perceive things in his new spiritual form of existence and as a “novice”, the narrator describes what new levels of perception are needed to understand this new level of consciousness :

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines. (TT p.7)

In this passage Nabokov elucidates on how the dead are able to see things in a multi-dimensional or transparent way and also that mortals such as Hugh must slowly learn to develop their new senses. However, even though the narrator, R., wants to actively help Hugh, the other ghosts prevent him from doing so too actively and thus we learn the first rule of Nabokov’s ghosts, which is that they will only be able to influence mortals indirectly and thus the hero must learn to make the transition from life to death on his own.

As mentioned above, ghosts can indeed be found everywhere throughout the story which roughly revolves around Hugh’s four trips to Switzerland ; the first trip with his recently widowed father at the age of twenty-two, the second some ten years later to meet the writer R. in conjunction with his editing responsibilities and where he also, by chance, happens to meet his future wife, Armande. Hugh’s third trip takes place the same year as his second when he and his new bride return to Switzerland from New York to visit her dying mother. The final trip takes place at the start of the novel when he is now forty years old and has returned to hopefully retrace the steps of his past.

Chronologically speaking, the first ghost appears during Hugh's first visit with his father just after the death of his mother. Father and son ostensibly make the trip to help the father somehow forget his grief, yet the mother's dead spirit is already calling out to the father to join her in death and he is but a shadow of his former self. After barely arriving, the father ironically dies at a haberdashery shop while trying on a pair of new slacks :

Awkward Person Senior had been struggling to push a shod foot through the zigzag of a narrow trouser leg when he felt a roaring redness fill his head. He died before reaching the floor, as if falling from some great height, and now lay on his back, one arm outstretched, umbrella and hat out of reach in the tall looking glass. (TT p.20)

That same night when Hugh returns to his hotel, he already feels his father's ghostly presence :

It was not a ghost, however, that prevented him from falling asleep but the stuffiness. (TT p.24)

In this brief passage we see a typical ploy of Nabokov to have his protagonist overtly deny something only to indicate, in reality, exactly the opposite. Thus, Hugh indeed feels his father's ghostly presence. Hugh is then ever so slightly urged by the father to jump to his death from the hotel window. Hugh, as if in a trance, goes on to throw open both windows and looks down at the street below :

it was all very dismal and very distant, and our acrophobic Person felt the pull of gravity inviting him to join the night and his father. (TT p.24)

There is no question that a ghost is indeed present and inviting Hugh to

kill himself, yet Hugh is able to eventually overcome such temptation only by sitting up all night in an armchair to prevent himself from jumping out of the window during his sleep. Here, at the early age of twenty-two, Hugh already both instinctively and subconsciously knows to protect himself from the intruding influences of dead spirits. However, as he grows older his ability to counter such influences grows steadily weaker.

One of the most important contributions of the novel *Transparent Things* is the way in which Nabokov, for the first time, clearly defines both the capabilities and the limits of his ghosts through the various ramblings of the narrator ghost, R. The reader gradually sees that though numerous spirits may be present and hover close to living beings, they are essentially incapable of directly influencing a person's life and can only exert the faintest of spiritual nudges to send characters into a desired direction. R. clarifies that :

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 chemic, 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. (TT p. 95)

R's ghost then goes on to explain how the ghosts in Nabokov's world may only exert the slightest of pressure on characters to move them in a desired direction :

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 actually does happen. (TT p. 95)

Thus, Nabokov's ghosts can only act in the most obscure ways such as hoping to induce a dream that might somehow effect the course of events in a man's life.

Near the end of the story, R.'s ghost even describes the typical idiosyncrasies of the newly dead, or "novices" as he calls them. R.'s ghost warns such novices not to sink into the past if they want to retain a grasp on the present. He then goes on to explain how :

Novices love to watch such fascinating trifles as the shallow hollow in a pillow as seen through a person's forehead, frontal bone, rippling brain, occipital bone, the back of the head, and its black hair. In the beginning of our always entrancing, sometimes terrifying, new being that kind of innocent curiosity (a child playing with wriggly refractions in brook water, an Africa nun in an arctic convent touching with delight the fragile clock of her first dandelion) is not unusual especially if a person and the shadows of related matter are being followed from youth to death. (TT p.105)

Nowhere else in Nabokov's works are we afforded comparable insights into the workings of such ghostly influences in his literary world, and thus *Transparent Things* helps to also provide a deeper understanding to previous works such as *Pale Fire*, *Ada* and *The Gift* in which numerous ghosts and spirits can also be found.

The main reason for Hugh Person to return to Switzerland is, of course, to try and somehow rediscover the essence of his beloved wife, who died tragically eight years earlier. With biting irony, it turns out that it was Hugh himself who strangled his wife to death while in a strange somnambulist trance and after serving eight years in a series of prisons and mental institutions, he now wants to make a final pilgrimage to the place where they originally met. After leaving prison, Hugh at first wants only to forget his sorrow, but Hugh's dead wife Armande constantly appears in his dreams and gently influences him to return to Switzerland and relive his past. Yet, we later discover that Armande's only goal is to

get revenge and lead him to his eventual own death. Armande does not limit her appearances to Hugh's dreams alone, and after his arrival at the Hotel Ascot her presence can be felt everywhere. It is her ghost that helps him remember their former room number. Later it is her ghost that leads a Swiss businessman to bring up the topic of a man who murdered his spouse some eight years before, just as Hugh had done. Armande's ghost was present even in the man's speech since his :

English resembled in many ways that of Armande, both in grammar and intonation. (TT p.99)

The stranger then continues to refer to an article on the past murder and talk about how unjust it was that such a murderer (Hugh) could already be free after such a short time in prison :

It was appalling, continued the Swiss gentleman, using an expression Armande had got from Julia (now Lady X), really appalling how crime was pampered nowadays. (TT p.99)

Even the hotel receptionist who informs Hugh of the "good news" that his former room has suddenly become available also speaks "with his wife's habitual intonation." It is therefore clear that Armande is absolutely everywhere, thoroughly pervading the entire scene until she can successfully bring about Hugh's death.

It is also interesting to note that not all ghosts in Nabokov's world are evil or constantly trying to lead unsuspecting people to their untimely deaths. As mentioned earlier, Fyodor's father is a kind of guiding light for his son in *The Gift* and numerous other good spirits can be found scattered among Nabokov's other works. In the same manner, Hugh has also been haunted throughout his life by a kind of ghostly guardian angel, called an "umbral companion," who time and again has saved Hugh from doom :

All his life, we are glad to note our Person had experienced the curious sensation (known to three famous theologians and two minor poets) of there existing behind him—at his shoulder, as it were—a larger, incredibly wiser, calmer and stronger stranger, morally better than he. This was, in fact, his main ‘umbral companion’ and had he been without that transparent shadow, we would not have bothered to speak about our dear Person. (TT p.101)

Therefore, our hero is not just surrounded by ghosts who are out to get him but does have a helping spirit who may be able to save him yet. It is indeed this same kindred spirit that, just before being led to his death, warns Hugh to escape his fate.

Person was conscious of something or somebody warning him that he should leave Witt there and then

He did not heed his shadow, and fundamentally he may have been right. (TT p.101)

It seems by the end of the novel that Hugh simply had no more strength or energy to escape the muse-like music of Armande’s ghost. In addition, he may have felt that it was finally time that he join his dead wife since he had, in fact, been guilty of her death.

Hugh has several more encounters with his dead wife’s spirit. While trying to recapture an “unforgettable kiss” that he had once shared with her in the mountains, he searches the mountain path for the precise location of their previous idyllic meeting. He is unable, however, to find the exact spot but while he wanders in the mountains he notices a large white butterfly (who, it turns out, happens to be Armande’s spirit). We are told that Hugh dislikes insects and would normally have just squashed the bug with his foot. But for some reason he somehow cannot bring himself to do it.

Nevertheless, a mood of unusual kindness made him surmount the

impulse to crush it under a blind boot. (TT p.93)

In this passage the boot is blind because it cannot recognize the presence of Armande, who, we have been told earlier in the story, had been a collector of butterflies in her youth.

Shortly thereafter, when he has given up his search for the unforgettable spot, Armande's spirit causes a raindrop to fall on Hugh's head.

He felt a first kiss on his bald spot and walked back to the woods and widowhood. (TT p.93)

On his way back to town, Hugh somehow senses the overwhelming presence of spirits in the air and the eerie atmosphere is described by the narrator as :

It was either raining or pretending to rain or not raining at all, yet still appearing to rain in a sense that only 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. (TT p.94)

In this passage we can clearly see how Nabokov often casually and almost innocently uses ghostly terminology whenever such spirits are indeed present. With so many hints from the author the ghosts are not so hard to discern.

Another scene in which ghostly specters appear is when Hugh first arrives at the hotel in order to ultimately die at the Ascot Hotel and asks the receptionists if Kronig, the old hotel manager, was still around. The receptionist replies :

'He died last year'. . . .

'So there was nobody who might remember me ?'

'I regret,' she said with his late wife's habitual intonation. (TT p.7)

Besides Armande's ever present ghost we later learn that Kronig has committed suicide and his ghost is not only ever present but it is strongly hinted that the ghost of the old hotel manager plays no small role in the hotel fire which eventually engulfs the hotel and brings Hugh to his violent death. However, in the above scene, in typical Nabokov fashion, it is when the protagonist boldly assumes Kronig is not present that the reader should understand that most probably the opposite is true.

Nabokov also often uses the word "dust" to describe the presence of spirits. Such dust can usually be seen rising up in a sunbeam off the floor or even spinning and revolving in a spiral. In *Transparent Things*, R's ghost uses this same expression :

'Dust to dust' (the dead are good mixers, that's quite certain, at least.
(TT p.96)

Here the narrator infers that ghosts can be present in any object or realm of the senses in order to influence their object of desire—usually a human being.

Near the end of the novel, while the reader by now is merely waiting for Hugh's expected death, R.'s ghost suddenly asks rhetorically :

What had you expected of your pilgrimage, Person ? A mere mirror rerun of hoary torments ? Sympathy from an old stone ?
. . . . Something else had made him revisit dreary drab Witt.
Not a belief in ghosts. (TT p.97)

Here R.'s ghost taunts the hero over his imminent demise. Hugh's exclamatory denial of ghosts is the most indicative proof of a deep subconscious belief in them. Yet, for the reader who may still have any doubt as to the real forces behind the actions of the story, Nabokov explicitly declares through the voice of R.'s ghost :

Yet something connected with spectral visitations had impelled him to come all the way from another continent. (TT p.97)

“Sprectral visions” is one of Nabokov’s code words for the presence of ghosts. Thereafter, R.’s ghost goes on to describe how Hugh’s deceased wife has indeed been with him everywhere throughout his journey—in the mountains, the lakes and even in his dreams. She also appears one last time in a dream that Hugh has just before his death by fire in their former hotel room :

At this moment of her now indelible dawning through the limped door of his room he felt the elation a tourist feels, when taking off Here comes the air hostess bringing drinks, and she is Armande and now the plane explodes with a roar and retching cough. (TT p.106)

His dead wife has indeed tricked him into a death trap from which there is no return. However, instead of feeling horror at the prospect of death he subconsciously feels the thrill of someone taking off in a jumbo jet for a far away journey. It is then that he wakes up retching and coughing himself in a hellish inferno that had only moments before been a cozy bed in a comfortable hotel.

It is at this point that the cyclical nature of the novel comes full turn as the end of the novel now beings to mesh perfectly with the beginning pages—and the multitude of ghosts beckon to him in a roar of shouting voices that he mistakes for a storm. The flames are now “humming happily” on the last page just as the ghosts had been “humming happily” to themselves on the first page of the text. We finally return to the first scene in which the spirits had been attempting to aid Hugh after his supposed death and which the narrator describes as :

. . . . not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one

state of being to another. (TT p.107)

Thus, the short novel ultimately ends at exactly the same point at which it had begun, that is, at the threshold between life and death. The hero has traveled through a kind of time tunnel only to find that his true destiny lies in his own death and, at the same time, his own rebirth into a new level of consciousness while the reader is left to assume that Hugh does successfully make the transition to the hereafter.

In this rather brief paper I have attempted to show how Nabokov frequently employs the presence of ghosts and other spirits in many of his works and that the presence of such spirits in his second to last novel *Transparent Things* is of supreme importance in order to comprehend what author was trying to achieve. In addition, the unusually direct hints and explanations regarding the role and capabilities of ghosts in this late work provides a wealth of information for those who are interested in better understanding the role of such ghosts in his other more famous works.

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