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## Nabokov's Afterlife: A Reply to Brian Boyd

Martin Häggglund

**B**RIAN BOYD'S REPLY TO my essay proceeds from the assumption that I appeal to Nabokov's philosophy of time in order to make my argument and that I charge Boyd with having misconstrued Nabokov's philosophy. This is not the case. I clearly acknowledge that Boyd's arguments stem from a "reconstruction of Nabokov's metaphysics" and that Nabokov himself sometimes describes time as a "prison" that he wants to escape. However, my essay seeks to elucidate what I call the logic of chronophilia in Nabokov's writing. This logic opens a new way of reading Nabokov's work, which does not rely on Nabokov's own philosophy but rather reveals the internal contradictions in the metaphysical system reconstructed by Boyd. Thus, Boyd's lengthy demonstration that his reading is defensible on the level of Nabokov's declared intentions does not affect my argument. The "evidence" presented by Boyd is well known to me from reading his books and does not add anything new to the picture. Indeed, the philosophical position that Boyd rehearses in his reply is precisely the position that my essay shows is incoherent. It does not become any more coherent just because the incoherence in question can be traced back to Nabokov's own thinking. My argument is rather that the logic of chronophilia undercuts the Nabokovian metaphysics that Boyd assumes must serve as the foundation for a reading of his work.

Boyd's reconstruction of Nabokov's metaphysics hinges on the assumption that the affirmation of mortal life is compatible with the desire for immortality. In contrast, I argue that the affirmation of mortal life allows us to read the purported desire for immortality against itself. If one did not affirm mortal life, there would be no desire to save anything from death, since only mortal life can be threatened by death. Thus, without the affirmation of mortal life, there would be no fear of death and no desire to live on. But for the same reason, the idea of immortality cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. If one desires to *live on* after death, one does not desire immortality, since to live on is to remain subjected to temporal finitude. The state of immortality cannot answer to the desire to save the mortal, since it would put an end to the time of mortal life.

Thus, religious sages have had good reasons to preach *detachment* from the mortal as the path to the salvation of immortality. If one is bound to the mortal, the positive can never be released from the negative. Any mortal bond is a double bind, since whatever is desirable cannot be dissociated from the undesirable fact that it will be lost. This is why I argue that there can be no chronophilia without chronophobia. The desire for mortal life (chronophilia) cannot overcome the fear of death (chronophobia). On the contrary, the desire for mortal life is opposed to death and tries to defer it for as long as possible. But since mortal life is essentially linked to death, it is internally bound to what it opposes.

What I find compelling about Nabokov's work is how he stages such a constitutive *attachment* to the mortal and thus undermines the idea that immortality is desirable. In my essay, I analyze a passage in *Ada* where Van Veen makes this point by emphasizing that immortality would cancel out "our marvelous mortality."<sup>1</sup> I also provide an extensive analysis (in note 7) of how Boyd misreads this passage and its implications in his book on *Ada*. Instead of responding to this detailed argument, Boyd takes me to task for failing to engage with his work on *Ada*, when he in fact fails to engage with my critique of his work on *Ada*.<sup>2</sup>

Boyd alleges that my reading of *Ada* is "hardly original" and that my ideas have been anticipated in his own work, but he does not provide a single example to substantiate this claim. Moreover, it is clear that Boyd has not grasped the basic logic of my argument. According to Boyd, I discuss "the failure of Van and Ada to make of their love a timeless paradise." This is quite inaccurate. My argument is that time is intrinsic to the desired paradise itself, which means that there is no ambition (and hence no failure) to make it "timeless." The drama of desire in *Ada* does not stem from an unfulfilled longing for a timeless paradise, but from the fact that the threat of negation is internal to the paradise that is affirmed.

Boyd also claims that Nabokov has disproved my argument that a timeless consciousness could never reinvestigate or discover anything. Boyd's example is a passage from *Transparent Things*, which is narrated by the ghosts of characters from the story. However, this example proves the opposite of what Boyd thinks it proves. There is nothing that indicates that the ghosts are in possession of a timeless consciousness. On the contrary, their narration of the past is clearly marked by a temporality that is inherent in their own actions and thoughts; they "stop and recoil," they "haste to identify," and so on. Far from being immortal, these ghosts are *living on* after death and remain subjected to temporal finitude. Boyd himself has elsewhere conceded that the ghosts in *Transparent Things* cannot predict the future.<sup>3</sup> But this does not lead Boyd to reflect on how Nabokov installs time in the very idea of the afterlife. If the ghosts answer

to Nabokov's vision of the afterlife, they consolidate my argument that this vision is concerned with temporal survival rather than immortality. As I demonstrate in my essay, the Nabokovian protagonists who narrate their own lives are all in the position of ghosts who live on, since they have survived a past that they return to in memory. They try to reconstruct a past that otherwise would be lost but are themselves exposed to an unpredictable future, which opens both the chance of living on and the threat of erasure. This double bind cannot be resolved, since the death that the narrators defend against is internal to what is defended. It is the staging of such a double bind that makes Nabokov's writings so powerful and allows them to live on beyond his own intentions.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

NOTES

- 1 Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969; New York: Penguin, 1971), 458.
- 2 Boyd points out that I do not refer to the second, online edition of his book on *Ada*, but this edition does not alter any of the theses with which I take issue.
- 3 See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 600–01.