

The Dream of Mademoiselle as Jezebel

Getting to the Root of the Scene

in

*Drugie beregá / Other Shores*

by

James H. Buckingham

**THE DREAM**

Нам с братом, увы, были даны как раз обратные откровения: то, чего не могли видеть взрослые, наблюдавшие лишь облаченную в непроницаемые доспехи, дневную Mademoiselle, видели мы, всезнающие дети, когда, бывало, тому или другому из нас приснится дурной сон, и, разбуженная звериным воплем, она появлялась из соседней комнаты, босая, простоволосая, подняв перед собою свечу, миганьем своим обращавшую в чешую золотые блестки на ее кроваво-красном капоте, который не прикрывал ее чудовищных колыханий; в эту минуту она казалась сущим воплощением Иезавел из «*Athalie*», дурацкой трагедии Расина, куски которой мы, конечно, должны были знать наизусть вместе со всяким другим лжеклассическим бредом.<sup>1</sup>

With my brother and I, alas! we were given just the inverse revelations then what the grown-ups could not see: by those who only observed—robed in impermeable armor—the daytime Mademoiselle. We saw (the omniscient, all-knowing children) when it happened, one or the other of us will have a bad dream.

Awakened by a brutal scream, she appeared from the next room, barefoot and barehaired, by lifting up a candle in front of herself. By my own blinking, golden sequins turned into golden scales on her blood-red capote, which did not cover up her monstrous wavings.

At that moment, she seemed to be the living embodiment of Jezebel from *Athalie*, Racine's foolish tragedy. The bits and pieces of which we—of course—the true stories we *had to* know by heart. Together with all sorts of other pseudo-classical rubbish.<sup>2</sup>

And what a dream! Is it real or imagined from the mind of a child? The dream in front of this man is in piecing all the parts together from this one main passage. Exploring the various paths and avenues until they all converge collectively on the parkway of epiphanies. So move your right or left foot (your genetically acquired preference) with me and let us take that walk. да?

*Drugie berega* once again provides a mine of material not covered in any of the other versions of Vladimir Nabokov's semi-autobiography. It IS all about the details, my friends, fiends and colleagues. While the other texts ("Mademoiselle O," *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory* regarding this Chapter 5) allude to Racine's play and Jezebel, only *Drugie berega / Other Shores* gives the specific title of the play, *Athalie*. Some may mull that this is of little import, that this only adds what some can easily find on their own. What's the big deal, the diff?

The BIG diff(ERENCE) is not just the one detail, but the sum total of all of the extra details purposefully added only in *Drugie berega* that focuses the overall story to come across with a significantly greater impact in the Russian text over any of the English texts. Only in the native language of Nabokov can one truly enjoy and taste the fruit from his Russian apple tree. For every English reader out there, call me either *el diablo* or call me *l'ange*, I have begun biting on this Forbidden Fruit and offer you my share. Don't fight, just share and share alike.

Vladimir and Sergey are in bed and one of them has a bad dream, a nightmare. During the night the children see what the grown-ups do not see. The adults only see Mademoiselle (Mlle) during the day. She is "robed in impenetrable armor" being the robe of the armor of layers of clothing that clad her formidable body. But when Mlle has urgently come into the children's room in response to a scream in the night, there is no time to be properly clad and covered. She enters.

Vladimir sees. He blinks his eyes. What are gold sequins on her capote turn into gold scales. That capote is red, blood-red. Are the scales one of a fish or a dragon? The monster. The monstrous wavings of flesh. And now Mademoiselle is Jezebel and rhyming synthesis becomes a

storied combination. Jezebel's story comes from the Bible and more specifically here from Racine's play, *Athalie*. All this Vladimir and Sergey had to know by heart – memorize, those parts – those bits and parts. They are stuck in their heads, those words, along with all the other rubbish. All probably not a good idea for bedtime stories. Nightmares would be a foregone conclusion.

This is but an overview. A swift sweep. Let's get to more. Still not at the root for sure.

## THE BIBLE STORY

What part of Jezebel's story would color best with blood-red? Only one.

The Death of Jezebel 2 Kings 9:30-37 NKJV

<sup>30</sup> Now when Jehu had come to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; and she put paint on her eyes and adorned her head, and looked through a window. <sup>31</sup> Then, as Jehu entered at the gate, she said, "Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?" <sup>32</sup> And he looked up at the window, and said, "Who is on my side? Who?" So two or three eunuchs looked out at him. <sup>33</sup> Then he said, "Throw her down." So they threw her down, and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses; and he trampled her underfoot. <sup>34</sup> And when he had gone in, he ate and drank. Then he said, "Go now, see to this accursed woman, and bury her, for she was a king's daughter." <sup>35</sup> So they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. <sup>36</sup> Therefore they came back and told him. And he said, "This is the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'On the plot of ground at Jezreel dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; <sup>37</sup> and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as refuse on the surface of the field, in the plot at Jezreel, so that they shall not say, Here lies Jezebel.'"

Now we're getting somewhere. How does Jezebel, the Queen of Judah, armor herself? As a woman, she paints her eyes and adorns her hair. Jezebel is a grandmother now at this time. She

is not the harlot and hussy portrayed by the Biblical narrator. Jezebel fully knows that Jehu is coming to kill her. This is the only armor she has. To go out in glory. To be seen at the window of the gate of the palace for all to see that she is the queen to the last.

Besides her appearance, her sharp tongue also serves Jezebel as the arrows in her armor's quiver. She calls Jehu, Zimri. For Zimri was a chariot commander who assassinated his master, King Elah. Zimri's reign lasted all of 7 days when his life and rule ended in self-inflected flames.<sup>3</sup> So too Jezebel is aware of the purpose of Jehu's visit, assassination. No quiet and docile Ruth, Jezebel is strong and speaks out. She remains with her pride intact to the very end.

What is the main cause of the antagonism and slander against Jezebel? She is a foreigner who does not fit in. She retains her original foreign beliefs in her new land and still worships Baal and not Yahweh. Ruth as another foreigner is the foil to Jezebel, for Ruth readily assimilates into her new culture and accepts their customs and gods.<sup>4</sup> Not only does Jezebel keep her faith, but she persuades her husband, Ahab, to follow her as well. Once Ahab dies, she is now queen and that would be unacceptable to the followers of Yahweh and the narrators in the Book of Kings.<sup>5</sup>

And who are the one's who actually precipitate Jezebel's fall? Servants lift her up to have her fall down. Hmmmmmm, he mumbles. Jezebel *does* rhyme with Mademoiselle! Sound alike.

### **LENSKY, *le comble***

How long was Mademoiselle's reign?

Она проведет с нами около восьми лет, и уроки становились все реже, а характер ее все хуже.<sup>6</sup>

She spent about eight years<sup>7</sup> with us, and the lessons were becoming less and less, and her temper becoming worse and worse.

Regardless of the length of her reign, one factor was the precipitator here, Lensky. The tutor Lensky was Mlle's *le comble*,<sup>8</sup> her last straw. A servant was Mlle's downfall. Indeed, she may have stayed longer if not for Lensky.

Она бы продолжала ждать и надеяться, если бы не Ленский, . . . .

She would have continued to wait and hope, if it were not for Lensky, . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Он был довольно неотесанный одессит с чистыми идеалами, . . . .<sup>10</sup>

He was a rather uncouth Odessan with pure ideals, . . . .

It was Lensky's pure ideals, his unabashed political intolerance for the airs of supremacy that existed in a wealthy, aristocratic household. Note too that Lensky is hailed as being from Odessa and what might that have anything to do with Mademoiselle's arrival in the winter of 1905-6?

### **THE POTESKIN STEPS or STAIRS**

While the timing of the ending encounters and friction with Lensky would be years later from 1905-6, one can hardly ignore the common ground of Mlle's date of beginning employment and what happened in Odessa back in 1905 that would tie in with Lensky's disgust with the servant-master relationship and politics.

Odessa at the time was Russia's main port on the Black Sea. A famous feature there is the staircase or steps rising from the Black Sea up to the city. Originally named the Primorsky Приморский (seaside, maritime) Stairs, the 200 steps were built between 1837 and 1841. When you look up from the bottom, you cannot see the landings, and when you look down from the top, you cannot see the steps. Later in 1955, they were renamed the Potemkin Stairs.

And why? is a fair question. By looking at the two photos on the next page, all begins to explain:



Postcard of the Odessa Steps from 1890 to 1900



Act IV: The Odessa Steps

The Massacre Scene from Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 movie, *Battleship Potemkin*

Considering the times, to say one was from Odessa back in 1905, or later, would be the same as someone saying they came from Bunker Hill within 10 years after its occurrence. It was all about Revolution.

The Battleship Potemkin mutiny sparked the beginning of the 1905 Revolution that kept the Nabokov family at their country estate over the winter for the first time, rather than coming home to St. Petersburg, as was their norm. Lensky by his manners and association with Odessa identifies with revolutionary change. It is the massacre of civilians on the Odessa Steps that provided the motivation for Eisenstein's movie, *Battleship Potemkin*.

So legendary is this event that it does not matter that the massacre did not occur on these steps. It is Eisenstein's famous 1925 movie that has so ingrained this event into the Russian psyche. That Odessa Steps scene helped to memorialize the Primorsky Stairs, leading to their renaming as the Potemkin Stairs in 1955, 50 years after the fact. This Russian history would not be lost on even an exile like Vladimir Nabokov, who sailed away forever from another port on the Black Sea, Sevastopol.

## THE PETERSBURG STAIRS

Yet what does Odessa have to do with St. Pete? It is what Lensky has to do with Mademoiselle on those stairs on the Nabokov home on Morskaya Street:

Оскорбительно намекая на ее тяжесть, этот лифт часто бастовал, и Mademoiselle бывала принуждена, со многими астматическими паузами, подниматься по лестнице. К ней навстречу по этим ступеням тяжеломерно, но резво сбегал, бывало, Ленский, и в течение двух зим она доказывала, что, проходя, он непременно толкает ее, пихнет, собьет с ног, растопчет ее безжизненное тело.<sup>11</sup>



Offensively hinting at her heaviness, our one elevator lift frequently went on strike, and Mademoiselle was forced, with many asthmatic pauses, to climb up the stairs. It was a bit tough to meet her on these steps, but Lensky used to run down quickly. And over the course of two winters she argued how surely slipping by her, he will push, shove, knock her off her feet, and trample her lifeless body.

One can picture Mlle being ever so melodramatic here. Picturing her dead on those steps from the likes of an uncouth Odessan! Maybe Eisenstein should have made a sequel and shot Act IV, the Petersburg Steps, for *Battleship Mademoiselle*. Would this be it? All done?

No. Time to go to the penultimate source.

## **RACINE'S *ATHALIE*<sup>12</sup>**

*Athalie* 2.5.485-506<sup>13</sup>

### ATHALIE / ATHALIAH

Mais un trouble importun vient, depuis quelques jours, 485

But a troublesome trouble has been coming in the last few days,

De mes prospérités interrompre le cours.

From my prosperity I will interrupt the course.

Un songe (me devrais-je inquiéter d'un songe?)

A dream (should I worry about a dream?)

Entretient dans mon coeur un chagrin qui le ronge.

Keeps in my heart a sorrow that gnaws at it.

Je l'évite partout, partout il me poursuit.

I avoid it everywhere, everywhere it pursues me.

C'était pendant l'horreur d'une profonde nuit. 490

It was during the horror of a deep night.

Ma mère Jézabel devant moi s'est montrée,

My mother Jezebel showed herself before me,

Comme au jour de sa mort pompeusement parée.  
 As on the day of her death, pompously adorned.  
 Ses malheurs n'avaient point abattu sa fierté;  
 Her misfortunes had not beaten her pride;  
 Même elle avait encor cet éclat emprunté  
 She still had that same borrowed shine  
 Dont elle eut soin de peindre et d'orner son visage, 495  
 Of which she took care to paint and adorn her face,  
 Pour réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage.  
 To repair from the years the irreparable outrage.  
 «Tremble, m'a-t-elle dit, fille digne de moi.  
 "Tremble," she told me, "daughter worthy of me.  
 Le cruel Dieu des Juifs l'emporte aussi sur toi.  
 The cruel God of the Jews also prevails over you.  
 Je te plains de tomber dans ses mains redoutables,  
 I pity you to fall into His formidable hands,  
 Ma fille.» En achevant ces mots épouvantables, 500  
 My daughter." By finishing these terrible words  
 Son ombre vers mon lit a paru se baisser;  
 Her shadow appeared to bend down towards my bed;  
 Et moi, je lui tendais les mains pour l'embrasser.  
 And I was holding out my hands to embrace her.  
 Mais je n'ai plus trouvé qu'un horrible mélange  
 Now no longer anything but one horrible mix  
 D'os et de chair meurtris, et traînés dans la fange,  
 Of bones and bruised flesh, dragged through the mud,  
 Des lambeaux pleins de sang, et des membres affreux 505  
 Shreds full of blood and some rubbish limbs  
 Que des chiens dévorants se disputaient entre eux.  
 That devouring dogs were fighting over among themselves.

Here are the words that Sergey and Vladimir heard read to them by Mlle, being a story from the Bible (true stories были). Was Racine's verse, as well, words that had to be learned by rote? Recited back until learned by heart? Getting overwhelmed yet? I am, was and will, to cover all the tenses. Let us play on . . . *couldn't resist*—

### DISSECTION ↔ CONNECTION

Let us get down to the meat of *Athalie*. There is trouble and the dream is a nightmare. A nightmare that is unavoidable. Horror and dead Jezebel comes to visit. She is pompously adorned as told in 2 Kings with a painted face and adorned hair.

Yet Mlle is not wearing her armor. She comes from the night of sleep with no makeup. Bare feet and barehaired, meaning she's unadorned and not made up. Mlle's hair is not her hair of the daytime: “Вижу ее пышную прическу, . . .<sup>14</sup> I see her luxuriant coiffure, . . . .” Unprotected, Mademoiselle does not have her armor on.

With bare feet, what does she wear when entering the boys' room? A капоте (the prepositional singular of капот) is the Russian word used. Not much of a variant at all from the French word, capote. So Mlle is wearing a hooded cloak like Little Red Riding Hood? Interesting, but no. A капот(е) is a generic term, which can mean she has on a housecoat, a dressing gown, a nightgown or a wrapper (not a bathrobe, in any event). But there are fancy details on the article of clothing with the gold sequins. Also a certain disturbing transparency is in the room, illuminated by candlelight. Remember those “monstrous wavings,” those large wavings of flesh? Here one question leads to another. Why be so vague with a detail, when another garment name would be far more specific? The question remains as to what is Mlle wearing then, or more likely to be wearing?

A peignoir, from the French word *peigner*, meaning *to comb the hair*.

So what would a peignoir look like in 1905 – 1910 or so? A fancy dressing gown with lace or maybe sequins? Also somewhat transparent. Perhaps see too much? Because the gown does not cover up her “monstrous wavings”?

Then why would VN not use the French word, *peignoir*? A man who has a command of French, who enjoys details, seems to overlook something. Yet what is not overlooked is the etymology for the French word, *capote*, from *cape*, from the Latin *cappa* and lastly *caput*, *the head*. It is the capote that is blood-red. While Mlle’s peignoir may have sequins and be red, it is Jezebel’s capote, her head, that is blood-red. [Honestly, not trying to rhyme here, Dear.]



For Mlle, like the warning for Athalie from her mother Jezebel, will fall into formidable hands. Mlle in her bare feet, like Jezebel, has been dissected by the dogs into all that is left, a skull and feet and palms of her hands. Those hands of Athalie meant to embrace Jezebel only reach towards bones and bruised flesh, full of blood and rubbish limbs. Those limbs that were trampled on by Jehu after the fall, just as Mademoiselle imagined Lensky trampling on her lifeless body. Lensky is the Jehu to Mlle’s Jezebel. The nightmare has been extended from Vladimir to Mademoiselle. Lensky is her last straw that causes her downfall as the reigning governess of the Nabokov household. For Mademoiselle, all that is left is her pride, like Jezebel.

All that is left is rubbish. “Together with all sorts of other pseudo-classical rubbish.” is how Nabokov gnashes at the pseudo-classical style of Racine. And now there may be a reason why.

**THE ROOT OF THE RACINE SCENE**

For one so wont to pillage and devour an author who is quite well-praised by no less than Gustave Flaubert in his epic novel, *Madame Bovary*, where Homais the pharmacist names his daughter after the hero of *Athalie*, one wonders, what is aplay amongst the debris of feet, hands and a skull? What is VN thinking? Or not? What we can't address we don't think about, but still we have a visceral reaction.

A Stream of Consciousness List then as to all these words learned by heart, which led to a nightmare, and no wonder:

**A SOURCE**

Bible, 2 Kings: *adorned her head, murderer, Throw her down, blood spattered, trampled her underfoot, bury her, skull, feet, the palms of the hand, dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel, the corpse of Jezebel shall be as refuse.*

**PLUS ANOTHER SOURCE**

Racine's *Athalie*: *trouble, dream, sorrow, gnaws, pursue me, horror, deep night, death, misfortunes, beaten, adorn her face, Tremble, cruel God, pity, fall, terrible, shadow, horrible, bones, bruised flesh, dragged through the mud, shreds full of blood, rubbish limbs, devouring dogs, fighting.*

**PLUS ANOTHER SOURCE**

Nabokov's *Life*: *robed, luxuriant coiffure, bad dream, brutal scream, barefoot and barehired, monstrous, living embodiment of Jezebel, tragedy, if it were not for Lensky, uncouth Odessan, run down, forced, push, shove, knock her off her feet, blood-red capote, trample her lifeless body, bits and pieces, rubbish.*<sup>15</sup>

**EQUALS**

***Drugie berega / Other Shores***

The sum is greater than the parts.  $1 + 1 + 1$  (parts) =  $3 + 1 = 4$  (sum)

$$\sqrt{4} = 2 \quad \text{Outside Roots}$$

And that is the *root*, the *Racine*, as the French might say of this Scene.

“Rubbish!” You say? Your choice. But like Vladimir as to psychology, beware he/she who doth protesteth too loudly perchance when the weight of evidence is overbearing. Lest your crucible of evidence, no matter how much put there, continually requires the same two words as said by Giles Corey: “More weight.”

*Finis by the Lion of Lucernity*

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *Drugie berega*. Azbuka, 2011, pp. 103-104.

<sup>2</sup> Not an authorized translation of *Drugie berega*, whose sole copyright remains with the Vladimir Nabokov Estate under Article 3C Trust under the Will of Vladimir Nabokov, 1967. All Russian to English translations herein are by James H. Buckingham.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 16: 15-20

<sup>4</sup> Ruth 1:16 “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> For more of a perspective on Jezebel, read the following article by Janet Howe Gaines, “How Bad Was Jezebel?” <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/>

<sup>6</sup> *Drugie berega*, p 107.

<sup>7</sup> *about eight years* около восьми лет: All of the other sources, “Mademoiselle O,” *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory*, cite seven years. Seven or eight?

The difference between the minuend (the first number in a subtraction) and the subtrahend (the number being subtracted) is the remainder (the difference).

E.g.:  $12 - 5 = 7$ .

UNLESS those numbers are inclusive, then add 1 to the difference.

E.g.: Read pages 5 to 12 =  $12 - 5 = 7 + 1 = 8$ . 8 pages to read.

E.g.: How many years were you there?

From 1905 to 1912 =  $1912 - 1905 = 7 + 1 = 8$ .

8 years there for the years 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911 and 1912 (inclusive) over the 7 years length of time. So which is correct, 7 or 8 years? Inclusive or not?

[An aside — Mathematical Puzzles

The Measurement Difference = Plus 1.

Is eight *almost* about seven? Or is seven *almost* about eight? Is one ordinal equivalent to another? Hence, the state of two inequalities are therefore equalling each other, when comparing the process of inclusion between two fixed points as opposed to the difference between two said same points. In both instances, the points and the distance remain the same. The only variable being the decision on the measurement of whether to include or not. SubAddition is the Unity of Subtraction.]

So, is *Drugie berega* the only one that has it right or the only one that has it wrong?

Yes regarding Memory, *you* (VN) “must admit, has shown herself to be a very careless girl.” (*Speak, Memory*, 6)

<sup>8</sup> *Drugie berega*, p 111.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *Drugie berega*, p 113.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Racine (1639-1699), French dramatist who mainly wrote tragedies. *Athalie* was his last tragedy, written in 1691. A writer of the pseudo-classical style. Used a rhyming French Alexandrine meter for his verse, 12 syllables/line.

<sup>13</sup> Did not plan on translating the original French text, but after a quick scan of the atrocious translations on the Internet, I really had no choice.

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<sup>14</sup> *Drugie berega*, 100.

<sup>15</sup> Not an authorized translation of *Drugie berega*, whose sole copyright remains with the Vladimir Nabokov Estate under Article 3C Trust under the Will of Vladimir Nabokov, 1967.

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