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Gannibal

The Moor of Petersburg

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Preface

Alexander Pushkin was not only Russia's greatest poet. He was also the great-grandson of an African slave. The slave, whose godfather was Peter the Great, claimed to have royal blood of his own. Certainly his Russian descendants believed that he was a prince of Abyssinia. His English descendants have included Mountbattens and others close to the royal family. So the legend goes on.

Pushkin told the story of his black ancestor in *The Negro of Peter the Great*, but this is a different version. The main difference is between fact and fiction. The poet hoped to discover a biographical truth by sticking to the facts, only to discover that facts are slippery and not always true. His biography turned into a novel. Even then, it was left unfinished after six and a half chapters. The scrawled manuscript comes to a halt with a line of dialogue – 'Sit down, you scoundrel, let's talk!' – and a line of dots.

He could be speaking to himself. In any case, it's now time to stand up and carry on with the story. I have tried to join up the dots.

This is a book, then, about a missing link between the storyteller and his elusive subject, between the various branches of a family and its roots, between Pushkin and Africa, Africa and Europe, Europe and Russia, black and white. It is the story of a remarkable life and it poses the question: how is such a life to be explained?

My own explanation began in 2001, while I was living in Russia and working there as a journalist. The first draft was written during the war in Afghanistan, on the road to Kabul, and in the footsteps of the Taliban, but it describes other journeys, other pursuits. One led me to the frontline of a different kind of war, in Abyssinia, or at least to the fifteen-mile no-go zone separating the armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea. According to legend, Pushkin's ancestor was born here,

on the northern bank of the river Mareb, where I was arrested for taking photographs and compass readings, on suspicion of being an Eritrean spy. Understandably my captors declined to believe that I was merely a journalist researching the ancestry of Russia's greatest writer, hoping to prove a negative. At the military camp, where I was held for a number of hours, the commandant looked me up and down when I asked, in my plummiest accent, 'I say, my good man, can you tell me, basically, what is going on here?' 'Basically,' he replied, with distaste, 'you is in *pree-zan*!'

The incident taught me something about the imprisoning facts of biography. Journalists, like biographers, are meant to respect facts, and by retracing Gannibal's footsteps, I hoped to find a true story.

Some of those journeys lie behind the book, and intrude whenever it is helpful to show that the past often retains a physical presence for the biographer – in landscapes, buildings, portraits, and above all in the trace of handwriting on original letters or journals. But my own journeys are not the point of the book. It is Gannibal's story. I am only following him.

Descriptions of Africa and the slave trade are drawn from my journeys, but this is not a book about a 'stolen legacy', nor certainly about the intellectual wars that have dogged black history in recent years. Biographers, like novelists, should tell stories. I have tried.

The book was mostly written between 2001 and 2004, but its themes have been in and out of my mind for over a decade. As a result there are long-standing debts. I wish to thank my editor Peter Carson for commissioning the book. I am also grateful to Derek Johns, Joanna Zenghelis, Anne Barton, John Kerrigan, the late Dmitry Likhachev, Sergei Fomichev, Dieudonné Gnammankou, Rachel Polonsky and Kyril Zinovieff, who is a descendant of Gannibal and, at ninety-five, one of the last survivors of the old Russian nobility.

I am grateful to Nicolas Miletitch, of Agence France-Presse, for employing me in Russia, and to his colleagues, David Millikin and Michel Viatteau, for their help and advice; and to Scott and Alexandra Peterson for giving me a quiet place to work in Sad Sam.

'A Negro!' Nikolai finished with a smile of delight. 'Of course I remember. But I still don't know if the Negro really existed, or if we just dreamed it or heard a story about him.'

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

1

Hermitage

Under the sky of my Africa
To sigh for gloomy Russia.

Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

On 9 June 1762, during the 'white nights' of midsummer in Saint Petersburg, Russia's black knight left the Winter Palace in a huff. He was African and the son of Peter the Great, or so he claimed in a letter to Catherine the Great. (The epithet was bestowed somewhat liberally in eighteenth-century Europe.) 'Sacked!' he wrote in disbelief, 'after 57 years of loyal service, without reason or reward.'[1]

It had been a day of snubs and humiliations. The last straw came at a banquet given by the tsar, Peter's grandson and Catherine's husband, Peter III, to mark the signing of a peace treaty with Frederick the Great, king of Prussia. It was a gala occasion – the first of its kind in the new palace – and the whole of Petersburg was there. Built 'for the glory of Russia' by the Italian architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, the magnificent structure cast a spell. Diversity and scale, the icy turquoise façade stretching two hundred yards down the Neva embankment, gave its baroque detail a heavy, almost barbaric flavour. In the half-light of the northern solstice, the vast bulk of the palace seemed to float upon the water. An optical illusion perhaps, or just the visible manifestation of an incomprehensible mystery: Dostoyevsky's 'invented city', its existence seeming to defy the physical and moral order of things.

Other guests noticed the African's moody demeanour. He was peevish and irritable, according to Baron Nikolai Korf, the head of the secret police, who described the outcast 'smiling like a wounded monkey' as he turned his back on the crush of senators, diplomats, ladies-in-waiting, aides-de-camp – even members of the imperial family just arrived from the tsar's native Holstein – and vanished into thin air.[2]

It was the usual racist slur. Not that his was the only black face in the crowd. Negro slaves were a common sight in Petersburg. In the grand salons of Millionnaya (or Millionaires') street, they appeared in a variety of roles, such as pets, pages, footmen, mascots, mistresses, favourites and adopted children. At the Winter Palace, so-called court Arabs – usually Ethiopians dressed *à l'orientale* in turbans and baggy trousers – stood guard like stage extras in the wings of marble and lapis lazuli. Recent events were the other backdrop. The African was not the only disgruntled soldier who opposed the end of Russia's victorious involvement in the Seven Years' War. Talk of conspiracy was rife. A hotchpotch of disaffected courtiers and adventurers loyal to Catherine were said to be plotting a *coup d'état*. Even Korf, the tsar's chief dissident-hunter, was thinking of changing sides.

It is often said that the African took part in the overthrow of Peter III. But Korf's anecdote is all that remains of his brief days as a revolutionary. Police reports show he left Petersburg after his untimely departure from the Winter Palace. The only other documentary evidence is a stationhouse register in the province of Pskov. An entry for 5 July – the day of Peter's murder – finds him returning from his country estate at Mikhailovskoye, 285 miles south-west of the capital, and inscribing his name and rank, as well as the date, for communication, in accordance with the law, to the secret police: 'Abram Petrovich Gannibal – General-in-chief – Landowner – Travelling on Private Affairs.'[3]

The story of Abram Petrovich Gannibal, and how he got that name, is the stuff of epic drama or romantic legend. It begins, in 1703, with a journey out of Africa. The young Moorish prince, aged

seven, did not leave of his own free will. According to legend, he was kidnapped by pirates off the Barbary coast and sold as a slave to the Sultan of Turkey. Before long, however, a Russian spy in Constantinople rescued the exotic-looking child and dispatched him to the Kremlin as a present for Peter the Great, who became his godfather, and later adopted him. As for the riddle of his 'mysterious origin', which prompted Vladimir Nabokov to write a 60-page essay on the subject, as an appendix to his controversial edition of *Eugene Onegin*, new evidence has emerged in the last decade, and more will come out in the course of this book. By coincidence, in the year of Gannibal's enslavement, Russia's westernising tsar abandoned Moscow to build his new capital on a Baltic swamp. This 'Venice of the North' was founded on malaria-stricken bogs, and built by hundreds of thousands of serfs, many of whom died of disease and malnutrition during its construction. Saint Petersburg and the freed slave grew up side by side. The city with its Italianate architecture and stuccoed façades rose out of nothing on the banks of the Neva. The tsar's black favourite also scaled the heights of European society. He was fêted in salons from the Winter Palace to the court of Louis XV. Women were spellbound by his sexual charisma; their husbands marvelled at his nonchalant wit. At the same time, his military exploits from northern Spain to the icy wastes of Siberia – to say nothing of his marital problems – sealed Gannibal's reputation as the Russian Othello. His life rang with praise and applause, but so far he has been the subject of a disproportionately small amount of biography – none of it in English. The oracles have been dumb, and sometimes surly. Today he is remembered, if at all, only as the great-grandfather of Russia's finest poet, Alexander Pushkin, who portrayed his black ancestor in an unfinished novel, *The Negro of Peter the Great*.

Truth is stranger than fiction. The life of the Moor of Petersburg was not just adventurous; it was also evolutionary. Peter's Russia had always welcomed outsiders. Ever since the time of his first Grand Embassy to western Europe a decade earlier, the reforming tsar had brought back architects and engineers, craftsmen and artists,

furniture designers and landscape gardeners. Scots, Germans, French and Italians all settled in large numbers in Petersburg. Under his godfather's watchful eye, Gannibal reversed the experiment, moving in and out of royal favour, but also soaring to dizzy heights as a soldier, diplomat, political factotum, and spy – not only for Russia, but also in France for the duc du Maine and opponents of the Regency.

In Paris, where he studied mathematics as well as military engineering, Gannibal played a key role in the exchange of ideas and technology that helped to modernise Russia. At the same time his friendship with Montesquieu and Voltaire, who praised him as the 'dark star of Russia's enlightenment', highlighted the Negrophobia of the contributors to the *Encyclopédie*. For his role as the first black intellectual in Europe, Gannibal was uniquely fitted by his varied experiences and abilities. But the nature of that experience, some of it clandestine and dangerous, has meant that although the African was a figure of substance, his total achievement has always seemed less than the sum of its parts. Not that we really know what all the parts were, since he revelled in the contrasts and conjunctions of his different pursuits: the philosopher and the man of action, the soldier-scholar, the plain-speaking courtier, the 'pensive' Moor, the same word Pushkin used for Rousseau in his discussion of the Noble Savage.[4]

Significantly, perhaps, it was during his sojourn in France that the interloper began signing his name 'Gannibal', a variant in Russian (with its aitchless Cyrillic alphabet) of Hannibal. A *nom de guerre*, it evoked not only the ancient Carthaginian general, his African precursor in the heart of Europe, but also (with a minor consonantal shift) a deep-seated racial prejudice in French thought, from Montaigne's 'On Cannibals' – the singular noun, in Russian, is *kannibal* – to a heading in the *Encyclopédie*: 'Vicious Character of Negroes'. Out of this etymological jumble comes one aspect of the European reaction to Gannibal: fear, a clinging to the idea of backwardness, of monstrousness. Yet opponents of slavery used Gannibal's achievements to point out how wrong it was to enslave such talented people. Given pro-slavery arguments, which rationalised

black servitude in terms of African baseness, it was inevitable that abolitionists would see in the Moor of Petersburg a counter-myth of African nobility. Certainly, with his natural gift for mathematics and his unrivalled skill as a field engineer, Gannibal more than repaid his debt to the tsar. Russian despots from Catherine the Great to Josef Stalin have owed stout defence to the line of fortifications he built from the Arctic Circle to the frontier with China. To quote Shakespeare on Othello, he had done the state some service, and they knew it – or, at any rate, Peter's daughter, the Empress Elizabeth, did. In 1741, she rewarded his efforts by granting him the estate at Mikhailovskoye, with its thousands of acres of pine forests and its hundreds of serfs. It was the ultimate irony in a bizarre life: the African slave had become a Russian slaveowner.

But who was Abram Petrovich Gannibal? And where did he come from? Was he really an Ethiopian prince, as the social-climbing Pushkins liked to claim? Or was he purchased by a drunk Russian skipper at the Ottoman Porte for a bottle of rum, as the poet's enemies believed. Here the romantic legend gives way to a detective story. It begins to unravel in Catherine's reign, as soon as he disappeared from the Winter Palace to a well-appointed exile in the Pskovan woods.

Gannibal's opting for hermitage became a legend in his family. 'In the reign of Emperor Peter the Third,' wrote his son-in-law, 'he went into retirement and lived like a sage in a peaceful and untroubled country life.' Rusticity was the feel of Mikhailovskoye, a kind of pastoralism. The manor house was small – fifty-six feet by forty-five – with an open porch looking out onto meadows, the picturesque Sorot river, the Svyatogorsky monastery, founded in 1569 by Ivan the Terrible, and two beautiful lakes, Kuchane and Malenets, surrounded by pine trees, hemp fields and corn stacks. Here Gannibal sat for days on end, in an old armchair in the study, with its smell of kvass and tallow candles, a table piled up with papers, and a glass-fronted bookcase full of volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, cobwebs, and dust.

Pushkin neatly captured the paradox of Gannibal's retirement when he wrote, in a note to *Eugene Onegin*, that 'the black African

who had become a Russian noble lived out his life like a French *philosophe*'.[5] To see it in this way is not to deny a more down-to-earth explanation. The decree signed by Peter III cited 'old age' as the reason for his dismissal. In other words, as a military commander, Gannibal was over the hill – which is probably true – and his retirement to a 'nest of the gentry' was overdue: it is just a question of scale, of extremity. This is a human story. But there is also an archetypal or legendary aspect to Gannibal which magnifies his gestures and loads his curtest utterances. And if, at times, this construction seems a bit novelistic, that is because the habits of the landed gentry (as we know them from Turgenev or Tolstoy) did not have to be invented, but were simply there: the summer mushroom hunts, the troika rides, the same, roughly predictable cast of characters – the faithful peasant, the unruly steward – as well as the general-in-chief celebrated in *War and Peace* in the figure of Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky.

It was no coincidence that, in 1762, Gannibal helped to invent a new Russian archetype. That year was a turning point in the history of the Russian countryside and a milestone for those 'travelling on private affairs'. It marked the beginning of a golden age for the country estate, which lasted a century until the abolition of serfdom in 1861. During the brief six months of his reign, Peter III made a very significant breach in Russia's system of *noblesse oblige*. Until 1762, the bondage of Russian society extended to the very top. Each individual was assigned to a particular rank – noble, townsman, priest or serf. Since 1722, a Table of Ranks instituted by Peter the Great had obliged even the nobility to serve the state. By issuing a decree that released the aristocracy from military and civil service, his grandson inadvertently enabled the idea of the 'private' individual to develop. The reform of 1762 turned backwaters such as Mikhailovskoye into the patriarchal fiefdoms or bucolic playgrounds – depending on your point of view – that led to the cultural flowering of the nineteenth century.[6]

This was his new life, then: the country gent, the retired soldier cultivating his garden, the philosopher-king, whom Pushkin describes in a poem written at Mikhailovskoye:

On the estate, where Peter's adopted child,
The beloved slave of tsars and tsarinas,
The forgotten one, who lived with them,
My ancestor the Blackamoor hid,
And where, having forgotten the court
And the splendid solemn promises of Elizabeth,
In the shade of lime-tree arbours,
He thought in cool summers
Of his far-off Africa.[7]

In other words, all the while, virtually from the moment Gannibal settled in the country, his mind was reaching out for somewhere else. At first it may have been, as Pushkin suggests, for his African homeland. That sense of nostalgia is evident in the family coat of arms emblazoned on a flag flying from the roof: the image of an elephant, with its hint of the ancient forerunner, and the enigmatic motto FUMMO, to which no satisfactory meaning has ever been ascribed. The most plausible effort to date is a non-existent proverb, *Fortuna viam meam mutavit oppido*, or 'Fate changed my life completely', which is certainly ingenious yet fails to convince, if only because Gannibal knew almost no Latin.

From the summer of 1762, perhaps even from the second week in July, when news of Catherine's coup against her husband reached Gannibal at Mikhailovskoye, the African was taking stock, hatching plans, thinking of revenge. On his desk, among the bric-à-brac of estate papers, were the maps, the charts, the campaign journals of the Seven Years' War. It was the first truly global conflict in history, ranging from Ohio to the Philippines, from Havana to Berlin. The war also highlighted the extraordinary reform of the Russian military that had taken place since the reign of Peter the Great, a reform in which Gannibal himself, both as theorist and practitioner, had played a significant role.

In the edgy aftermath of revolution, Gannibal wrote to Catherine requesting a promotion (to the rank of field marshal) and the financial

reward he felt that Peter III had unjustly denied him. During the early weeks of her reign, Catherine lavished such rewards on those who had helped her to the throne. Grigory Potemkin, her future lover and consort, but someone who played only a minor role in the uprising, received 300 serfs, for example, while others got a life pension. So this is probably the true context of his letter to Catherine, which quickly dispenses with the usual expressions of fealty ('Your Venerable Majesty', 'Your Most Virtuous Highness', 'All High and Mighty Great Empress, All-Gracious Autocrat of Russia') to speak of his 'actions' – a clear reference to the plot against her murdered husband, whom he pointedly slights:

> I served the glorious memory of Your Majesty's beloved grandfather without interruption for 57 years, and without faults, but now on the ninth of June, unexpectedly, and without there being any crime on my part, I have been banished from service, and without the usual rewards.
>
> In return for my actions and unstinting service to Your Majesty, I beg you to grant me from the lofty nature of Your Imperial Highness the ownership, for the sake of my poor family, of the estate in Ingria and Korpusk and the houses and estates of Old Siverko, New Siverko, Bolshevomezhno, Vyra, Rybitsa, in which there were at the last count five hundred and seven serfs, as well as one estate in Kurovitskaya.
>
> All-gracious Tsarina, I beg Your Imperial Majesty to judge this petition in my favour. Your entreating general and knight, Abram Gannibal, son of Peter, July 1762.[8]

This bold entreaty was a last desperate throw of the dice. It didn't pay off. In the month of July 1762, Catherine had urgent business in hand. She had no time to waste filling the pockets of a retired general. His petition was quietly dropped. The African didn't even get a reply from the hot-blooded empress. He was already a yesterday's man, a bizarre relic, an unwelcome reminder. In a scribbled postscript

to Gannibal's letter, an unknown clerk has written 'no resolution' at the bottom of the sheet of paper, which now languishes in a dusty archive.

It is hard to improve upon the verdict of the anonymous bureaucrat. Such inconclusiveness was typical of Gannibal. From its very beginnings somewhere in Africa, his whole life was almost heroically *unresolved*: a story of departures and flights, of disappearances and reappearances. As a result, one can argue that his years of retirement, of hermitage, of disappointment, were not, as they are often taken to be, some kind of long blank coda at the end of a brilliant career, but an expression of something that was always there, in his life and in his alienation – a desire for self-removal, a dream of leaving and also perhaps of leaving no trace.

Nobody can reconstruct the linear narrative of Gannibal's life. It is full of gaps, of undecipherable clues, of mysteries and riddles. He often falls out of the historical record, goes missing for years, only to crop up again in a different place, in a new role, as a fresh imposture. Little has been written about him. The sources – letters, memoirs, official documents – are tantalisingly thin. The shortage of intimate papers makes it hard to hear the voice in which he spoke to himself and his closest friends. Even when the facts, the bare outlines, of his life are clear, the interpretation of them is very difficult. This difficulty is increased by Gannibal's own reticence about himself. Most of his correspondence has disappeared, and the surviving letters are astonishingly uncommunicative of his character. Their clipped, nonchalant tones, explanatory but somehow evasive, approximate to his conversational style. 'He spoke little,' said his friend Ivan Cherkasov. 'His comments were brief.' This is amply confirmed by others.

The atmosphere of political repression during the early years of Catherine's reign was not favourable to speaking out of turn. Having seized the throne by colluding in the murder of the Romanov tsar, she – his widow, a minor German princess by birth – understandably feared a challenge to her new status as empress, particularly as her son and heir Paul had no Romanov blood, being almost certainly the

child of her lover Sergei Saltykov. That fact, though far from public knowledge, might have been known to Gannibal, and may explain the strange formalisation of himself as Peter's 'son', in the letter to Catherine, when the more usual word for 'godson' would have done. Nevertheless, in day-to-day conversation, the African wisely held his tongue. And there was a reason why he took no chances. It was the brutal repression of dissent under a law passed in 1763, called the Manifesto of Silence, which outlawed 'improper discussion and gossip' on political subjects.

His own silence was already manifest. It wasn't the African's way to give himself away on paper. He was not a confessional writer. 'During the reign of Peter III, Gannibal retired,' Pushkin adds in the note to *Eugene Onegin*. 'He wrote his memoirs in French, but in a fit of panic, to which he was subject, ordered them to be burned in his presence, together with other precious documents.'[9] But what caused him to panic? What exactly did he fear? The knock on the door in the middle of the night or a round-the-clock surveillance by Catherine's network of police spies known collectively as the Secret Expedition?

Pushkin wanted to know. In a series of visits to Mikhailovskoye as a young man, he mounted a kind of paper chase for any surviving documents. (Anyone trying to reconstruct Gannibal's story is always trailing in the footsteps of the poet and his detective work.) For example, Pushkin made regular visits to see his great-uncle, the African's second son, General Pyotr Abramovich Gannibal, who lived on the neighbouring estate of Petrovskoye, which Gannibal had built a few miles away. In 1817, soon after graduating, Pushkin went to see Pyotr, hoping to get some family documents from him. The old man was known in the district for his unconventional private life. In his youth, he had, like many another Russian landowner, kept a harem of serf girls. By the time Pushkin came to visit, however, Pyotr's pleasures were more or less confined to drink. 'He ordered a vodka,' the poet noted in his diary,

> poured out a glass for himself and told the servant to offer me a glass. I emptied it at a gulp without pulling a face, a fact which, it seems, greatly pleased the old Negro. A quarter of an hour later, he again called for vodka and repeated this five or six times until dinner.[10]

Yet the visit bore fruit. Pushkin left with a handful of papers, including an unpublished 4,000-word biography of Gannibal written by his Estonian son-in-law, Adam Karpovich Rotkirkh. The text, in German, contains a number of absurd fantasies, including the claim that Gannibal was directly descended from his ancient Carthaginian namesake, as well as some facts that only Gannibal could have remembered. Based on notes the son-in-law jotted down in the final years of the African's life, the book's fabulous narrative is not so much a substitute for the destroyed memoirs as a kind of self-rejoinder, a complicating of the story told by an old man whose memory was fading. He was forgetful as well as 'forgotten'. Indeed Pyotr's elder brother Ivan recalled that, 'at the end of his life, [Gannibal] seemed to view his former career as in a dream'. The German biography, too, has a dreamlike quality – unsurprisingly perhaps, since Rotkirkh is describing events in a remote past, which he knows of only indirectly and from a source of doubtful reliability. Out of this thin fabric, the son-in-law builds up an epic story that at least coheres with itself, even if it doesn't always with the rest of history or geography.

Pushkin, who translated Rotkirkh's biography into Russian, made several attempts of his own to write about his great-grandfather, first in a straightforwardly historical vein – and then, out of despair, in the form of a novel *The Negro of Peter the Great*, which he left unfinished. In 1825, he jotted down what he called the 'notes' to the first chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, an encyclopaedia of Russian life, but also, poignantly, a treatment of his own years in exile at Mikhailovskoye.

That same year, he seems to have resumed the scholarly detective work. In a letter of 11 August, to his friend and neighbour Praskovya Osipova, then in Riga, he wrote: 'I am counting on seeing my old Negro of a great Uncle, who I suppose, is going to die one of these

fine days, and I must get from him some memoirs concerning my great-grandfather.'[11]

Pyotr did indeed die shortly afterwards, on 6 June 1826, at his other estate of Safontyevo, forty miles from Mikhailovskoye. It seems Pushkin never learned the identity of the author of the German biography, and his great-uncle was too ill to tell him. Pyotr had suffered a serious stroke and was unable to remember the name of his own son Veniamin.[12] Pushkin, however, took possession of the document, which now lies in the archive of the Russian Institute of Literature in Saint Petersburg, and he used its characteristic phrases, beliefs, misunderstandings and clues left inexplicably behind to write *The Negro of Peter the Great*. There can be little doubt that Pushkin's novel makes Gannibal in some ways a more complex, sympathetic and indeed a more modern figure. Yet there are also conflations and blurrings, imaginary links placed in the narrative, a merging of history and legend that has bedevilled Gannibal biography ever since, obscuring the actual life and crushing it under the weight of scholarship.

The irony did not escape Pushkin. The poet's fame overshadowed, as it were, the invisible facts of Gannibal's life. His story, instead of being properly investigated, was told and retold without any regard for its truth. Pushkin seems to have anticipated and wanted to remedy this fate. 'In Russia,' he wrote,

> where the memory of eminent men is soon obliterated by the absence of historical memoirs, the strange life of Gannibal is known only through family legends. We hope to publish in due time his complete biography.[13]

That biography was never written. But the 'forgotten one' was never quite forgotten.