



Vladimir Nabokov and Captain Mayne Reid

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Vladimir Nabokov and Captain Mayne Reid

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Chapter Ten of *Speak Memory* explores the theme of Nabokov's sexual awakening between the summers of 1909 or 1910 and 1915.¹ Oddly, Nabokov chooses Mayne Reid's 1865 Wild West adventure novel, *The Headless Horseman*, as the springboard for his investigation of this and a number of other themes. We shall see that the Anglo-Irish novelist plays a surprising role in Nabokov's life and work.

The chapter opens with Nabokov's fond recollections of *The Headless Horseman* and of his friendship with his first cousin, Yuri Rausch von Traubenberg. Yuri, eighteen months Nabokov's senior, introduced him to the Mayne Reid books as the basis for Wild West scenarios played out by the two boys. One of the central plot whorls of Reid's novel is the mistaken murder of the hero's friend after the two men have swapped clothes. During World War I, Yuri, now a young officer candidate, trades outfits with Nabokov as a lark. After the Revolution, Yuri will be killed in a heroic lone cavalry charge on a Red machine-gun nest in the Crimea. Nabokov sums up his cousin as a man whose sense of honor was morally equivalent to perfect pitch.

The chapter's second section turns to a fuller account of *The Headless Horseman* and the boys' reenactments of a rough and ready Texas barroom duel. Nabokov recalls, however, that his attention would often wander to those "senoritas of questionable calling" clustered outside the bar and, later, to the charms of the heroine, the fair Louise Poindexter whom Maurice the Mustanger will save from the evil designs of her cousin Cassius Calhoun.

By the winter of 1910-11 Nabokov has found his damsel in distress whom he, like Maurice the Mustanger, will rescue, if only in his fantasies. In Berlin for dental work, he spots a beautiful American girl at the roller-skating rink where she is being harassed by a skating instructor, evidently her boy friend. The young Nabokov mentally assigns them the names and roles of "Louise" and "Calhoun," but his fantasies find a disillusioning denouement when she turns out to be a member of "The Gala Girls" who dance at the Wintergarten. Nonetheless, the mysterious physical condition that he experiences when thinking of her soon reasserts itself in connection with any female form.

The events of the *Headless Horseman* take place in southwestern Texas in 1850.² Woodley Poindexter, former Louisiana sugar plantation owner and father of beautiful, headstrong Louise, has decided to try his fortunes in Texas. With the help of his wealthy nephew, Cassius Calhoun, he has purchased a hacienda near Ft. Inge. Calhoun, who holds the mortgage, is not above using his financial leverage to press his suit with Louise. As the novel opens, the Poindexter wagon train is lost. A storm approaches and the company is saved only through the fortuitous appearance of Maurice Gerald, a lowly mustanger who catches wild horses for the fort. Maurice cuts a dashing figure in his black, bullion-ringed sombrero and colorful serape. Having assured their safety, he moves on, but not before Louise is smitten. Her brother, Henry, in his elegant white Panama hat and cloak, is also much taken with Maurice. Several nights later at the local hotel bar, the drunk and jealous Calhoun precipitates a duel

¹ The earliest version of what was to become Chapter Ten of *Speak, Memory* appeared in *The New Yorker*, 1 Jan. 1949, pp. 18-21 under title "Curtain Raiser." The essay was written during June 1948 according to Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1991), p. 128. Henceforth, "Boyd II". References to Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1990) shall be in the form "Boyd I". Unless otherwise indicated, comments and quotes from Nabokov's autobiographies shall be from *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam, 1966).

² Mayne Reid, *The Headless Horseman. A Strange Tale of Texas* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1866).

with the mustanger. Both men are wounded but Maurice magnanimously spares his opponent. Humiliated, Calhoun determines to murder his rival.

Several weeks later, from the hacienda *azotea* Louise sees the beautiful Dona Isidora Covarubias de los Llanos, who, she learns, has been sending food baskets to the convalescent mustanger. Her jealousy flares until the recovering Maurice naively explains that Isidora is grateful to him for “a slight service” — saving her from drunken Indians. Louise proclaims that *she* would love such a saviour. A nocturnal tryst by the lovers in the hacienda garden is observed by Calhoun who rouses Louise’s brother Henry to save his sister’s honor. Violence is forestalled when Louise explains Maurice’s honorable intentions and his claim to the family estate and title in Ireland. Distressed that he has so misjudged Maurice, Henry sets out after him to make amends. The enraged Calhoun follows. An artfully murky chapter (36) follows in which three nameless figures move through the nocturnal Texas wilderness. A shot rings out. The next morning Henry’s bloodspattered horse returns to the Poindexter ranch. A posse following the trail encounters only a pool of blood. Over the next several days the mysterious figure of the Headless Horseman begins to appear in the distance.

The scene shifts to a badly injured young man in a white Panama hat who regains consciousness to see vultures circling. Dazed, crippled, his horse gone, he is rescued by his old friend, the backwoodsman and tracker Zeb Stump, who takes the unconscious Maurice back to the mustanger’s shack where he is soon found by the posse. Thanks to Calhoun’s incitement, the posse is now little better than a lynch mob. Delirious and unable to speak in his own defense, Maurice is (three times) on the point of being strung up until saved by the intercession of Zeb and Louise.

On the eve of Maurice’s trial, Calhoun once again pressures Louise’s father for her hand. When she refuses, Calhoun tries to ruin her reputation by exposing her nocturnal tryst with Maurice and telling the court of Henry’s intended vengeance, thus supplying a motive for the murder. Maurice now begins his testimony telling how Henry overtook him on the trail. In token of their renewed friendship (and future relationship as in-laws) they exchange hats and cloaks before Henry starts back to the hacienda. At this point Maurice’s testimony is interrupted when the Headless Horseman is seen on the distant prairie. A pursuit ensues with Calhoun in the lead. When Zeb catches up, he finds Calhoun preparing to perform an operation on the headless corpse with his bowie knife. Back at the trial, Maurice has resumed his testimony, recounting his discovery of Henry’s headless body and his attempt to bring it back lashed astride his own horse while he rides Henry’s. When Henry’s horse looks back and sees the bizarre sight, he bolts. Maurice is smashed into a tree and loses consciousness. As the mustanger concludes his testimony, Zeb arrives with the “headless horseman” and Calhoun. An instant autopsy is conducted and the bullet extracted from the headless mummified body bears the tell-tale initials “C.C.” As Maurice is freed, Calhoun flees on horseback. Led by Maurice, the crowd sets out in pursuit. The lassoed villain is returned to the court scene and charged with the murder of his cousin, Henry Poindexter. All is clear but the motive. After sentencing, Calhoun confesses: “*I killed him by mistake .*” Cutting off the victim’s head in the dead of night (presumably to throw the blame on Indians), he has failed to notice that it is not Maurice, but Henry dressed in Maurice’s clothing. As he speaks, Calhoun whips out a hidden revolver, fires at Maurice, and then kills himself. Unscathed, the mustanger survives to marry Louise, reclaim his baronetcy, and take over the Poindexter ranch.

Speak, Memory draws on only small portions of *The Headless Horseman* — those that fit in with certain themes. Most of these are connected, directly or indirectly, to Yuri Rausch. Although very different in many ways (Yuri obsessed with things military; Vladimir with butterflies), the pair shared a love of boisterous play. Vladimir, who after Yuri’s death was to

call him his “best friend,”³ admired his older cousin who was to be his early model, if not mentor, in three areas: manly valor, amatory matters, and poetry.

Nabokov opens his account of the first two of these themes with particular scenes from *The Headless Horseman*. Guns appear everywhere in Nabokov’s memories of Yuri. The motif marks their first meeting in 1904, when Yuri, who has just bought a toy pistol, stumbles and falls as he runs to show it to his cousin (197). The Mayne Reid “Wild West” games begin in 1909 or 1910 with the weapons escalating from popguns to 1912’s real pistol which was discharged at a hand-held shoe-box lid. The barroom duel between Maurice the Mustanger and Cassius Calhoun is reenacted countless times. Only a few years later Yuri will die in a hail of machine-gun bullets that will well-nigh behead him.

Although the boys’ favorite scene was the barroom gun fight, another aspect of *The Headless Horseman* led Nabokov to use it as a frame for his account of Yuri. The switch of apparel in which Nabokov dons Yuri’s uniform directly echoes the fatal exchange of clothes by Maurice the Mustanger and Henry Poindexter. Just weeks before Yuri’s final charge, Nabokov had decided to join Yuri’s unit and had even tried on his boots.⁴ How Nabokov felt about his failure to enlist in the hopeless White cause is moot, but the carefully drawn transposed parallel between the dashing Maurice and the unfortunate Henry Poindexter, on the one hand, and Yuri and himself, on the other, suggests an awareness that “there, but for the grace of God, ...” In the original *New Yorker* version Nabokov writes that Yuri “never really awoke from that bellicose and romantic Mayne Reid daydream” shared by the cousins. Nabokov also prefaces his account of his father’s death — another case of the wrong man being shot — with a fleeting reference to Reid’s novel (188-193).

If Nabokov’s account of his awakening sense of manly valor is prefigured by *The Headless Horseman*’s smoking guns, the dawning sexuality theme is also introduced by a scene from Mayne Reid’s horse opera (155-156). Maurice the Mustanger, recovering from his duel wounds, encounters Louise Poindexter on horseback. Up to this time their relations have been entirely formal, although Louise is jealous of Dona Isidora. When the proud Creole says that *she* would be not merely grateful but would love her rescuer, the gallant Maurice rises to the occasion. He would, he says, “give half my life to see you in the hands of Wild Cat and his drunken companions [and] the other half to deliver you from the danger” (155). The remainder of the passage deserves quoting in full: “Do you mean this, Maurice Gerald? Do not trifle with me: I am not a child. Speak the truth! Do you mean it? I do! As heaven is above me, I do!” Reid’s own voice intrudes here: “The sweetest kiss I ever had in my life, was when a woman — a fair creature, in the hunting field — leant over in her saddle and kissed me as I sate in mine.” Now the fictional narrator’s voice returns: “The fondest embrace ever received by Maurice Gerald, was that given by Louise Poindexter; when standing up in her stirrup, and laying her hand on his shoulder, she cried in an agony of passion — *Do with me as thou wilt: I love you! — I love you!*” (156). Nabokov uses this scene to preface a discussion of “girls” by Yuri and his eleven-year-old self. It also introduces the following section in which the lithesome American skater “Louise” induces that awkward physical condition that Nabokov consults his father about.

Mayne Reid and his *Headless Horseman* played an even more prominent role in Nabokov’s life and work than is suggested by *Speak, Memory*. In a letter of 1921 Nabokov speaks of his earliest writing efforts: “I am twenty-two and my muse is twelve. At ten, I remember translating Mayne Reid’s *Headless Horseman* from English into improbable French

³ Boyd II, p. 158

⁴ Boyd I, pp. 157-158.

alexandrines.”⁵ Ten-odd years later Nabokov was to again invoke Mayne Reid in a poem dedicated to his childhood friend, Yuri.⁶

In that coppice where berries — a thousand —
glowed crimson like fine points of fire,
the two of us played; a year older
he was, but a single year older than I.
Our games were inspired by visions
from colorful books about war,
the pines made a fairytale rustle,
the world was perfumed and immense.
We grew up... Then came years
of struggle and shame and torments.
One day I was quietly told,
“He’s been killed, your fun-loving friend.”
Though things were more simple, more grim,
the game he had played was unchanged.
I remember them, crimson as blood drops,
whortleberries amid the pine grove.

(Poem and translation (c) Copyright Dmitri Nabokov)

Podvig or *Glory*, written in 1930, was originally entitled *Romanticheskii vek* or “Romantic Times.”⁷ The hero, dreamy Martin Edelweiss, undertakes a high deed, a feat, solely to satisfy the vague yearnings of his soul. His secret journey across the Soviet border is undertaken for no practical purpose but in emulation of a childhood fantasy about entering the fairy tale world of the picture hanging above his bed. In its details, *Glory* is the most autobiographical of Nabokov novels and, not surprisingly, traces of Mayne Reid’s *Headless Horseman* and Yuri flicker in and out of its pages. Martin, who is as inept in his love affairs as he is in life in general, reflects on his erotic history. For Martin, the truly erotic is symbolized by Mayne Reid’s hero, Maurice Gerald, who having “stopped his steed side-by-side with that of Louise Poindexter, put his arm around the blond Creole’s limber waist, and here the author exclaimed in a personal aside: ‘What can compare with such a kiss?’ Things like that provided a far greater erotic thrill. What fired him as a rule was the remote, the forbidden, the vague — anything sufficiently indistinct to make his fantasy work at establishing details - ...”⁸ There are also hints of Nabokov’s relationship with Yuri in Martin’s ruminations that had he fought in the Civil War, perhaps he would have “got rid once for all of the attraction danger has for young boys” (100). Martin’s gratuitous crossing of the Soviet border is his attempt to recreate the valorous actions of Nabokov’s cousin Yuri and their Mayne Reid heros.

The Headless Horseman also receives passing mention in *Ada*. In 1880 when Van is ten, he spends a year in the Wild West. In one of those cross-cultural macedoines common in *Ada*, Nabokov interweaves the Rockies and the Caucases, those outposts of the Romantic imagination in their two cultures. At the same age that Nabokov was reading *The Headless Horseman* and translating it into French alexandrines, Van is memorizing Pushkin’s “Headless Horseman.” Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” has merged with Mayne Reid’s *Headless Horseman*.⁹ Less direct traces of Mayne Reid may be found in *The Gift* where

⁵ Boyd I, p. 81, and Vladimir Nabokov, letter to S.V. Potresov, 28 Sept. 1921, Bakhmeteff Archive, Columbia University Libraries. In his letter Nabokov curiously calls Reid by the single appellation “Mainrid.” Apparently in Russian popular usage, Mayne Reid, was taken to be a compound family name. There is an echo of this in the index of *Speak, Memory* where Reid is listed under “M.”

⁶ Sirin (Vladimir Nabokov), *Gornii put'* (Berlin: Grani, 1923), p. 71. My translation.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. x.

⁸ *Glory*, p. 34. One might remark another possible prototype for the “kiss-on-horseback” scene that so stirred the young Nabokov and his hero Martin. Long before reading Mayne Reid, both Vladimir and Yuri must have savored the horseback kiss exchanged between Pechorin and Princess Mary in Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 191. Nabokov confirms the blend in his end note for p. 136 in the Penguin edition of *Ada*, p. 468. Harmondsworth, 1970.

Nabokov assigns Mayne Reid's dates and parts of his and Maurice Gerald's biographies to Fyodor's grandfather.¹⁰ Nabokov's keenest fictional evocations of the American West are, of course, found in the travels of Lolita and Humbert. Perhaps because of the hundred year interval, little of Mayne Reid's West is evident, although Lo's penchant for western movies with their barroom brawls may reflect Nabokov's Mayne Reidian childhood, as may the final (one-sided) duel between Humbert and Quilty.

Mayne Reid, born in 1818, dropped out of his Belfast college and made his way to the United States and Mexico where he spent an adventurous decade as teacher, trader, explorer, naturalist, soldier, and journalist. Returning to England in 1849 after being wounded and decorated in the Mexican War, Captain Mayne Reid became a prolific writer of adventure tales.¹¹ A prodigal dandy, if not a fop, he remained a man of democratic principles: anti-slavery, anti-royalty, and anti-communist until his death in 1883. He was, for a time, an extremely successful writer. He was also a very bad writer. Nonetheless, there were things Nabokov might have admired about his writing. Reid was extremely good at the precise description of landscape, flora, and fauna. So much so that some readers and reviewers took exception to his custom of giving Latin as well as common names of plants and animals and to his penchant for footnotes on matters ecological and ethnographic. One over-enthusiastic authority on the American West went so far as to assert "no one has ever been able to pick a serious flaw in Mayne Reid's history, geography, ethnology, or Zoology, in fact his local color."¹² Nabokov might also have enjoyed Reid's gift for intricate plotting and fast action — features notably rare in Russian writing. Reid was good at creating and maintaining "suspense," for which no Russian word exists. He was also good at planting subtle clues for the reader who must keep track of just what each character is wearing, the color of his or her horse, and so on. True, it will all come out in the wash, but the good reader gets his reward earlier. The older Nabokov must have found a certain charm in Reid's fascination with the enchanting moustaches of Mexican maidens and in the good Captain's penchant for very young heroines. Reid, author of *The Child Wife* (1868), proposed to his future bride when she was thirteen and married her two years later. He was, by the way, a friend of Edgar Allen Poe and Virginia.¹³

I now turn to a final aspect of Mayne Reid's role in Nabokov's life. Nabokov was proud of his memory and with good reason. When he came to write about *The Headless Horseman*, nearly forty years had passed since he had first read it. But the copy he located in a university library, did not, alas, resemble the "puffy book bound in red cloth" (195) that he remembered from childhood. Nor did it contain the tissue-paper covered, watery grey illustrations he remembered. He conjectured, however, that the absent frontispiece had depicted "Louise Poindexter's unfortunate brother (and perhaps a coyote or two, unless I am thinking of *The Death Shot*, another Mayne Reid tale)" (195). In the London edition of 1866 the watery grey frontispiece by F. C. Tilney does indeed depict the Headless Horseman riding across the Texas plain flanked by a pair of coyotes.

Nabokov makes two leaps out of the time frame of *Speak, Memory*'s tenth chapter. The first immediately follows his recollection of the missing frontispiece. To the remark that the picture "has so long been exposed to the blaze of my imagination that it is now completely bleached," he adds "(but miraculously replaced by the *real* thing, as I noted when translating this chapter into Russian in the spring of 1953, and namely, by the view from the ranch you and I rented that year: a cactus-and-yucca waste whence came that morning the plaintive call

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Putnam, 1963), pp. 110-114.

¹¹ Information on Reid's life is drawn from the "Chronology" and the first chapter of Joan Steel, *Captain Mayne Reid* (Boston: Twayne, 1978).

¹² Charles F. Lummis, *Mesa, Canon and Pueblo* (New York, 1924) quoted in Steel, p. 140.

¹³ Steel, pp. 24 and 20.

of a quail — Gambel's Quail, I believe — overwhelming me with a sense of undeserved attainments and rewards" (195-196). A reexamination of that frontispiece does indeed show yucca and what appear to be cactus. The second leap in time is triggered by a detail in Reid's description of the Texas saloon where Maurice and Calhoun shoot it out "in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty" (115). After picking out several stylistic highlights from Reid's description (qualities he calls "Gogolian" in the Russian edition), Nabokov approvingly quotes Reid's "brown asterisks," i.e., globs of spat-out tobacco juice, illuminated on the white sand of the barroom floor by the glare of camphine lamps. These lamps serve as a link to the following sentence: "In another year of our Lord — namely 1941 — I caught some very good moths at the neon lights of a gas station between Dallas and Fort Worth" (201). It was on this same trip that Nabokov captured his first new species of butterfly, *Neonympha dorothea*, thus fulfilling his boyhood dream.¹⁴

These two departures from the time boundaries and more obvious themes of Chapter Ten are significant in defining Reid's import for Nabokov. Unquestionably, Mayne Reid's greatest accomplishment was introducing several generations of young Europeans to the American West, even now a central component in the national myth. For them, Reid's Wild West was America, the exotic scene of endless adventures. The American West became the locale of those butterfly expeditions to exotic places that the young Nabokov had planned until they were made impossible by the Russian Revolution. This is one of the hidden themes in *Speak, Memory*. Like most, it is revealed in the Index. Under the entry "America," one finds "119-139 passim." These pages, Chapter Six, describe Nabokov's growing passion for butterflies, mostly between 1906 and 1910. America is present in the chapter only twice. Nabokov's first butterfly, that swallowtail of 1906, escapes the mothballed wardrobe and sets off on its westward journey to be recaptured after a forty-year pursuit in Boulder, Colorado. Even more telling is the second reference. By 1910, the same year the young lepidopterist discovers Mayne Reid's America in *The Headless Horseman*, he begins to venture further afield in his pursuit of new butterflies. He crosses over the Oredezh into a peat bog called "America" because of its remoteness and mystery.¹⁵ As the explorer presses forward, the flora and fauna of northern Russia gradually give way to that of alpine Colorado. Here in the West, Nabokov rediscovered the America of his youth, Mayne Reid's America. In a 1943 letter to Edmund Wilson from Alta Lodge in Utah, Nabokov praised the butterfly collecting and the scenery, and went on to speak of the delapidated little town where one could imagine twenty years before "a Roaring Gulch with goldiggers plugging each other in saloons."¹⁶ More specifically, Nabokov wrote to his old friend, the émigré writer Mark Aldanov, describing the setting and adding that years before the place had been filled with mines and miners, gun fights in taverns, and all the other things that we learned in childhood from a certain captain.¹⁷ It was also in Alta that Nabokov caught the new species of pug moth that was later named for him — *Eupithecia nabokovi*.¹⁸ The hunt for butterflies, a pastime in which Nabokov found transcendence, is closely identified with the theme of America, especially the American West. It was the intrepid Captain Mayne Reid who first built the bridge between Nabokov's Russia and America.

¹⁴ Boyd II, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ Boyd I, p. 81 & Boyd II, p. 157, and *Speak, Memory*, pp. 137-139.

¹⁶ *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters. Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson 1940-1971*. Edited, Annotated and with an Introductory Essay by Simon Karlinsky. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 107.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, letter to Mark Aldanov, 6 Aug. 1943, Bakhmeteff Archive, Columbia University Libraries. My thanks to Brian Boyd for calling this to my attention.

¹⁸ Boyd II, p. 64.