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"Uniform Translation": The Opening Paragraph of *King, Queen, Knave*

Despite his lifelong exploration of the texture of time, Vladimir Nabokov was never particularly sympathetic to, nor conversant with, Einstein's theories of relativity. This is not to say that he was generally unaware of or indifferent to modern physical science: as Stephen Blackwell has noted, "in every novel from *Invitation to a Beheading* on, a total of ten novels, Nabokov made major or minor use of concepts from twentieth-century advances in theoretical physics." (Blackwell, 165) Insofar as Einstein figured in this engagement, however, it was largely as an antagonist. As Nabokov put it in one of the most boring pronouncements in his most boring book, "While not having much physics, I reject Einstein's slick formulae" (*Strong Opinions*, 116) Coming from someone without "much physics" (after all, "one need not know theology to be an atheist" [*Ibid*.]) this is rather silly; coming nearly a quarter century after Einstein's "slick formulae" were validated, to horrific effect, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is simply ridiculous. But while Nabokov never could reconcile himself to the relativization of *time*, there is evidence, circumstantial and literary, that he did accommodate his imagination to the relativization of *space*.[1]

The story of Einstein's formulation of relativity and his subsequent rise to fame (patent office, eclipse) has been well told many times, but it is worth reviewing the key details as they relate to Nabokov's biography.

After "generalizing" his theory of relativity in 1915, Einstein published a popular exposition: *Über die spezielle und die allgemeine Relativitätstheorie (gemeinverständlich)*. At that time, Einstein was a well-regarded member of the German intellectual establishment, and a reading public that thought nothing of working through Kant's three critiques for its recreation was curious enough about the new theory that the book went through five editions over the next three years. This still wasn't enough to

[1] Of course, neither Einstein nor any serious student of physics would allow "spacetime" to be decoupled in this way. But the interrelationship between the two phenomena is irrelevant to what, as we shall see below, Nabokov took from Einstein.

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merit a translation from the German. But when the experimental confirmation of the theory in 1919 made Einstein a global icon, his book was quickly translated into every major European language, as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Hebrew.

Just over a month before a November 7, 1919 *Times* headline announced "NEWTONIAN IDEAS OVERTHROWN," Nabokov was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge. (Boyd, 166) Just under a year later, the first translation of Einstein's popular treatment of relativity appeared, in English, as *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*. Nabokov might very well have read it in that edition. If he didn't, he certainly could have read the Russian translation that appeared the following year – О специальной и общей теории относительности (общедоступное изложение) – in an edition published by Slovo, the Berlin-based émigré publishing house founded by (among others) his father. (Boyd, 177)

As mentioned above, the portion of Einstein's theory that seems to have impressed itself most deeply on Nabokov at this time was the relativization of space. To place this notion into context, we have to step back a few hundred years, to the (on Einstein's terms) bad question that inaugurated modern science: does the Earth revolve around the Sun, or does the Sun revolve around the Earth?

The great Ptolemaic system, a synthesis of ancient knowledge developed over millennia and further refined in the centuries after his fundamental treatise, *The Almagest,* was compiled, is premised on a stationary Earth. The Copernican Revolution, the *cinquecento* catalyst of the Scientific Revolution, postulates a stationary Sun. Which position is "true"? As simple as this question sounds, nobody before Einstein answered it clearly.

Modern astronomy is, of course, rigorously Copernican: "Stationary Earther" isn't quite as pithy as "Flat Earther," but it would serve equally well as an epithet for a perfectly ignorant dolt. That said, our daily speech is completely Ptolemaic: we speak of a Sun that "rises" and "sets," where a rigorous Copenicanism would force us to speak, in the passive voice, of a Sun that was "revealed" and "concealed." What accounts for this tension?

Einstein provided the answer: the Ptolemaic and Copernican system share a fundamental, and fundamentally false, assumption: that there is some body in the universe that is at "absolute rest." Einstein banished this idea from physics altogether (see his first paper on Special Relativity at Einstein, 2:140). Instead, he insists that "every description of events in space involves the use of a rigid body to which such events have to be referred." That is to say, we can *designate* a "stationary body" for a given purpose – despite the fact that, from a different perspective, that body is clearly in

motion[2] – and make observations *relative to it*. If we take the Earth as our rigid "reference body," then it would be accurate to say that a given reader sits still at her desk. Of course, this would match the reader's subjective experience: because the Earth is moving in a constant direction, and at a constant speed, nobody on it will "feel" its motion or be able to measure it. This kind of motion is known as "uniform translation": "'uniform' because it is of constant velocity and direction, 'translation' because although the [body] changes its position … it does not rotate in so doing." (Einstein, 6:261) The only way for someone on such a body to realize that it is moving is to "look outside." Then again, billions of observers did precisely that, and concluded that the Sun was moving along the ecliptic, rather than that the Earth orbiting the Sun. "Relative" to where they were making their observations, this was perfectly true.

From the perspective of an observer on, say, the Moon, the picture is completely different: from *that* perspective, the reader and their desk are rotating at some speed up to 1,670 kilometers per hour.[3] And from the perspective of an observer *outside* the Solar System, they are moving more rapidly still: "in virtue of its motion in an orbit round the sun, our earth is comparable with a railway carriage travelling with a velocity of about 30 kilometres per second." (Einstein 6:264)

The bit about the "railway carriage" is a reminder that Einstein did not explain his theory in celestial terms, but in quite pedestrian (or, rather, locomotive) ones. In fact, the most famous and memorable parts of his book are the various thought experiments involving passengers and observers on railway carriages and embankments, dropping rocks and bouncing balls and timing lightning strikes. Summing up the "special" theory of relativity before moving on to his exposition of the "general" theory, Einstein returns to the railway station, with an image that clearly made a strong impression on Nabokov:

> *[E]very motion must be considered only as a relative motion.* Returning to the illustration we have frequently used of the embankment and the railway carriage, we can express the fact of the motion here taking place in the following two forms, both of which are equally justifiable:
>
> (a) The carriage is in motion relative to the embankment.

[2] This understates matters somewhat, because there is no body that we might choose that *isn't* in motion from another perspective. *There is no absolute rest.*

[3] I am assuming that they aren't seated at the exact North or South pole—the ("stationary") axes of rotation.

> (b) The embankment is in motion relative to the carriage.
>
> In (a) the embankment, in (b) the carriage, serves as the body of reference in our statement of the motion taking place. If it is simply a question of detecting or of describing the motion involved, it is in principle immaterial to what reference-body we refer the motion. (Einstein 6:310, emphasis added)

With that, we can turn to the opening paragraph of *King, Queen, Knave*[4]:

> The huge black clock hand is still at rest but is on the point of making its once-a-minute gesture; that resilient jolt will set a whole world in motion. The clock face will slowly turn away, full of despair, contempt, and boredom, as one by one the iron pillars will start walking past, bearing away the vault of the station like bland atlantes; the platform will begin to move past, carrying off on an unknown journey cigarette butts, used tickets, flecks of sunlight and spittle; a luggage handcart will glide by, its wheels motionless; it will be followed by a news stall hung with seductive magazine covers—photographs of naked, pearl-gray beauties; and people, people, people on the moving platform, themselves moving their feet, yet standing still, striding forward, yet retreating as in an agonizing dream full of incredible effort, nausea, a cottony weakness in one's calves, will surge back, almost falling supine. (*King, Queen, Knave*, 1)

Which is to say: "The embankment is in motion relative to the carriage."

Perhaps Nabokov arrived at this vision independently of Einstein? Or perhaps Einstein's ideas were "in the air" around Cambridge and Berlin, and Nabokov caught wind of his thought experiments? Absent contemporary archival evidence proving that Nabokov read Einstein's relativity pamphlet (in English or in Russian) it is impossible to say for certain. In either

[4] It is well known that Nabokov made considerable changes to *Король, дама, валет* when he brought it over into English (see Grayson 90ff) but the opening paragraph of *King, Queen, Knave* (reproduced here) is a literal translation of the Russian.

case, these formulations of the same vision allow us to compare two of the twentieth century's greatest imaginations.

Einstein's metaphors are certainly vivid: if you have spent any time working through the intricacies of his theories, bouncing balls on railway carriages and embankments are a permanent part of your mental furniture. And yet Einstein's imagination appears, through these thought experiments and his descriptions of them, to be extremely *schematic*. The passenger on the railway carriage and the observer on the embankment are undifferentiated. For my part, I imagine black suits and bowler hats and can't quite make out any facial features. This should be familiar. Elsewhere in the book, Einstein imagines a railway car outfitted with a framework of measuring rods extended at the x, y and z axes, and he sends the train so outfitted "travelling … across the whole of space." "Without committing any fundamental error, we can disregard the fact that in reality these frameworks would continually interfere with each other, owing to the impenetrability of solid bodies." (Einstein, 6:280-1) We've seen this before, too.



Figure 1: René Magritte, *"Le fils de l'homme" ("The Son of Man")*, 1964.

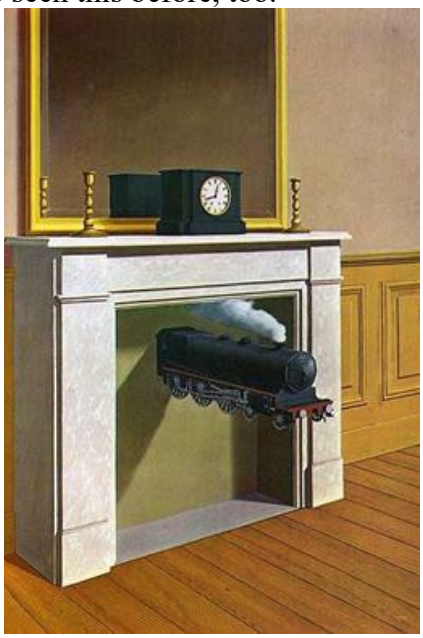

Figure 2: René Magritte, *"La Durée poignardée" ("Time Transfixed")*, 1938.

René Magritte is Einstein's ideal illustrator. His train station might be populated, exclusively, by Magritte's bowler-hatted men. (In this context, the apple in *The Son of Man* can do double-duty as a symbol of Eve's sin, and Newton's discovery of gravitation.) The train traveling "across the whole of space" (without being obstructed by "solid bodies") is captured passing through a fireplace in a moment of *Time Transfixed*. These images

are stark, indelible, and – in Magritte as in Einstein – *exclude details that might distract from the philosophical point*.

Nabokov, of course, would never subordinate a detail to an idea. While Einstein suggests that we are committing no "fundamental error" by ignoring so a trivial matter as "the impenetrability of solid bodies," Nabokov will not allow us to ignore *any* details in *his* railway carriage or on *his* embankment. We have the detritus on the ground: "cigarette butts, used tickets, flecks of sunlight and spittle." We have the images on the magazines in the news stall: "photographs of naked, pearl-gray beauties." We have the *smell* of Franz's sister at their parting. We have the taste and feel of the fruit vendor's strawberries: "all their achenes proclaiming their affinity with one's own tongue's papillae." (*King, Queen, Knave*, 2, not in the original; cf. SSRP 2:131-2) There is no "uniform translation" here, but "ever more rapid" acceleration and "quickening jolts." (*Ibid*.)

And yet, Nabokov was not immune to the power of Einstein's iconography. The very first phrase in the thoroughly Einsteinian paragraph we have been considering represents an object more closely associated with Einstein than any other: "The huge black clock…" As we said at the beginning, Nabokov would come to strongly resist Einstein's relativization of time. But here, in the opening moment of his second novel, he allows that the clock's "once-a-minute gesture … will set a whole world in motion." As Einstein would have it, "Every reference-body … has its own particular time." (Einstein, 6:276) This prompts a question: if a clock can set a world into motion, shouldn't the end of a world mean the end of that world's "own particular time"? As *Nabokov* would have it, a world dies approximately every half second, because "the world dies with the individual." (*Lectures on Literature*, 387) The coincidence between the death of an individual and the death of that individual's "own particular time" concludes another of Nabokov's opening paragraphs. Martin Edelweiss has just introduced us to his grandfather. He remembers him "only in one form and position": seated on a bench in front of the house, under the lindens. "It was on this very bench that his grandfather had died, holding in the palm of his hand his beloved gold watch, whose lid was like a little golden mirror. Apoplexy overtook him during this timely gesture and, according to family legend, the hands stopped at the same moment as his heart." (*Glory*, 1)[5]

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