

## On Chapter Eight: I-XIV

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Chapter Eight begins with reminiscences of the Lyceum, where the Muse began appearing to Pushkin. Nabokov notes that the poet, one of the first students accepted by the Lyceum founded by Alexander I at Tsarskoe Selo (now Pushkin) in 1820, remained deeply attached to the Lyceum and to his former fellow students through his entire life. Nabokov, in contrast, never had such a sense of belonging to his alma maters or alumni. Referring to the education system of the Lyceum, Nabokov highly values the fact that corporeal punishment was absolutely forbidden there while flogging and other brutal punishments were common even at the best English and European schools of the time. That reminds the reader of an episode from *Speak, Memory* that young Volodia saw a boy protagonist terribly spanked in American pictured books given by Uncle Ruka. Volodia, who had never been spanked, felt the punishment was like a “strange exotic torture”<sup>1</sup> he had read about in a book by Mayne Reid.

It is especially interesting that one of the three brothers of Jean Paul Mara / Marat, who is referred to in *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, taught Pushkin French literature and history at the Lyceum. The brother, known as “de Boudry,” is supposed to be Henri Mara, but Nabokov also considers the possibility that he could be David.

The Muse becomes a central character in several stanzas describing the days after Pushkin graduated from the Lyceum. She accompanies the poet who indulges himself in noisy feasts and riotous discussions with his friends. Then, with her, the poet drops off and begins wandering around some places in Russia. Their journey to Caucasus, Crimea, Moldavia etc. may be seen as a digest of *Onegin's Journey*, which was separately published. The Muse leads the poet to Romantic experiences from the wild beauty of those places. Sensual associations with savage tribes, which the poet himself is considered to enjoy, are depicted to be experienced by the Muse. Then suddenly the journey is interrupted; the Muse appears in the poet's garden, in the figure of a provincial girl like Tatyana, with sad eyes and a French book in her hands. The Muse, seemingly a double of Tatyana, is taken to a rout, where she charms and is charmed by society people. Following her, the reader is led to see Tatyana, now queen of society, and Onegin, who has just returned to St. Petersburg. In the previous stanzas, the poet journeys in place of Onegin, sometimes doubling as the Muse; in these stanzas, at first, the Muse plays the role of Tatyana who is just introduced to the society, then separates herself and leads the reader to Tatyana, a most elegant society lady, and disappears

leaving her behind with the reader.

Nabokov considers a problem concerning Onegin's journey: whether he has traveled abroad, as generally considered, or merely to some places in Russia as depicted in *Onegin's journey*. He decides that it is more plausible to restrict the journey to within the country.

Nabokov's evaluation of Pushkin's French puzzles the reader again. This time Nabokov seems to try to denounce Pushkin's dedication to French literature. He discusses that Pushkin's nickname, "the Frenchman," comes from the metaphor for France, "monkeys and tigers," rather than from Pushkin's Francophilia, well known in his school days. To prove it, Nabokov brings up the fact that Pushkin added to his signature, "the Frenchman," in the minutes of the annual reunion of the Lyceum alumni, "A cross between a monkey and a tiger." His gloss is interesting enough, but at the same time, it makes the reader wonder why Nabokov should try to separate Pushkin from French literature. Nabokov's assertion looks even more mysterious when we remember his desire to position Pushkin in the tradition of European literature.

Nabokov spends several pages discussing Derzhavin, Dmitriev, Karamzin and Zhukovski, who preceded and had contacts with Pushkin. Nabokov's evaluation of those major poets is highly interesting. He also glosses a "literary war" fought between the two groups over the evolution of the Russian language, which foreshadows the one between Slavophiles and Westerners in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Admiral Shishkov's achievement as the president of the Academy of Sciences and the leader of the Archaic group of writers is not highly regarded, despite the fact that he is a cousin of Nabokov's great-grandmother. On the other hand, Nabokov appreciates that Karamzin, a leader of the Moderns, marvelously reformed the Russian literary language. However, Nabokov admits neither group actually influenced the course of Russian literature. According to Nabokov, "as all the great literatures," Russian literature "is the product of individuals, not groups." He makes fun of dogmatic Russian historians who overrated the historical importance of the well-known Arzamas Society, led by Zhukovski and Karamzin and joined by Pushkin.

Nabokov's description concerning Bürger's *Lenore* deserves attention. He confesses that he has wondered why Pushkin identifies his Muse with the frightened girl in the poem, and that he is tempted to interpret the allusion as suggesting the five spectral Decembrists "dangling from those gallows by the autobiographical road over which he swiftly passes in his retrospective fancy of 1829." The importance of *Lenore* in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* has been discussed by Priscilla Meyer in relation to German Romanticism.<sup>2</sup> Nabokov's complex interpretation seems to invite a rereading of the

passage from *Lolita* for a possible prismatic clue that could be hidden there.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (1967; New York: Vintage, 1989) 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1988).