

Pushkin Between Russia and Africa

Dieudonné Gnamankou

Born in 1799 in Moscow, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin – who has been called the “founder of poetic and literary language in Russian” (Belinski, Turgenev), “the first of the Russians” (Dostoyevski), “the first Russian artist-poet” (Belinski), “the original model for Russian identity” (Grigoriev), “an extremely rare and perhaps unique phenomenon of the Russian spirit” (Gogol), “the sun of the Russian intellectual conception of the world” (Dostoyevsky) – could trace his roots back to African ancestors. His mother, Nadine Hanibal, was the granddaughter of “The Negro of Peter the Great,” Abraham Petrovich Hanibal, who at the beginning of the eighteenth century fell victim to the black slave trade with the Ottoman Empire.

But Pushkin was not the only European writer to spring from such a hybrid union, a Euro-African *métissage* resulting from the slave trade. One of his famous French contemporaries, Alexandre Dumas, was the grandson of Césètte Dumas, a black slave woman from Saint-Domingue, who according to the Swiss historian Debrunner was probably of Yoruba or Dahomian origin.

The case of Pushkin seems unexpected to say the least, since Russia, where he was born, was not among the European powers known for trafficking in slaves. But there was a “slave route” from Constantinople to Moscow, along which a small but steady traffic in African children was conducted from the end of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.¹

When the African presence in Europe is studied, it becomes apparent that Africans were present throughout the European continent, including those countries that were not involved in the trading of African slaves; some of these Africans met with undeniable social success. In Poland, for example, George Bridgetower, born in

the eighteenth century of a marriage between an African man and a Polish woman, became a great violinist.

The history of the black presence in Europe during the period of the black slave trade deserves to be better known. If it is first and foremost a non-negligible aspect of the history of the black diaspora, it is also a slice of European history that is unknown to most Europeans today. As for the Africans, do they know, for example, that since 1977 there has been a museum in Petrovskoe (in the Pskov region) that is devoted to the eighteenth-century African A. P. Hanibal?

Of all the Africans who lived in Europe in the eighteenth century, A. P. Hanibal was the one who exercised the highest responsibilities. True, the philosopher Anton Amo (1707-?), originally from what we now know as Ghana, was a senior member of the Council of State in Berlin and the author of several books; Adolphe Badin (1760-1822) served as secretary to the Court of Sweden; and in Vienna, Austria, another African, Angelo Soliman (1731-1796), was the tutor to a son of Prince Franz Joseph of Liechtenstein. In London, Olaudah Equiano (1755-1797), an important figure in the abolitionist movement, was the author in 1789 of an autobiography that was a publishing triumph (nine editions were published during the author's lifetime). But despite the success and popularity these Africans enjoyed, it must be acknowledged, to quote Leonid Arinshtein, "that in eighteenth-century Europe no other African received so many honors" as did Abraham Petrovich Hanibal, the black protégé of Peter the Great, in Russia.

Russian Traffic in Black Slaves

From the end of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1917, African slaves, in most cases children, were bought in Tripoli or Constantinople by Russian merchants or diplomats and taken to Russia. Czeslaw Jesman, who has studied the Tripoli trade network, explains that the slaves "were bought by Russian consuls in Tripoli, baptized on the spot in the Russian Orthodox Church, and sent to Saint Petersburg where, as new

converts, they were freed and engaged for life in the service of the imperial court. As a general rule, the duration of their service was to last twenty-five or thirty years."² They became pages in the Court or soldiers of the Imperial Guard; some were servants in families of the Russian aristocracy.

This traffic was not significant numerically speaking: it was in no way comparable, for example, to the thousands of Africans who, because of slavery, were forced to live in England, France or the other European countries that were directly involved in the black slave trade during the same period. The minimal African presence in Russia would probably have gone unnoticed if it were not for one of the children who fell victim to this traffic who had become a noted figure in Russian history. Abraham Petrovich Hanibal, whose destiny was to prove exceptional, was one of the most highly educated individuals in eighteenth-century Russia.

Abraham Petrovich Hanibal

Born in 1696 "on his father's land in the town of Logone,"³ according to his own written account, Hanibal found himself in 1703, at about the age of seven, in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Like all the foreign children, Christian or pagan, who were taken prisoner or subjected to the *devshirme* (the blood tax), he was converted to Islam, and was given the Muslim name Ibrahim. Being of noble origin, he was placed in the service of the sultan. One year later, he was taken in secret to Moscow to the court of Czar Peter the Great, Russia's reform-minded sovereign. The companion-in-arms to Peter I, Abraham Petrovich became one of the Czar's confidants and closest collaborators. From then on, he made Russia his adopted homeland, where from 1704 to 1781 he was to lead a long life rich in accomplishments.

An eminent mathematician, fortifications expert, and hydraulic engineer, A. P. Hanibal was also a statesman, a talented diplomat, and an important military leader. For many years he headed the entire defense system of the immense Russian Empire. He was decorated on a number of occasions by Empress Elizabeth "for his self-sacrifice and perseverance." An important figure in the his-

tory of Russian military engineering and architecture of the period, he was among those who helped bring the advances of Vauban, his illustrious French predecessor, to Russia.

In the field of mathematics, Hanibal published a treatise and for many years played an important role in mathematical pedagogy. As the author of the *Géométrie pratique* [sic], in 1725-1726, he was something of a pioneer, since the first treatise on geometry to be translated from German into Russian, the *Geometry* written by von Birkenshtein and Antony Erst, had appeared only in 1708.

After Hanibal had spent several years in France, where he obtained his diploma in engineering and attained the rank of captain, the Czar entrusted him with the administration of his private cabinet and charged him with teaching mathematics to the young Russian nobles enrolled in the technical schools of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Later on, Empress Anna Ivanovna sent him to Pernov (Estonia) to train the future engineers of the local military academy. Hanibal also instructed the future Czar Peter II, who was to reign from 1727 to 1730, in geometry and the science of fortifications.

Hanibal was active in many aspects of military engineering: besides fortifications, which formed the subject of his second work (1726), he was an expert in artillery, hydraulics, and architecture; as the chief translator of the Imperial Palace, he was in charge of overseeing scientific and technical translations from French into Russian. In the second half of the eighteenth century, he was to become Russia's genius of fortifications. Hanibal's innovations touched technology and pedagogy alike: he is known, for example, for having introduced instruction in civil architecture into engineering schools. He was also the first in Russia to apply the paving-stone technique to the restoration of fortresses.

For several years, Hanibal was the chief supervisor of training programs in schools of military engineering and artillery. In this capacity, he was one of the founders of the first combined school of engineering and artillery in St. Petersburg (1758).

As chief of the corps of engineers, Hanibal directed all major projects and came to be known as "an irreplaceable specialist." Thus in 1755 when Elizabeth Petrovna, Empress of Russia, appointed him governor of the province of Vyborg near the Finnish border, the War College – the highest military agency in the

country – lost no time in requesting that the Empress allow “Lieutenant-General and Chevalier Hanibal to remain as before in the Corps of Engineers ... since the Lieutenant-General and Chevalier commands the entire Department of Engineers and has in his purview all affairs relating to this Corps, including staffing matters in Engineering ...”

For some twenty years, until his retirement, Hanibal held the highest military ranks: commander in chief of the Estonian province, director of fortification projects in northwestern and western Russia (Cronstadt, Petersburg, Schlüsselburg, Riga, Pernov), southern Russia (Novosserbsk, Slaviansoserbsk, Elisabethgrad), the Ukraine (Kiev), western Siberia (Tobolsk-Itchimsk) President of the Commission appointed in 1757 to study the state of Russian fortresses, he was also the chief administrator of the Ladoga canal project and of the Commission of Works in Cronstadt and the Baltic port.

At the head of the defense system of the Russian Empire, the African of Russia criss-crossed the country building strongholds. When it became necessary in the 1750s to reinforce defenses in Russia’s southern regions against attacks by the Tatars and Turks, Hanibal decided to construct the St. Elizabeth fortress, defended by six bastions, for which he himself laid the first stone. A decade later, a small town (Elizabethgrad, renamed Kirovograd during the Soviet period) was to be built on the site of the fortress. A century later, Elizabethgrad had become “the principal military quarters of the Russian colonies on the eastern bank of the Bug ... inhabited by a considerable corps of cavalry.” Today, Kirovograd is a mid-sized Ukrainian city with a population numbering 263,000.

During the 1740s, Hanibal was entrusted with diplomatic missions to Finland. Empress Elizabeth appointed him chief of the Russian commission for determining boundaries with Sweden, charging him “with establishing in the field the national border crossing at the point likely to confer the greatest military advantage, and with selecting sites for constructing the fortifications that will be essential for the defense of the border in the future.” In 1759, Hanibal reached the peak of the military hierarchy when he was promoted to the rank of commander in chief of the army.

An Example for Russian Society of His Time

A military leader and an indefatigable builder, General Hanibal was not indifferent to the wretched living conditions that prevailed among the thousands of workers he employed on his construction sites. In 1755, he founded a hospital for the Cronstadt canal workers. One year later, he started a school for the laborers' and foremen's sons who were aimlessly roaming the streets of Cronstadt. Two graduates of this school created one of the first steam machines used by the Russian fleet.

In mid-century, when serfdom held sway in Russia, Abraham Petrovich, a rich landowner, improved the harsh conditions suffered by the hundreds of serfs working on his various estates, by prohibiting corporal punishment and abusive exploitation. Hanibal had become popular among the Russian and Estonian peasants, whose interests he did not hesitate to defend publicly; they found him a generous master.

After a first marriage, which was nothing short of a disaster, Abraham Hanibal enjoyed a long and happy marriage with his second wife, a descendant of Swedish nobility, Christine-Regina of Schoëburg. They lived happily together for nearly half a century and had many children. One of their sons, the army captain Joseph Hanibal, was to become one of the most celebrated grandfathers in Russia, for his only daughter Nadine, born of his tumultuous marriage with Marie Alexeyevna Pushkin, married his distant cousin Sergei Pushkin and gave birth to Alexander Pushkin.

Thus it was that the godson of the great Russian emperor Peter I became the great-grandfather of the great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin.

Pushkin's African Heritage

One might have expected that, because of the three generations separating Abraham Hanibal from his great-grandson, the poet's mixed heritage would go unnoticed. But the reality was otherwise, first of all because it happened that Pushkin was born with

African facial features that were more pronounced even than those of his mother. This physical detail made him stand out among his fellow Russians. According to Lunacharski, Lenin's minister of education, Pushkin's school friends and teachers described him as "short, slim, Negroid, with curly hair, a fiery expression, mercurial movements, and a passionate air."⁴ Emile Haumant, Pushkin's French biographer, observed that he had "frizzy black hair, thick lips, and a dark complexion."⁵ Most of the poet's portraits confirm this description.

Chance also had it that the young Pushkin thought himself "ugly": "I have never been handsome," he wrote in 1835.⁶ In the view of his contemporaries, this "ugliness" could only be a result of the "African blood" that flowed through his veins. Didn't works of natural history teach that Blacks were ugly and closely related to monkeys? During the years from 1810 to 1817, some of Pushkin's classmates were quick to nickname him "the monkey." The Russian author Vigel, who was one of the poet's companions, was to write that "his quick movements likened him to one of the anthropoids of Central Africa"! Born and raised in a context in which such prejudices circulated like common coin, the young Pushkin came to accept or to believe that his "ugliness" indeed resulted from his African origin. In an autobiographical description in one of his earliest poems, he wrote "A real monkey-face ..."; he later declared himself "an ugly offspring of Negroes" in a famous self-deprecation that was seized upon and deformed by later authors who claimed that Pushkin had written: "I am the offspring of ugly Negroes."⁷ Bukhalov, who has also studied this question, maintains that "the assimilation of monkeys to Negroes or Africans," a commonly held belief in Pushkin's time, must have made the poet "as a child, when he examined himself in the mirror, try hard to make himself correspond in detail to the received stereotypes."⁸

It seems moreover that the act of proclaiming his "blackness" was for Pushkin a form of auto-therapy that freed him, enabling him to escape being caught in the complex that might have resulted from the insults he had to endure. Pushkin decided to accept not only his origin but also the "flaws" generally acknowledged to accompany this identity. His attitude in this regard could appear contradictory; in February 1825, in a letter he wrote from

his exile at Mikhailovskoe⁹ – the estate his mother had inherited from Hanibal – to his younger brother Leo, he made the following suggestions: “Advice to Ryleyev: tell him to use our grandfather [Abraham Hanibal], a member of the entourage of Peter I, as a character in his new poem [Voïnarovski]. His Negro face will create a dramatic effect at the scene of the battle of Poltava.” If it is clear that Pushkin was not troubled by his ancestry, paradoxically the acknowledgment of his African identity did not prevent him from refusing to allow his “ugliness” to be portrayed. Thus, in a letter written in May 1836 to his wife – “eight months before his death,” according to one of his biographers, Arminjon¹⁰ – Pushkin told her jokingly that someone had offered to sculpt his bust: “But I don’t want it. My Negro ugliness would immediately be immortalized in the absolute immobility of death. I told them: the beauty who lives in my home is the one whose likeness you should sculpt.” It is true that Nathalie Pushkin, his wife, was one of the most beautiful women in Petersburg.¹¹

Moreover, the numerous self-portraits in pencil that Pushkin made were far from flattering. He gave himself an elongated face as if to resemble a monkey, in keeping with contemporary drawings considered as typical representations of blacks. Indeed, there is a striking resemblance between the Negro, supposedly a close relative of the orangutan, as shown in a drawing in J. J. Virey’s 1824 book *L’histoire naturelle du genre humain*, and Pushkin’s various self-portraits, as well as the portrait he made of his black ancestor.

If blacks were excluded from the concept of beauty by the Eurocentric canons that prevailed at the time and for a long time thereafter – how else can we explain the resounding cry of Harlem blacks, “Black is beautiful!” a century later? – it is nevertheless true that Pushkin’s mother, herself the grand-daughter of “the Negro of Peter the Great,” was renowned for her beauty. In Petersburg high society she was known as “the lovely Creole” or “the lovely African.” It is also noteworthy that Nadine Hanibal’s father, Joseph Hanibal, the unruly third son of the general, was a handsome man. To judge from the portraits depicting Abraham Hanibal himself, it could be said that he too was blessed by nature.

According to most of Pushkin’s biographers, his relationship with his mother was unhappy throughout his youth. Some authors

have attempted to explain this situation by the fact that Nadine Hanibal, in Arminjon's words, "was not happy to see certain hereditary traits of her Abyssinian [sic] ancestors lurking in the face and temperament of her eldest son. This woman who was besotted with French literature, and whose beauty was immortalized by Xavier de Maistre, was blessed by the mixing of races; is it possible that, when it came to her oldest son, nature took its revenge?" It is not impossible that, because of the prevailing prejudice against blacks, she would have preferred to have "white" children, as in the case of certain American and West Indian Blacks – a preference decried by Frantz Fanon in his work *Peaux noires, masques blancs* [*Black skins, white masks*]. However, a letter written in December 1834 by Nadine Hanibal to her daughter, Pushkin's sister Olga, provides evidence for her rather neutral attitude on this matter: "your older brother, it seems, dreamed that your baby would be black like Abraham Petrovich; you tell me he is neither light nor dark, which is more plausible and more natural," she wrote.¹²

Pushkin's Double Fatherland

Pushkin thus grew up with a double sense of identity. Naturally, he was first and foremost a Russian; but in his life and his writing alike, he never lost sight of his African side. The most striking example of this awareness is the theme of the double fatherland that he develops in his poetic masterpiece, the celebrated *Eugene Onegin*, which he began to write during his exile in Odessa in the southern Russian Empire. The poet dreams of freedom and escape and imagines himself taking refuge in his second homeland, Africa, where he would be able to think freely of his native country – Russia – toward which he harbored contradictory feelings of simultaneous suffering and love:

*Will it come the hour of my freedom?
Time, time! – call to it;
I roam above the sea, I wait for the weather,
I beckon to the sails of ships.
Under the cope of storms, with waves disputing,*

*on the free crossway of the sea
when shall I start on my free course?
Time to leave the dull shore
Of a to me inimical element,
and 'mid the meridian swell,
beneath the sky of my Africa,
to sigh for sombre Russia,
where I suffered, where I loved,
where my heart I buried.*¹³

Vladimir Nabokov aptly heads this stanza “Abram Gannibal,” for this longing or even need that Pushkin felt for Africa during his years of exile, and that he expressed in these beautiful lines, also paid homage to Hanibal, the African ancestor whom he did not have the good fortune to meet, and through Hanibal to Africa herself, where he could never go.

Someone close to Pushkin reports the poet’s reaction to solicitous attention on the part of an Asian-born servant who was in the employ of a common friend: “Asia protects Africa.”¹⁴ Clearly Pushkin considered himself a representative of Africa and identified with Africa, a factor that illuminates some of his inner motivations both as a man and as a writer.

Africa was ever-present in the imaginative world of the descendants of the founder of the line of Hanibal in Russia. In 1834 Benjamin Petrovich Hanibal, one of Pushkin’s uncles, wrote to Pushkin’s sister Olga upon finding out that she had just given birth to a son: “It is impossible to describe my joy. Kiss the new scion of the Hanibals, your Leonid, now just a lion cub, with all my heart and all my soul, *in the African way, the Hanibal way*. Please write to me soon to tell me whether he resembles the Hanibals, I mean if the baby Leonid is a little Negro with really dark skin.” In 1899, Anna Semionovna Hannibal, a distant descendant of the line, was to communicate her own longing for Africa: “I do so regret that I am no longer young enough to visit the land of my ancestors [Africa] ... but I must say that I have always been attracted to the south, to heat and sun.”¹⁵

Bukhalov, the Russian writer whose work laid the groundwork for research in the African dimension of Pushkin’s life and work,

answers Russians who are troubled by the nagging question: "No. It is not possible to avoid mentioning far-away Africa when we speak of Pushkin. Not only because Pushkin attached a great deal of importance to the African branch of his family tree; there is also the fact that African subjects are present in the poet's work in all its phases – from his high school poetry to his mature work. I believe the time has come to use all the knowledge that has been amassed in the field of Pushkin studies in order to shed light on this question calmly and dispassionately."

Pushkin and Hanibal

Nikolai Brodski, the author of a biography of Pushkin, made the following observation already in 1937: "In various periods of his life, Pushkin referred to his great-grandfather A. P. Hanibal."¹⁶ In fact, the great-grandfather and the great-grandson were practically contemporaries, even though they undeniably lived in different periods of Russian history. They are separated by barely twenty years: Hanibal died in 1781 and Pushkin was born in 1799. Hanibal belonged to the era of Peter the Great, to the eighteenth century which Pushkin found so fascinating. This century in which his illustrious ancestor lived was the source of answers to the many questions that sometimes assailed the nineteenth-century Russian that he was. And was Hanibal himself not the symbol of efforts by Peter I, the reform-minded ruler, to open Russia up to the outside world? Such was Pushkin's strong conviction.¹⁷

Hanibal's existence constituted a direct link between Pushkin and Peter the Great. Not only had the African been one of the "Eaglets in Peter's nest" – the phrase that Pushkin coined to designate the Czar's close companions – but he had also been Peter's godson: thus Peter was a sort of adoptive father. And Pushkin himself was a direct descendant of the Czar's adoptive son. He was therefore "in a sense," as Leskiss writes, a "creation of Peter," and he was always aware of this living link that joined them. The Russian writer who has given the most forceful expression to this belief in an existential relation connecting Peter the I through Hanibal to Pushkin is undoubtedly the poet Marina Tsvetaeva,

who writes of “that unknown day when Peter rested his gaze – a dark, and bright, and merry gaze, a fearsome gaze – upon the little Abyssinian [sic] Ibrahim. This gaze commanded Pushkin *into being*.”¹⁸ In this relationship, Hanibal was a sort of medium from another world, Africa, who made it possible for Pushkin’s genius to blossom. As the godson of the great emperor and the great-grandfather of the great poet, Hanibal earned an enviable place in the history of modern Russia.

Pushkin immortalized his black ancestor by making him a literary hero: as V. Listov writes, “The powerful figure of Abraham Hanibal is present in the pages of Pushkin’s literary output from *Eugene Onegin*, through the poem *My Genealogy* and the essay *Refutation of the Critics*, to the historical novel *The Negro of Peter the Great*.¹⁹

Hanibal was constantly present in Pushkin’s life, not only through stories told him by his mother Nadine Pushkin, the general’s granddaughter, but also through the accounts of numerous individuals in Pushkin’s entourage who had known his black grandfather. The two women who, in Pushkin’s own opinion, had played an important role in his life – his grandmother Marie Alexeyevna Hannibal and his peasant nurse Arina Rodionovna – told him everything they knew about Abraham Hanibal. Pushkin’s grandmother Marie had married one of Hanibal’s sons, Joseph (Ossip) Hanibal. The young married couple had lived for some time in the house in Souida (in the St. Petersburg region) that belonged to Abraham and Christine Hanibal; in fact this is where Pushkin’s mother was born in 1775.

Pushkin’s nurse was born in 1758 to a family of serfs living on the Souida estate, which then belonged to the Count Feodor A. Apraxine, from whom General Hanibal bought it a year later.²⁰ When Peter II granted Hanibal retirement in 1762, the general settled at Souida in the principal residence with sixty-nine servants in attendance. At Hanibal’s death in 1781, Arina Rodionovna was a young woman of twenty-six years. She was thus a ready source of lore about her black master and his family, much of which she conveyed to Pushkin when he was exiled in Mikhailovskoe in the 1820s. A friend of the poet has left the following description to posterity: “His days were monotonous. Rising early in the morning, he immersed himself in a cold bath, then took up his books

and pen; during bouts of melancholy, he would roll billiard balls or call upon his old nurse, who spoke to him of olden times, of the Hanibals, the descendants of the Negro of Peter the Great, the family to which his mother belonged."²¹

Pushkin's most likely source of information on the extraordinary history of his maternal great-grandfather was Peter Abramovich Hanibal, the second son of the black godson of Peter I. This retired Major General, born in 1742, was a privileged witness. By default, his august godparents were the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna and the future emperor Peter III. Pushkin met the couple on several occasions: "I am hoping to see once again my old Negro Great-Uncle who is likely to die one of these days, and from whom I must obtain memoirs concerning my ancestor," wrote Pushkin in a letter to his friend Madame P. A. Ossipova. Indeed, before dying, the great-uncle gave Pushkin several documents from the family archives.

The presence of the great-grandfather from Africa continued to make itself felt in a number of ways: the estate of Mikhailovskoe²², inherited by Nadine Pushkin, née Hanibal, with its parks designed by Hanibal himself, was a source of great poetic inspiration to Pushkin; the Souida estates were Hanibal's final resting place; Kobrino was inherited by Pushkin's grandfather Joseph Hanibal, and Taitsy is mentioned in Pushkin's journal in June 1834: "Yesterday evening at Catherine Andreyevna's. She is going to Taitsy, which used to belong to Hanibal, my great-grandfather."

If "the family name Pushkin crops up at every moment in [Russian] history,"²³ it was not until it was not until the eighteenth century that the name Hanibal (altered to Hannibal in the nineteenth century, which explains the variance in spelling) appeared in the Russian historical landscape. And the African elephant, which Hanibal had chosen as his emblem, was perched on the roof of the house in Petrovskoe. Pushkin was proud of his genealogy for bringing these two families together. In 1804, the council of nobles of the town of Pskov decided to inscribe the names of Abraham Hanibal's children in the first part of the *Book of Russian Nobility*; but this was not enough for the children: it was the wish of every noble family in Russia to figure in the sixth part of the book, for which "a century of land ownership" had to be documented. The founder of this new

dynasty in Russia had received his first great estate from the imperial land holdings in 1742. Therefore, the long-awaited step was not taken until February 1843: "The name of the Hannibals will henceforth be among the oldest families of the nobility, in virtue of which we command that this name figure in the sixth part of the *Book of Russian nobility in fulfillment of article 973 ...*"

Ivan Hanibal, the older son of Peter the Great's Negro, who was "one of the most remarkable men during the reign of Catherine the Great," to quote Pushkin's own words, had his name engraved on a colonnade erected by Catherine in honor of the heroes of the naval battle of Tchesme (June 1770) at the Czars' residence at Tsarskoe Selo (now Pushkino). As chance would have it, the boarding school where Pushkin studied was located at Tsarskoe Selo. Pushkin took great pride in seeing his grand-uncle Ivan's name; the latter had seen to the education of the poet's mother and had taken his grandmother Marie Alexeyevna under his wing after her divorce. In lines dedicated to A. P. Hanibal, Pushkin paid homage to Ivan, the hero of Navarin:

*And his son was that Hannibal
who over the abyssal seas
torched a massive fleet
and foreshadowed Navarin.*²⁴

Writing of Ivan Hanibal in his 1834 biographical sketch, Pushkin emphasized that he "was as worthy of attention as his father ... In 1770, he took Navarin. In 1779 he constructed Kher-son. His decrees still hold sway to this day in the south of Russia, where in 1821 I saw old-timers who could still remember him clearly." Ivan Hanibal died in 1801, not long after the birth of his grand-nephew Alexandre, and was buried in the renowned Alexander Nevsky Abby in St. Petersburg, a few meters from the tomb of another remarkable figure in Russian history, M. Lomonosov. On his tomb are the following words: "Born in the heat of Africa, his body rests here./ He served Russia and will live on in his immortal exploits."

Very early on, Alexander Pushkin expressed the pride he felt in belonging to the line of Hanibals by signing one of his high-school

poems, "The Cossack" (1814), with the hyphenated name, Pushkin-Annibal. A century later, another writer who was a descendant of A. P. Hanibal, the Russian novelist Zinovieva – wife of the poet Ivanov – also chose to sign her work with the double name, Zinovieva-Annibal.

Pushkin's pride in his African heritage is understandable. According to certain authors, it was even a source of "vanity" for him. There is no doubt that he could not stand to have it ridiculed: his honor was at stake. Bulgarine, a Russian writer of Polish origin, learned this at his expense in 1830 when he attacked Pushkin in the journal *The Northern Bee*: "It is no secret that a poet from Latin America ... descended from a mulatto or mulatress – who knows which – set out to demonstrate that one of his ancestors was a Negro prince. At the town hall of this city it was discovered that, long ago, this Negro was the object of a suit between a captain and his second mate, both of whom wished to appropriate the man; the captain proved that he had bought the Negro for a bottle of rum! Who would have thought that one day a poet would flaunt his kinship with this Negro? *Vanitas vanitatum*." Responding to these petty attacks, Pushkin lashed out directly at Bulgarin:

"A petty emigrant can be forgiven for not liking Russians, or Russia, or its history, or its glory. But he cannot be praised for responding to Russian advances by besmirching the sacred pages of our chronicles, by denigrating the best of our citizens and, not content to take on his contemporaries, by scoffing at the tombs of our ancestors."²⁵

Such provocations and other racially-motivated insults left Pushkin extremely sensitive. The nickname "monkey" dogged him throughout his life.²⁶ One day, in Petersburg, he had the following exchange with a Frenchwoman who asked him whether his grandfather was a Negro.

"No, he wasn't anymore."

"Then it was your great-grandfather?"

"Yes, it was my great-grandfather."

"So he was a Negro. Yes, that's it ... but then, who was *his* father?"

"A monkey, Madame," he quipped, ending the conversation.

(A surprising parallel can be drawn between Pushkin's situation in Russia and that of Alexandre Dumas in France. One of his biographers recounts that to the question "In fact, dear sir, you

must really be an expert on Negroes," Dumas replied: "Most certainly. My father was a mulatto, my grandfather was a Negro, and my great-grandfather was a monkey. You see, Sir, my family began where yours ended up."²⁷)

* * *

Pushkin was killed in a duel in 1837 by Georges d'Anthès, a French officer of the Russian Imperial Guard who had been courting Pushkin's wife. Lotman sees the poet as the victim of nothing less than a "plot by society"²⁸: Pushkin's numerous enemies in high society chose the most subtle and the most dangerous weapon they could to bring him harm. They knew that wounding him in his self-regard would leave him most vulnerable. Thus during the final act of this tragedy, he received a letter announcing his status as a cuckold. Leonid Arinshtein has observed that the seal used on the envelope containing the letter represented several huts. This could not have been mere chance: the hut was deliberately invoked with its racist connotations as a symbol of the "primitive." It is clear that the author or authors of this letter knew that such a detail, which no one else would have noticed, would be sure to strike a blow to the dignity of the addressee.

It seems obvious that the poet's psychological universe was influenced by Pushkin's own relation to his "African origin."²⁹

Contrary to what many historians of Russian literature have lead us to believe, this lineage is not of merely anecdotic value. Pushkin's mixed blood was an important element in his sense of identity and his personality, and is reflected in his literary work. Pushkin, who never ceased to celebrate his happiness over having been born in Russia and his pride in being Russian, did not for all that hesitate to recall that he had a second fatherland, Africa – whose most prestigious representative in imperial Russia was Abraham Petrovich Hanibal, the man who in Pushkin's eyes was at once his own great-grandfather, the godson, pupil and confidant of Peter the Great, the father of a Russian hero, one of his country's finest sons, and finally, the ancestor whose story forms part of the "sacred pages" of Russian history.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. See D. Gnamankou, "La traite des Noirs en direction de la Russie," in *Actes du Colloque Unesco "La Route de l'Esclave: Ouidah (Bénin 1994)"* (forthcoming, Editions Unesco-Aupelf).
2. Czeslaw Jesman, "Early Russian Contacts with Ethiopia," in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, 1966), pp. 253-267.
3. Letter to the Russian Senate, 1742. In this autobiographical document, Hanibal does not however supply the name of the country where the town of Logone was located. Half a century later, Rotkirkh, Hanibal's son-in-law, wrote in a document known as the "German Biography" that Hanibal was a "Negro from Abyssinia." Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as the centenary of the poet's birth drew near, attempts were made in Russia to determine the native land of Pushkin's black great-grandfather. In 1899, a Russian scholar named Anuchin announced that he had discovered the town of Logone in Ethiopia. Thus was born the legend of Pushkin's Ethiopian ancestry. But Anuchin had inaccurately transformed the place name Logo-Tchova, the name of a village in northern Ethiopia, into Logone. A few decades later, Vladimir Nabokov endeavored in vain to locate the town of Logone in Ethiopia according to Anuchin's indications. Having concluded that the "German Biography" that mentioned Abyssinia was an error-ridden document, and realizing that in Anuchin's article the Ethiopian place name *Loggo* or *Logo* was miraculously transformed in various versions to *Loggon* or *Logom*, then *Loggon* or *Logon*, Nabokov decided to ignore the document and to pursue his own line of investigation from scratch; he did not find Logone in Ethiopia. In reality, the town of Logone was located elsewhere in Africa, in a principality of the same name located in the basin of Lake Chad, in territory formerly known as Central Sudan and now part of Cameroon. This conclusion is based on a critical study of all of my predecessors' work and on new research. Cf. my article "Otkuda rodom Ibragim Gannibal," *Rossiyskie Vesti* no. 101 (2 June 1995) and the English version of this article, "New Research on Pushkin's Africa: Hannibal's Homeland," in *Research in African Literature*, vol. 28, no. 4 (winter 1997); and my article "Where Does Hanibal Come From?", in *The Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, vol. 65, no. 12 (December 1995).
4. Bukhalov, V. I. *Roman o tsarskom arape [The Novel of the Tsar's Negro]* (Moscow, 1990), p. 22.
5. Emile Haumant, *Pouchkine* (Paris, 1911), p. 14.
6. A. S. Pushkin, *Correspondence* (not translated) (Moscow, 1965), vol. 10, p. 49.
7. In 1820 Pushkin wrote:
But I, an eternally-idle rake,
An ugly offspring of Negroes,
Not knowing the sufferings of love,
I please youthful beauties
With the shameless rage of my desire ...
A. Pushkin, "Iur'evu" ("To Iurev"), quoted by Allison Blakely, in *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, D.C., 1986), p. 51.
8. Bukhalov, *Roman o tsarskom arape*, p. 27.

9. In May 1820, Pushkin was exiled in the south of the Russian Empire for having written political verse, in particular the "Ode to Liberty." In July 1824, after the police had intercepted one of his letters expressing atheist ideas, he was transferred to the northwest of Russia, to Mikhailovskoe. See Dimitrij Blagoj, *Alexander Pushkin* (Paris, 1981). Nicholas I, who became emperor after the death of Alexander I, brought Pushkin's second exile to an end in September 1826. The poet's troubles with the authorities were however not over, for Nicholas I himself decided to censor Pushkin and had him placed under police surveillance.
10. Pierre Arminjon, *Pouchkine et Pierre le Grand* (Paris, 1971).
11. Before his marriage in 1831 to Nathalie Goncharova, Pushkin had attracted attention in Moscow and Petersburg with his many amorous adventures. He loved women and reveled in the pleasures of the senses and the mind, which were all gifts from heaven in his eyes (Seseman D.). He had many admirers among the women of high society and some of these lovers were immortalized in not a few poems. Thus women found Pushkin handsome and quite seductive.
12. *Mir Pushkina. Familnye bumagi Pushkinykh Gannibalov [The World of Pushkin]* (St. Petersburg, 1993), vol. 1.
13. Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 1, stanza L, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, in "Pushkin and Gannibal: A Footnote," *Encounter*, vol. 19, no. 1 (July 1962), p. 11. For the Russian translation of this article, see *Legendy i mify o Pushkine [Myths et Legends about Pushkin]* (St. Petersburg, 1995).
14. Cited by Bukhalov, *Roman o tsarskom arape*, p. 27.
15. Letter from Anna S. Hannibal to D. Anuchin, Odessa, 6 November 1899, in *Vsesoyuznaia Biblioteka v.i. Lenina*, Troudy, Shornik IV, Moscow, 1939), p. 163.
16. Nikolai Leontovich Brodskii, *A. S. Pushkin: Biografiia* (Moscow, 1937), p. 572, cited by Bukhalov, *Roman o tsarskom arape*, p. 120.
17. Louis Martinez, *Alexandre Pouchkine, Poésies* (Paris, 1994).
18. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Mon Pouchkine* (Paris, 1987).
19. *Legendy i mify o Puchkine*.
20. Nina Ivanova Granovskaia, *Esl' ekhat vam sluchitsia ... [In Case You Should Happen to Go ...]* (Leningrad, 1989).
21. Bukhalov.
22. In 1824, Pushkin sent his friend Yazykov the following lines from Mikhailovskoe:

In the countryside, where Peter's foster-child,
Favorite slave of tsars and tsarinas
And their forgotten housemate,
My Negro great-grandfather hid,
Where, having forgotten Elizabeth
And the court and magnificent promise,
Under the canopy of lime-blossom lanes
He thought in cool summers
About his distant Africa,
I wait for you ...

(English translation by Allison Blakely, in *Russia and the Negro*, p. 52).
23. A. Pushkin, *Début d'Autobiographie*, in Dieudonné Gnamankou, *Abraham Hanibal, l'aïeul noir de Pouchkine* (Paris, 1996), p. 208.

24. From the French translation by Louis Martinez, *Alexandre Pouchkine, Poésies*.
25. From the French translation by André Meynieux, in *Pouchkine. Oeuvres complètes. Autobiographie. Critique. Correspondance* (Paris, 1977).
26. G. Alexinsky, "Pouchkine l'Africain," in *Le Figaro Littéraire* no. 276 (August 1951).
27. Daniel Zimmerman, *Alexandre Dumas le Grand* (Paris, 1993), p. 354.
28. Iurii Mikhailovich Lotman, *Pouchkine* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1995), p. 181.
29. Pushkin was the most illustrious of the descendants of Abraham Hanibal, the Russian of Africa, whose wife Nathalie had borne him four children: Marie, Alexander, Gregory, and Nathalie. The oldest, Marie (1832-1919) was married to Major-General Leonid Hartung. Alexander (1833-1914) was a Lieutenant General in the Russian Army. A war hero, he earned several military decorations. His brother Gregory (1835-1905) left the army very early and went on to a career in administration. He became a senior member of the Council of State in 1896. As for Nathalie, whose contemporaries considered her "even more beautiful than her mother, despite her irregular African features," she was married for a second time, in London, to a German prince, Nicolas of Nassau, a relative of the Romanovs, the Russian Imperial family. In 1867 she became Countess of Merenberg. In 1916 her granddaughter, the Countess Nada de Torbi, married another German prince, George of Mountbatten, the uncle of Philip of Edinburgh, and became the Marquessa of Milford-Haven. Cf. Viktor Mikhailovich Rusakov, *Rasskazy o potomkakh A. S. Pushkina [The Descendants of Pushkin]* (St. Petersburg, 1992). Today Pushkin's many descendants live all over the world.