
Studies in RUSSIAN LITERATURE and Theory

Under the Sky of My Africa

*Alexander Pushkin
and Blackness*

Edited by

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy,
Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos

Foreword by

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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Northwestern University Press
Studies in Russian Literature and Theory

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NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS / EVANSTON, ILLINOIS
STUDIES OF THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Northwestern University Press
Evanston, Illinois 60208-4170

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-8101-1970-6 (cloth)

ISBN 0-8101-1971-4 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Under the sky of my Africa : Alexander Pushkin and blackness / edited by
Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos ;
foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

p. cm.—(Studies in Russian literature and theory) (Studies of the Harriman
Institute)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8101-1971-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-8101-1970-6 (cloth : alk.
paper)

1. Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeevich, 1799–1837—Knowledge—Race awareness.
2. Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeevich, 1799–1837—Family. 3. Racially mixed
people—Race identity—Russia. 4. Blacks in literature. 5. Race awareness in
literature. 6. Pushkin family. 7. Russia—Ethnic relations. I. Nepomnyashchy,
Catharine Theimer. II. Svobodny, Nicole. III. Trigos, Ludmilla A. IV. Series. V.
Series: Studies of the Harriman Institute.

PG3358.R33.U53 2005

891.71'3—dc22

2005016715

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for
Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Foreword

Scholars believe that as many African slaves were sold across the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean as crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Think of it as the “other slave trade.” One of these slaves—who would be named Abram Gannibal by his new master—was born in the country today called Cameroon, sold into slavery, and taken across the desert to Constantinople. In 1704, when he was about seven or eight, he was purchased by Peter the Great. Under Peter’s protection and tutelage, Gannibal became a broadly educated and well-traveled man; Voltaire himself called him “the dark star of the Enlightenment.” Despite exile to Siberia—and, later, forced retirement under Peter III—Gannibal would ultimately rise to the rank of chief military engineer in the Russian Army, along the way fathering eleven children with Christina Regina von Schöberg, of German and Swedish extraction. In 1799, their granddaughter, Nadezhda, would give birth to a son she called Alexander.

For over a century and a half, Alexander Pushkin has been a shadowy if dramatic presence in African American letters, a resonant symbol of all that a person of African descent could achieve if his or her talents were unfettered by the confining strictures of racism, and simultaneously an abidingly potent sign of the sheer absurdity of America’s bizarre “one-drop rule.” The great artist Quincy Jones has announced plans to make a film about Pushkin for this very reason. Pushkin has enjoyed pride of place in every textbook of “the world’s great men of color,” as the journalist and historian J. A. Rogers put it.

Had Pushkin, the great-grandson of a black African, been born in the United States rather than in Russia, he would most likely have been a slave or, at best, a second-class citizen. His great-grandfather, accompanying Peter the Great to Paris, became friends with Montesquieu, Diderot, and Voltaire, but one is forced to wonder how the father of the American Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson, would have regarded him? Would Jefferson have encouraged a Monticello-born Pushkin to write, to excel, indeed to found America’s national literature based on a rich and emerging vernacular? Pushkin would

have become Jefferson's house servant at most, perhaps learning how to keep books, sort the mail, and select and pour the wine.

"What proportion of America's collective artistic and intellectual genius," black thinkers since Frederick Douglass have exclaimed, "has been lost or underdeveloped, because even the slightest touch of the tar brush trumps talent every time?"

Elevated to the status of a black icon by the American abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier in 1847, Pushkin was heralded as a beacon of hope in the long dark night of slavery, the shining star of "The Negro Can Be Elevated" movement, which excavated and held high "key noble specimens" of Negro achievement in the antislavery version of the great man and great woman school of black history. In 1940, when no less a skeptic than W. E. B. DuBois decided to publish an ostensible entry from his ill-fated *Encyclopedia of the Negro*, he chose "Alexander Pushkin" for the topic of his article.

Pushkin demonstrated all that a Negro could be: a cultured aristocrat, a man of letters, indeed the father of a national literature. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, a veritable kitchen cabinet of superstar mulattoes and impeccable black Africans and Americans could be summoned whenever someone needed to show that persons of African descent could achieve at the highest levels in the arts. Think of it as the "Beethoven was black" school of history, even if Beethoven, sadly, did not really make the cut. (Nor, for the record, did Cleopatra or Hannibal.) But Juan Latino; Beethoven's sometime friend and rival, George Bridgetower; and Alexander Dumas did. And of this group, no one informed the African American imagination more than Pushkin, the tragic Romantic hero of the American abolitionist movement.

Pushkin's great-grandfather first appears in the African American popular imagination in 1828, in an article published in *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper. Whittier's longer, widely cited essay (with and without attribution) appeared in the *National Era* in 1847, two years following the publication of Frederick Douglass's genre-defining autobiographical slave narrative. The timing was not accidental; as Anne Lounsbery suggests in an exceptionally fascinating essay, Pushkin was Douglass's *doppelgänger*, the handsome, dashing man of letters, whose personal development, unlike Douglass's, had not been proscribed. Whittier dared America to imagine Douglass as the New Man, as the progenitor of a truly new, truly *national* literature. Pushkin was far more than the abolitionists could ask for, and far more than even sympathetic white Americans could possibly imagine. But there he strode, nonetheless: a Russian national treasure, the father of Russian literature, in black—or brown—face.

Pushkin adopted a variety of stances toward his black ancestry: at times he embraced his "exoticism" and his African "hot-bloodedness"; at other times he brooded that the traces of his African lineage that showed in his face

and his hair made him “ugly.” But there is no doubt that, whatever his attitude toward it, Pushkin’s African ancestry was a source of ongoing fascination for him. It made him different from all other Russians; it is thought by a number of the authors who appear in this collection of essays that this difference is what enabled Pushkin to become the great chronicler of Russian life and the Russian people. That he stood a little apart from his countrymen gave Pushkin a clear-eyed vantage point from which to view his fellow Russians.

The essays in this collection make much of the literary traces of Africa in Pushkin’s work (such as his declaration in a note to *Eugene Onegin* that it is “under the sky of my Africa” that his imagination was freest, or his unfinished narrative *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, an adaptation of his great-grandfather’s life) and also of his Romantic sympathies with Russian serfs and American slaves (to whom he once referred as “my brothers”). Many are concerned with passing, and one essay is concerned entirely with Pushkin’s physical appearance in portraits, which show varying degrees of “blackness,” a variation rooted not in his own relationship to his African ancestry but rather in the cultural moments in which these portraits appeared.

The essays also track the historical course followed by literary reactions to Pushkin’s connection to Africa and to African Americans. Romantics celebrated Pushkin as a free and at times “uncivilized” genius who drew on his “wild” African blood to break the literary chains of his native land. Pushkin appeared several times in the abolitionist press in the United States as the example of what happens when “race prejudice” is not a factor in national life: according to John Greenleaf Whittier, a man with “African blood” could rise to the greatest artistic heights and even become a shaper of the national aesthetic only in the absence of the American brand of prejudice and racism (my word, not Whittier’s). More generally, Pushkin’s sympathy with slaves (whom many abolitionist writers compared to Russian serfs) won acclaim among antislavery groups.

Writers in the Harlem Renaissance seized on Pushkin because of his embrace of his African lineage (they seemed to overlook his less loving references to it) and also because he drew on a vernacular language rooted in the “low” culture of Russia to shape a national literature. Pushkin served in the Harlem Renaissance as a successful example of the movement’s literary-national aspirations. A Soviet-era writer such as Marina Tsvetaeva or a composer like Lourié embraced Pushkin’s “hybridity,” internationalism, and cosmopolitanism as the ideals that communism (with its suppression of many artists) was falling short of.

Many critics and writers, most famously Nabokov, dismissed Pushkin’s “Africanness” as a quirk of biographical fate, as a factor to be acknowledged only barely, if at all, and to be dismissed as irrelevant to his artistic life. But these essays make a convincing case for the merits of a sustained exploration

Foreword

of the role his African ancestry played in Pushkin's creative life, in his perception of himself, and in his perception and interpretation of Russia. This brilliantly edited collection is at once a major contribution to Pushkin studies, to Russian literary criticism, and to African American studies. It deserves the widest possible readership.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Acknowledgments

This project originated out of a conversation with Susan Harris, formerly at Northwestern University Press, at the national meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in 1997, and we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Susan for her encouragement and support throughout. It then developed further as the result of a series of Modern Language Association panels on Alexander Pushkin and his African heritage in 1999. As with any ongoing and long-gestating project, there are a number of people who were instrumental in helping bring it to completion. The editors would first of all like to thank our readers Marcus Levitt and Josephine Wohl for their valuable feedback during the review process. We also thank Irina Reyfman for her many suggestions and thorough reading of the manuscript; and Alla Rachkov, Kevin Laney, Ronald Meyer, and Larisa Kirichenko for their valiant efforts on our behalf and their unflagging support in all aspects, large and small. Jared Ingersoll and Clint Walker were especially helpful to us in our numerous bibliographic queries. Deborah Martinsen, Kathleen Parthé, Donia Allen, Robert Coles, and Allison Blakely provided us with useful suggestions and source materials; Souleymane Ndiaye gave us firsthand information on the experiences of African exchange students in Moscow; and Kara Lynch graciously shared the prerelease version of her documentary *Black Russians* with us. Finally, we are grateful for the research assistance of Douglas Greenfield, Eric Roston, Cate Huetter, and Tench Coxe.

The editors express appreciation to the University Seminars at Columbia University for their help in publication. Material in this work was presented to the University Seminar on Slavic History and Culture. We would also like to thank Barnard College and the Harriman Institute of Columbia University for their generous support.

J. Thomas Shaw's article "Pushkin on His African Heritage: Publications during His Lifetime" has been reprinted from the volume *Pushkin Today*, edited by David M. Bethea (1993), with the permission of Indiana University Press. Associated University Presses has granted us permission to publish a shorter version of a chapter from Catherine O'Neil's book *With Shakespeare's*

Acknowledgments

Eyes: Pushkin's Creative Appropriation of Shakespeare (University of Delaware Press, 2003). N. K. Teletova's article has been reprinted with permission of the author. The excerpt from Abram Tertz's *Strolls with Pushkin* (1993) has been republished here with the permission of Yale University Press.

Editors' Note

We are following a modified Library of Congress transliteration system in this volume. To make the text more readable to a general audience, first and last names ending in *-ii* have been changed to *-y*, such as Anatoly or Belinsky rather than Anatolii or Belinskii. We have also, for the sake of readability, collapsed *-iia* endings to *-ia*. For the same reason, names beginning with *-ia* or *-iu*, such as Iurii and Iazykov, have been changed to Yury and Yazykov. Names are given in their standard English form when one exists. Bibliographical references follow the standard Library of Congress transliteration system.

All of our references to Pushkin's work have been taken from the seventeen-volume *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, i.e., the "large Academy" edition (Moscow and Leningrad, 1937–59). References are cited by volume and page number and included in parentheses in the text, as for example (*PSS* 1:211).

Translations of the same Russian passages vary slightly from article to article due to the authors' translation preferences.

Under the Sky of My Africa

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Ludmilla A. Trigos

Introduction: Was Pushkin Black and Does It Matter?

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

—Jeremiah 13:23

The native of Africa is a lazy, beast-like, dull-witted creature doomed to perpetual slavery and working under the threat of punishment and dire torment.

—Vissarion Belinsky, *The Idea of Art*, 1841

Pushkin was a Rastaman.

—*Black Russians*

ROUGHLY IN THE YEAR 1705, a young African boy, acquired from the seraglio of the Turkish sultan by the Russian envoy in Constantinople (Istanbul), was transported to Russia as a gift to Tsar Peter the Great, who was known for his love of the exotic and the odd. As the vagaries of history would have it, this child, later known as Abram Petrovich Gannibal, was to become the godson of the ruler of the largest contiguous empire on earth, travel from one end of Europe to the other and across the huge expanses of Russia into Asia almost to the Chinese border, and survive six of Peter's successors to die at a ripe old age, having attained the rank of general and the status of Russian nobility. Most important, he was to become the great-grandfather of Russia's greatest national poet, Alexander Pushkin. It is the contention of the editors of this book, borne out, we believe, by the majority of essays included in this collection, that Pushkin's African ancestry has played the role of a "wild card" of sorts as a formative element in Russian cultural mythology. That is, not only has the fact of Gannibal's African origin functioned as an essential element in the "canonization" of his great-grandson as the exemplary Russian—heralded even in his lifetime by his fellow writer Nikolai Gogol as "the Russian as he will be in two hundred years"—but the

ways in which Gannibal's legacy over the course of the past two centuries has been incorporated into or excluded from the cult of Pushkin's biography serve as shifting markers of Russia's self-definition.

Despite sparring over historical detail, it is safe to say that there is some consensus among biographers about the broad outlines of Gannibal's life, especially as concerns the better-documented period after he arrived in Russia.¹ Within months of his presentation to the tsar, he was baptized in Vilno (Vilnius) with Peter the Great standing as his godfather, and he appears to have traveled in Peter's entourage throughout the military campaigns of the next decade, eventually becoming Peter's amanuensis. In 1717 he went along on the tsar's second journey to western Europe and was left behind to study in France, in line with Peter's policy of sending youths abroad for education to stock the cadres he needed in his campaign to reform and westernize his empire. Gannibal spent five years in France, where he studied military engineering. He served in the French army from 1719 to 1721, apparently both to continue his training and to better the precarious financial position into which erratic deliveries of stipends from Russia and the French crisis in paper money had left those young Russians studying in France at the time. Gannibal apparently suffered a head wound in battle in 1719. From 1720 he studied mathematics, fortification, and artillery in a new school 100 miles outside of Paris. Despite the straitened financial circumstances of which Gannibal and his fellow students complained bitterly in periodic letters to Russia, and which one contemporary Russian observer lamented as bringing down "such shame on our fatherland," Gannibal managed to acquire a library of some 400 volumes on diverse subjects, which he took back with him to Russia.² After his somewhat reluctant return to Russia in 1722, Gannibal again appears to have served as Peter's personal secretary as well as to have put into practice the engineering training he had acquired in France. In February 1724 Peter awarded his protégé the rank of engineer-lieutenant in his own crack Preobrazhensky Regiment, where Gannibal taught fortification and mathematics to officer candidates. At the time of Peter's sudden death in 1725 Gannibal was in Riga, whither the tsar had sent him in the fall of 1724 to work on the strengthening of the city's fortress.

Since Peter had not designated a successor, his death plunged his court, including Gannibal and those vying for the throne, into intrigue. Gannibal was appointed tutor to the Tsarevich Peter Alekseevich (the future Peter II) and managed to maintain a position close to the court throughout the two-year reign of Peter the Great's wife, Catherine I, who had known him since his arrival in Russia. Deprived of Catherine's protection upon her death on May 6, 1727, however, Gannibal found himself at the mercy of the powerful Prince Menshikov against whom he had plotted, and was sent to Siberia, ostensibly to design and oversee the building of fortifications in the remote town of Selenginsk. (It is worthy of note that the first documented

use of Gannibal's surname dates to this period.³ It would appear that Pushkin's forebear, hitherto referred to as Abram Petrov or Abram *arap* ("blackamoor"), adopted the name, and the putative genealogy back to the Carthaginian general Hannibal it implies, only after the deaths of Peter I and his wife, who might have challenged his genealogical pretensions.)⁴ Despite Menshikov's fall and attempted intercessions by his friends, Gannibal remained in Siberia—and was subjected to house searches and two months under arrest in Tobolsk as well as severe financial hardship—until 1730, when he was transferred to the Estonian town of Pernov (Pärnu), probably thanks to the influential Count B. Kh. Minikh, who was the head of military engineering for all of Russia at the time.

Gannibal's return from Siberia opened yet another dramatic, even melodramatic period in his life. After arriving in Petersburg in December 1730, he made the acquaintance of a Greek captain, one Andrei Dioper, and asked for the hand of his younger daughter, Evdokia, in marriage. Despite the disinclination of the woman herself, who was already engaged to another and who reportedly objected to Gannibal on the grounds that "he's an *arap* and not our breed," the couple was married in January 1731 and soon after left to take up residence in Pernov.⁵ Perhaps predictably, the marriage degenerated in short order, leading to the institution of divorce proceedings which dragged on for twenty-one years, the final divorce ruling coming only on September 9, 1753, and exonerating Gannibal of all guilt and consigning Evdokia to a nunnery for the rest of her life. Scholars' attempts to reconstruct the facts of the marriage and its prolonged aftermath have been hindered by the fact that the primary historical source remains the suits and countersuits in the court records.⁶ The legal documents include allegations that Gannibal set up a private torture chamber in his home to force his wife into testifying as he wished and that, for her part, Evdokia engaged in multiple infidelities and even plotted with one of her lovers to poison her husband.⁷ It is nonetheless evident that, quite apart from issues of blame, both parties were trapped by their willfulness in a legal morass. What was at stake for Gannibal, however, was the legitimacy of his children, for sometime no later than 1734 Gannibal met, took up residence with, and eventually succeeded in legally marrying Christina Regina von Schöberg, daughter of a Swedish captain who was of noble descent.⁸ Gannibal's second wife bore him seven children—four sons and three daughters—and the two lived together, apparently in harmony, for almost half a century, dying within months of one another.⁹

Whether because of personal or professional problems, Gannibal began requesting that he be allowed to retire from the military, and from his job teaching mathematics to junior officers in Pernov, in the autumn of 1731, and his request was finally granted on May 21, 1733. He bought the farmstead Kärrikula outside of Revel (Tallinn) and remained there in retirement with his

wife and growing family for seven years, apparently taking up the life of a gentleman farmer. Gannibal emerged from retirement in 1741, under the regency of Anna Leopoldovna, and served as an engineer in Revel with the rank of lieutenant colonel, probably owing this twist in his career again to Minikh. It was, however, only with the ascension to the throne of Peter's daughter, Empress Elizabeth I, in late 1741 that Gannibal's fortunes took a sharp turn for the better. In 1742 Gannibal was promoted to the rank of major general, was made chief commandant of Revel, and was granted land in the Pskov region, including the estate at Mikhailovskoe, which was to become so important to his great-grandson's life and work. In 1748 Gannibal was awarded the Order of Saint Andrew, and by 1752 he was finally reassigned to St. Petersburg, in the environs of which he was to live out his life. In 1759 he was promoted to full general and in 1760 received the Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky. In the same year, at the height of Gannibal's career, the Empress Elizabeth died, and at the age of 66, apparently under pressure from political enemies, Gannibal went into final retirement three weeks before the end of Peter III's brief and ill-starred reign brought Catherine II to the throne. In 1762 Gannibal moved to the estate at Suida, which he had bought along with other lands outside of the capital in the final years of his military engineering career, and there he lived the last nineteen years of his life, dying on April 20, 1781, in his mid-eighties.¹⁰

While wranglings among historians and Pushkin biographers over the course of Gannibal's life after he left Africa remain on the level of symbolically negligible detail, the question of his origins to this day constitutes a point of culturally loaded contention. Gannibal himself apparently left no written trace of the name of his country of birth. In his 1742 petition to the Empress Elizabeth requesting that he be granted a coat of arms based on purportedly noble African origins, Gannibal mentions only the name of a town, Logon, where he was born.¹¹ The first biography of Gannibal, the so-called German biography, names Abyssinia as Gannibal's country of origin, fueling the long-standing belief that Gannibal was Ethiopian.¹² As Vladimir Nabokov and others have pointed out, however, at the time the term "Abyssinia" was a catchall designation among Europeans for all of northern Africa and therefore tells us little in terms of hard geographical information.¹³ Even if we were to accept incontestably the region historically occupied by Abyssinia as Gannibal's place of birth, it would tell us little, if anything, about Gannibal's ethnic derivation, given the diversity of Abyssinia's population—made up at the time of Gannibal's birth as today of Semitic or Hamitic and Negroid peoples. According to sources roughly contemporary with Pushkin, the country of Abyssinia, in eastern Africa, gained its name, "Habesh," from the appellation of its first explorers, the Arabs. It was inhabited by a people "who have a swarthy coloration to their skin [*smuglyi svet kozhi*] and are well-formed. The original Cushitic population . . . was edged out by Semitic newcomers who made themselves

rulers of the country and the carriers of indigenous culture . . . In the 16th century, the Galla tribe penetrated into Abyssinia from the depths of Africa and gradually settled all over Abyssinia as the agricultural class of the population . . . The hot, low-lying regions of Abyssinia are occupied by half-wild Negro tribes.”¹⁴ The renowned compendium of Enlightenment knowledge compiled by the French philosophes, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers* (1751–72), defines the African population thus: “Africa has no other inhabitants but the blacks. Not only the color, but also the facial traits distinguish them from other men: large and flat noses, thick lips, and wool instead of hair. They appear to constitute a new species of mankind. If one moves further away from the Equator toward the Antarctic, the black skin becomes lighter, but the ugliness remains: one finds here this same wicked people that inhabits the African Meridian.”¹⁵ A popular nineteenth-century Russian encyclopedia points out that “the scientific study of Negroes began in the 18th century, with the research of Zemmering, White, Campere and Blumenbach, who found that Negroes were closer to animals (monkeys) than the representatives of other races.”¹⁶

As the foregoing citations should make clear, from the very beginning—or at least since the time of his great-grandson—hidden, and sometimes not so hidden, behind the sparring over geography in the reconstruction of Gannibal’s biography, lies the deeper issue of race. Gannibal referred to himself as “black,” for instance, in a petition to I. A. Cherkasov, secretary to the Empress Elizabeth:

I would like everyone to be like me: dutiful and faithful to the limit of my ability (*except only for my blackness [chernoty]*). O, sovereign, do not be angry that I said so—it is truly out of sorrow and bitterness of my heart—either cast me away as a worthless monster and consign me to oblivion or complete the charity begun in me.¹⁷

By the same token, Gannibal’s son Petr, in his brief autobiographical note, maintained: “My father was a Negro.”¹⁸ Moreover, as J. Thomas Shaw’s article republished in this collection demonstrates, Pushkin did not hesitate to identify his forebear publicly as “Negro” or “black”—at least, as we shall see, until an 1830 attack on his genealogy rendered him more circumspect. Yet, as the following “exchange” makes clear, some Russian scholars have been reluctant to accept Pushkin’s opinion on the matter. Thus, in his biography of Pushkin, Yury Lotman appends to the poet’s assertion that his mother’s grandfather “was a Negro” the following footnote:

Pushkin’s ancestor was not a Negro, but a Blackamoor [*arap*], i.e., an Ethiopian, an Abyssinian. His appearance at the court of Peter I was possibly

linked with deeper causes than the fashion, widespread in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, for Blackamoor pages [*pazhei-arapchat*]; in plans for the destruction of the Turkish empire, which Peter I was plotting, ties with Abyssinia—a Christian country situated in a strategically important region, at the rear of the troubled Egyptian flank of Turkey—occupied a definite place. However, the prolonged Northern War did not allow these plans to develop.¹⁹

Lotman's note contains a number of salient features, the most important of which are the distinction he draws between "Negro" and "Abyssinian" or "Ethiopian" and his complicated political digression, which arguably serves to distract from the "racial" issue at hand. Tellingly, moreover, Lotman never mentions Gannibal by name in his biography of Pushkin. In this context, we would argue, Lotman stands in for generations of contributors to the construction of Pushkin's image who have, more or less subtly, "washed the Ethiopie white," that is, downplayed, obscured, or left unspoken Pushkin's potentially unsettling racial ambiguity.

Was Pushkin black and does it matter? Of course, Pushkin's use of the Russian word for "black" or even "Negro" to describe himself or his forebear cannot be taken as unproblematically synonymous with the racially loaded discourse of American English, infected by centuries of slavery and segregation. As Lee D. Baker has observed:

Although they often seem immutable, racial categories are always in flux; indeed, sometimes they change rapidly. Racial categories are produced and reproduced ideologically and culturally: they are constructed. In turn, these categories structure the access of specific groups to opportunities and resources. Complex political, economic, and cultural processes on a global scale produce various racial constructs that vary during particular periods in history from solid and generally accepted to tenuous and vigorously contested.²⁰

Starkly put, the Russian aristocrat and serf owner Alexander Pushkin, acknowledged as Russia's national poet in his own lifetime, in the United States of his day would have been an octoroon potentially deprived by law not only of his freedom but even of basic literacy. In the words of the Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov, Russians esteemed Pushkin, "the descendant of an Ethiopian . . . with pride and joy, whereas he would have been denied citizenship in the United States and would not have had the right to marry the daughter of a washerwoman in Germany or of a butcher in England."²¹ Yet while it would be an egregious cultural anachronism to project our own country's ills onto the Russia of Pushkin's age, it would be equally misleading to assume—as so often has happened over the course of the almost two centuries

since Pushkin “created the Russian literary language” and thereby “fathered” Russian literature (as the clichés of the Pushkin cult have it)—that Pushkin’s ethnic heritage is irrelevant to understanding the poet’s place in Russian culture. In this volume, therefore, we employ “blackness” as a marked term that invests superficially perceived physical characteristics with far-ranging symbolic significance. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has highlighted the rhetorical power of constructions of race: “When we speak of ‘the white race’ or ‘the black race,’ ‘the Jewish race’ or ‘the Aryan race,’ we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors”; that is, race is a “dangerous trope.”²² We are not then concerned in this volume with trying to define what race *is*, but with exploring the proposition that blackness has constituted an undeniably semiotically laden and potentially “dangerous trope” for Russians at least since Pushkin’s day; and with examining the meaning with which that category has been charged.

What does matter, then, is that Pushkin himself and his contemporaries, living in an age in which race was becoming an increasingly important and virulent concept in the West and when the absorption of dark-skinned peoples into the empire was making the problem more immediate in Russia, appear to have taken Pushkin’s “blackness” seriously as a marker of anxiety and ambiguity. It would seem, moreover, that as Pushkin has evolved in the course of the past two centuries into a complex metaphor for Russia, his black otherness has become an essential component of the Russianness he figures, perhaps at times all the more potent for being repressed, explained away, consigned to silence. In the remainder of this introductory essay, we will attempt to illustrate this contention.

GANNIBAL IN THE AGE OF PUSHKIN

In order to understand what the issue of Gannibal’s origins meant to Pushkin, we must first ask what educated Russians of Pushkin’s day could have known about Africa and Africans in order to determine how this information might have shaped their perceptions of Pushkin’s origins. Unlike the countries of western Europe, which as early as the fifteenth century had both economic and expansionist interests overseas in Africa as a result of the trade in slaves and other commodities, the Russian Empire grew by incorporating contiguous lands and their inhabitants.²³ Therefore, without participation in the slave trade as impetus, Russia acquired a substantive interest in Africa relatively late in the game. Though attempts had been made by Peter the Great to encourage expeditions to Africa, Russian travel to that continent was not successfully undertaken before the late eighteenth century.²⁴ Until then, the primary sources on Africa available in Russia were foreign maps, geographies,

and travelers' accounts. The British best sellers, James Bruce's and Mungo Park's journeys, had been translated into Russian by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The first Russian to visit Africa was the naval officer M. G. Kokovstov, who traveled twice to Tunisia and Algeria in the late 1770s; his notes were published in two volumes, *A Description of the Archipelago and the Barbary Coast* (St. Petersburg: F. Tumansky, 1786).²⁵ An even more up-to-date and accessible source on Africa for Pushkin was probably his friend, A. S. Norov, who undertook an expedition to Egypt and Nubia in 1834 to 1835.²⁶ It is hard to imagine, given Pushkin's interest in Africa as his forebear's land of origin, that he would not have spoken to Norov about his adventures on that continent. Pushkin also must have been familiar with the illustrated travel account of Pavel Svinin (1787–1839), whose *A Picturesque Voyage in the United States of America in 1811, 1812, 1813*, published in Russia in 1815, prominently features a number of images of the lives of free African Americans and provides the earliest account of America through a Russian's eyes.²⁷ Aside from travelers' accounts and what readings and lessons in geography he garnered during his studies at the Tsarskoe Selo Lycée, Pushkin was arguably au courant with the incipient racism pervasive in the works of Enlightenment philosophers and propounded by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach at the University of Göttingen, where Pushkin's mentors, Aleksandr and Nikolai Turgenyev, had completed their education.²⁸ Moreover, educated Russians at least as early as the eighteenth-century political satirist Aleksandr Radishchev knew about the enslavement of Africans in the colonies of America and repeatedly exploited the analogy to excoriate Russian serfdom.

There were also a number of literary models accessible to the Russians of Pushkin's day which would have been formative in their conception of blackness. Pushkin himself was certainly familiar with such classic treatments as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759), and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759).²⁹ Representations of Africans in literature drew attention not only to skin color but to a complex of associations of imagined and real physical and emotional traits. That most renowned representation of "African passion" and jealousy, Shakespeare's *Othello*, was well known to Pushkin and his social group.³⁰ Indeed, the fatal recasting of Pushkin's biography into the *Othello* plot occurred during his lifetime and served as a compelling narrative structure into which contemporaries projected the events leading to the poet's tragic death in 1837 in a duel with his wife's alleged lover, Georges d'Anthès. Leslie O'Bell remarks: "Perhaps society ladies liked to think that they were watching the plot to *Othello* unfold, with Pushkin as the jealous Moor."³¹ Even the ambassador of the kingdom of Bavaria at the time, Maximilian von Lerchenfeld-Kofering, commented in a similar vein: "The details of this catastrophe, unfortunately provoked by the dead man himself with a blindness and a kind of frenetic

hated well worthy of his Moorish origins, have for days been the sole talk of the town here in the capital.”³² Even Pushkin’s closest friends could not resist the sway of the literary paradigm, as implicitly evidenced by a letter written by P. A. Viazemsky while Pushkin lay at death’s door: “His fiery and passionate soul and his African blood could not withstand the irritation produced by the doubts and suspicions of society.”³³ The persistence of this explanation for the tragedy and its penetration to the highest levels of society is evidenced by the memoirs (1881–82) of the Grand Princess Olga Nikolaevna, Nicholas I’s daughter, who ascribed the circumstances of the poet’s death to the fact that “Pushkin’s Negro [*negritianskaia*] blood boiled.”³⁴ Thus we see that the mode of Pushkin’s death only served to impress the comparison upon the public imagination.

Yet another significant literary paradigm that would have been familiar to educated Russians of Pushkin’s day was that of the African prince sold into slavery. Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* (1688) provides an allegedly true account of an African prince who is captured and taken to Surinam as a slave. This story, in which social status transcends racial difference, became “the prototype for a vast literature depicting noble African slaves.”³⁵ *Oroonoko* has been called the earliest example of the “noble primitive” who “stands as a complete, solitary, and alien *individual* against the values of the (colonial) society into which he is inserted.”³⁶ Another international best seller, Claire de Duras’s *Ourika* (1823), told the story of a young Senegalese slave girl taken in by an aristocratic French family during the Revolution.³⁷ They treat her like a member of the family and provide her with an education appropriate to their social position. She becomes aware of her racial difference and the prejudice it engenders only when the question of marriage arises. In 1824 an edition of *Ourika* was published in French in St. Petersburg, attesting to the accessibility of the novel to the Russian readership.³⁸

A number of thematic permutations of the African slave transplanted into European society obtain in narratives that in many cases imitated or embroidered upon reality. In some versions, the slave is taken into service by a nobleman or ruler who undertakes an “educational experiment” in his training of the African; in others a virtuous, enslaved prince exposes in his narrative the bestiality of the condition of slavery and its allegedly “civilized” perpetrators, expounding upon the fleeting nature of innocent happiness and idealizing his former life. (In fact, a surprisingly large number of Africans brought to Europe in the eighteenth century claimed royal descent though in some cases, this lineage was later disputed).³⁹ Likely influences upon the aforementioned fictional works were accounts of famous Africans sold into slavery and later freed, many of whom took part in the abolitionist movement in Europe.⁴⁰ The most popular work of this genre was Olaudah Equiano’s (1750–97) autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah*

Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789), which went through nine editions alone during Equiano's lifetime and was translated into Russian in 1794. (Like Gannibal, Equiano alleges that he was a kidnapped prince.) Ignatius Sancho (1729–80), Equiano's predecessor in the literary world, was an African who served the family of the Duke of Montagu. Sancho became famous after one of his letters to the author Lawrence Sterne was included in Sterne's posthumously published *Letters* (1775). Sancho, playing upon the fact that the figure of Othello was well known to his readership, characterized himself as a "sooty correspondent" who "though black as Othello has a heart as humanized as any of the fairest about St. James's."⁴¹ Sancho's letters (published posthumously by subscription in 1782 and translated into French in 1788), Equiano's autobiography, and other works were seized upon by opponents of slavery as proof of black literary abilities and on the whole received extremely favorable reviews in the British press. Indeed, Sancho's name became so well known that by 1786 he could be mentioned without further biographical information, and at the end of the century he served as the model for positively depicted Africans in two anonymous novels.⁴² These works represented Africans as men of feeling and intelligence and as examples of moral refinement, capacities that were denied to them by advocates of slavery.

Beyond whatever reading Pushkin and his contemporaries did, they might well have come upon Africans—called in Russian interchangeably *arapy*, *negry*, or *efiopy* (blackamoors, Negroes, or Ethiopians)—in their own social milieu.⁴³ We must recall that the Russian elite was already familiar with Africans as a result of the rage for black domestic servants that swept the Russian court during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in imitation of the courts of France, England, and Prussia. Peter the Great had several blackamoors in his court prior to and during Abram's residence (there is evidence that Pushkin's ancestor was accompanied in his journey to Russia by at least one other young African boy who was destined for the tsar's court), and other Russian noble families acquired black servants as a way of keeping up with the fashion for the exotic even a century after Peter's reign, as attested by the Muscovite noblewoman's frightening *arapka* servant in Aleksandr Griboedov's play *Woe from Wit* (*Gore ot uma*, 1824).⁴⁴ Though the practice was not so widespread that it reached the provinces, upon surveying Russian art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one can find many family portraits of members of the Russian nobility featuring a black male or female domestic servant as a sign of exalted social status.⁴⁵ In his notes and anecdotes Pushkin himself mentions a number of black servants. For example, among other anecdotes of questionable taste he cites in "Table-Talk" the scandalous tale of the *arap* belonging to Count S. who fathered a child on the count's daughter.⁴⁶ In addition to the small but growing number of *arapy* (acquired

from both Africa and America) into the nineteenth century, it became increasingly common for African American sailors to travel to Russia as part of their service.⁴⁷ It is significant that these individuals all occupied the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, as servants or as seamen; the Gannibals, it seems, were the only Africans to make their way into the Russian upper crust.

Aside from questions of what Pushkin knew about Africa, Africans, or contemporary racial theories, there remains also the more particular issue of what Pushkin knew about the Gannibal family. After the scion of the family, the most famous Gannibal was Ivan Abramovich Gannibal, Abram Petrovich's eldest son, who received the Order of Saint George for his participation in the battle at Chesmensky (1770) and who, in Pushkin's words, belonged "unarguably among the ranks of the most distinguished people of Catherine's time" (*PSS* 6:655). Pushkin certainly knew of the monument erected in honor of that Russian victory in Tsarskoe Selo, which included a dedication to "the Victory of Gannibal." Pushkin began spending summers with his family at Mikhailovskoe in 1817; at that point, he began to meet the numerous Gannibal relatives—many of whom had made successful careers in the military or civil service—who had settled in the region.⁴⁸ Pushkin's primary sources on Gannibal were the biographical notes, written in German by A. K. Rotkirkh, that belonged to his great-uncle Petr Abramovich Gannibal, a retired major general. Pushkin most likely made a shortened translation of this biography in the autumn of 1824 during a visit to Petr Abramovich, who lived on the estate of Safont'evo about 40 miles from Mikhailovskoe where Pushkin was in exile. In an August 11, 1825, letter to his Trigorskoe neighbor Praskovia Osipova, Pushkin wrote: "*Je compte voir encore mon vieux nègre de Grand'Oncle qui, je suppose, va mourir un de ces quatre matins et il faut que j'aie de lui mémoires concernant mon aïeul*" (*PSS* 13:205). Whether he made the intended trip or not, Pushkin acquired either shortly before or after Petr Abramovich's death the copy of the full German biography. At some point his great-uncle's own fragmentary memoirs also came into Pushkin's possession.⁴⁹ And, of course, Pushkin learned of his great-grandfather from the "family legends" to which he refers in the extended biographical footnote he appended, in the first edition, to the line, "under the sky of my Africa" in stanza L of the first book of *Eugene Onegin* (*PSS* 6:654). Pushkin's many cousins and, especially, his Gannibal uncles, were among the few people with whom he spent any time during his Mikhailovskoe exile. Moreover, the residents of that province were well acquainted with the Gannibals as members of the local nobility.⁵⁰ Aside from his Gannibal relatives, Pushkin may well have heard about Gannibal from others who had known him, including his grandmother, Maria Alekseevna Gannibal (née Pushkina, who was married to Osip Abramovich Gannibal) and his nanny, Arina Rodionovna.⁵¹

What could Gannibal's blackness have meant to Pushkin? Pushkin's references to Gannibal and blackness in his published writings, private corre-

spondence, and unpublished drafts make it clear that the fact of his African lineage was of the utmost importance to his own understanding of self and of his place in Russian society and letters. While other authors in this volume discuss these statements in detail, three references by Pushkin in particular beg our attention here. The first is Pushkin's earliest substantial, but uncompleted attempt at a novel, titled by the editors who published it shortly after the poet's death, *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* (*Arap Petra Velikogo*). The extant chapters of the novel focus primarily on a young African named Ibragim, clearly based on Abram Gannibal. When the novel opens, Ibragim is in Paris, where he has been sent to study by Peter the Great. With entrée to the most select Paris salons, Ibragim becomes involved in a passionate affair with a married countess. When the countess gives birth to a black baby—spirited away at once and replaced by a white infant to hoodwink the cuckolded husband—Ibragim realizes that the affair must come to an end. He decides to return to Russia in response to a letter from his sponsor, the tsar, and remains unswerving in his intent despite an invitation from the Duke of Orleans to remain in his service in France. Peter the Great is waiting to greet him on the road when he returns and immediately welcomes Ibragim back into the intimacy of the imperial family and enlists him in the massive project of reforming Russia. The text of the novel as it comes down to us breaks off as Peter arranges a marriage between Ibragim and the reluctant daughter of one of the leading boyar families. While the novel romanticizes the events of Gannibal's life, it departs significantly from the German biography—which itself idealizes Gannibal's life perhaps in an attempt to advance his descendants' claim to enhanced noble status—only in the love intrigues.⁵² Fabricating these episodes almost completely, Pushkin places his fictionalized forebear into situations fraught with sexual, social, and political complications. More to the point, Gannibal's status as a remarkably gifted alien in both of his adopted societies clearly served Pushkin as an opportunity to exercise in fiction issues that vexed his own life over a century later. The words of the foppish, Frenchified Russian Korsakov to Ibragim in the novel have a particularly ominous ring when we remember that Pushkin himself was seriously contemplating marriage at the time he took up writing the work: "With your fiery, pensive and suspicious character, with your flattened nose, bloated lips and woolly hair, how can you throw yourself into the dangers of marriage?" (*PSS* 8:30). Thus Gannibal's blackness became a touchstone for Pushkin's own anxieties regarding his life and work.⁵³

In this context, scholars have long suggested that for Pushkin, Gannibal existed on the borders between fact and myth, and that Pushkin's depictions of his forebear's blackness are echoed in his descriptions of himself.⁵⁴ This brings us to our second and third focal texts by Pushkin on blackness, texts all too often cited only partially and out of context so that the full impact and sub-

the nuances of Pushkin's statements are dulled. The texts in question are two letters Pushkin wrote to his friend Prince Petr Viazemsky at two very different moments in his creative biography, demonstrating the poet's continued preoccupation with the meaning of blackness throughout his life. In the first letter, written from Odessa on June 24–25, 1824, Pushkin drew an analogy between the Greek struggle for independence and the plight of Negro slaves in the United States: "One can think of the fate of the Greeks in the same way as of the fate of my brother Negroes, and one can wish both of them liberation from unendurable slavery. But for all enlightened European peoples to rant about Greece is unforgivable childishness. The Jesuits harped away at us about Themistocles and Pericles so that we imagined that a mean people made up of bandits and shopkeepers is their legitimate descendant and the heir of their scholastic glory" (PSS 13:99). While scholars have rightly remarked upon Pushkin's identification with the plight of Negro slaves in the United States, they have passed over in silence the shadow of ambivalence that his negative appraisal of the modern Greeks casts over the equation he draws between the two groups. The second letter, written in late 1835 or 1836, deserves citation in full:

Arab (does not have a feminine), a dweller or native of Arabia, an Arabian. *The caravan was plundered by the Arabs of the steppes.*

Arap [blackamoor] feminine *arapka*; this is what Negroes and mulattoes are usually called. *Dvortsovye arapy*, Negroes serving in the palace. *He goes calling attended by three finely dressed blackamoors.*

Arapnik, from the Polish *Herapnik* [whip] (de *harap*, cri de chasseur pour enlever aux chiens la proie. *Reiff*).⁵⁵ NB *harap* vient de ?*erab*.

To tell the truth, it would not be a bad idea to embark on a dictionary, or at least a critique of dictionaries.⁵⁶ (PSS 16:208)

Most tantalizing about this letter is the fact that we can only speculate on the context that prompted Pushkin to address the issue of racial terminology in such punctilious detail in a private letter to a close friend.

As the poet's letter to Viazemsky indirectly attests, Pushkin's contemporaries also seem to have viewed him as black, which entailed, as we have seen, discernible racial stereotyping. From Pushkin's childhood on, people noticed and commented on his purportedly "African" appearance.⁵⁷ Viazemsky, for instance, testifies to the physical resemblance of Pushkin and his younger brother Lev: "Like his brother [Alexander], he [Lev] was somewhat swarthy, like an Arab [*smuglyi arab*], but looked like a white Negro . . . Their mother's African imprint left a visible impress on them both. They had no other resemblance to her."⁵⁸ Moreover, Pushkin's contemporaries were quick to ascribe Pushkin's temper and passionate nature to his African roots. Pushkin's

Lycée classmate S. D. Komovsky states, “In him was manifested all the ardor and sensuality of his African blood.”⁵⁹ Komovsky associates Pushkin’s African heritage with the formulaic hypersexuality long cited in European writings on race.⁶⁰ Another of Pushkin’s schoolfellows, M. A. Korf, speaks similarly about Pushkin: “Flaring up into a fury, with unbridled African passions (such was his mother’s ancestry), eternally absent-minded, eternally absorbed in his poetic dreams, from childhood on spoiled by praise and flatterers.”⁶¹ Many contemporaries, moreover, drew a connection between Pushkin’s African nature and bestiality or wildness. For example, Dolly Fiquelmont’s observation on Pushkin’s appearance exploits his Lycée nickname: “It’s impossible to be more ugly—it’s a cross between the exterior of a monkey and tiger. He comes from an African race, and in the color of his face there remains an impress of something wild in his look.”⁶² F. F. Vigel’ likewise mentions Pushkin’s African origins in his description of Pushkin’s mannerisms:

On his mother’s side he was descended from the Negro General Gannibal. In his bone structure and the rapidity of his movements he resembled somewhat the Negroes and the humanlike inhabitants [*chelovekopodobnykh zhitelei*] of Africa. He agilely jumped on the large and long table before the window, stretched out on it, seized a pen and began to write.⁶³

In the same vein, another contemporary describes Pushkin’s gestures as simian:

Alexander Pushkin once arrived at the home of his acquaintance I. S. Timiri-azev. The servant told him that the master and mistress had gone out for a walk but would soon return. In the hall at the Timiri-azevs there was a large fireplace and on the table were some nuts. Before the Timiri-azevs’ return home, Pushkin took the nuts, climbed into the fireplace and making faces like a monkey, began to crack them.⁶⁴

It is notable, however, that invocations of blackness in Russia never entailed slurs on Pushkin’s intelligence. Indeed, Anna Khomutova, one of Pushkin’s admirers, suggests a perceived link between his African lineage and his superior intellect:

The ladies separated and counted on getting Pushkin’s attention, so that when he entered, all of them headed towards him and surrounded him. Each one wished that he would say even one word to her. Being neither young nor good-looking and as usual possessing an unfortunate shyness, I didn’t push myself forward and, imperceptible to the others, gazed from afar at that African face, on which was impressed his heritage, that face, which shone with intelligence.⁶⁵

Introduction

Pushkin's African heritage nonetheless rendered him vulnerable to public embarrassment. In Pushkin's day there circulated an alternate version of how Gannibal made his way to Russia, namely, that he had been purchased in Europe by Peter the Great. In an August 7, 1830, article, "Second Letter from Karlov to Kammenyi Ostrov," published in the *Northern Bee*, the unsavory publisher Faddei Bulgarin insinuated that Pushkin's ancestor had been bought for a pittance:

The anecdote is told that a certain Poet in Spanish America, . . . the offspring of a Mulatto man or woman, I don't remember which, began to contend that one of his ancestors was a Negro prince. In the town hall of the city it was discovered that in antiquity there was a lawsuit between a skipper of a ship and an assistant of his for this Negro, whom each of them wished to claim as his own, and that the skipper contended that he bought the Negro for a bottle of rum. Who would have thought then that a versifier would acknowledge connection with that Negro? Vanitas vanitatum!⁶⁶

This account could not have been anything other than repugnant to a person as sensitive to class status as Pushkin. Enraged by this imputation that Gannibal had been a slave, Pushkin responded with a note (PSS 11:153) and by circulating the poem "My Genealogy," in which he points out that the "skipper" in question was Peter the Great himself and that his ancestor was "the tsar's equal and not a slave" (PSS 3:263). In a letter to Count Benkendorf, the head of Nicholas's secret police, pleading his right to defend himself from the scurrilous attack, Pushkin made it clear that the none-too-veiled reference to him in the "letter" was easily decipherable:

Il y un an à peu près que dans l'un de nos journaux on imprima un article satyrique dans lequel on parlait d'un certain littérateur qui manifestait des prétentions à une origine noble, tandis qu'il n'était qu'un bourgeois-gentilhomme. On ajoutait que sa mere était une mulâtre dont le père, pauvre négriillon, avait été acheté par un matelot pour une bouteille de rhum. Quoique Pierre le Grand ne ressemblât guère à un matelot ivre, c'était me designer assez clairement, vu qu'il n'y a que moi de littérateur Russe qui comptasse un nègre parmi mes ancêtres. (PSS 14:242)

Thus this incident indicates the complex intersection of race and class already evident in Pushkin's day. In this context, the timing of Bulgarin's attack is telling. As Susan Layton has suggested in her groundbreaking study on Russian literature and empire, Russian society became increasingly intolerant of dark-skinned people as a result of intensified warfare in the Caucasus in the 1830s.⁶⁷ We cannot help but speculate that this intolerance

was a factor in the decline in Pushkin's public image in the later years of his life.

As a counterbalance to the Bulgarin attack, in January 1832, Pushkin's close friend Pavel Nashchokin sent him a New Year's gift which was to remain dear to the poet to the end of his life: an inkstand featuring a black man leaning against an anchor and standing in front of two bales of cotton (made to hold ink). Accompanying it was a note stating: "I am sending you your ancestor with inkwells that open and that reveal him to be a farsighted person [*à double vue*]" (PSS 14:250, translated by Shaw). Pushkin was extremely pleased with the gift, which he kept on his desk to the end of his days. As Shaw points out, there seems to be a great discrepancy between Pushkin's reactions to public and private references to his African origins. However, we must note not just the forum, but also the intention and, most important, the symbolism of those treatments here. Bulgarin obviously meant to denigrate Pushkin's ancestry, denying it any value whatsoever and slandering Pushkin's noble heredity, whereas Nashchokin positively validated it, underscoring Gannibal's destiny to have a great writer as a descendant. Nashchokin's gift gets to the heart of the issue: it holds the ink (*chernila*, literally, the "black stuff") for Pushkin to ply his trade and thus attests to the creativity of its owner. These two events, the Bulgarin attack and the Nashchokin gift, serve as defining moments for the future evolution of the semiotics of Pushkin's blackness, pitting black blood, with its potential for the pollution of the race, against black ink, as a mark of the poet's creative vigor.⁶⁸

THE MAKING OF PUSHKIN AS A CULTURAL ICON

If Pushkin's African lineage was common knowledge among his contemporaries, it was consigned to silence by those writers and critics in the poet's own lifetime and in the succeeding years of the nineteenth century who were to become the canonical ideologists of Pushkin as Russia's national poet. They were interested in Pushkin's "Russianness" rather than in his exotic roots. In this context, two interrelated tendencies drove the mythogenesis which began upon Pushkin's death. While in the latter half of the nineteenth century fascination with and exploration of Pushkin's blackness was pursued for the most part by a small, select group of scholars engaged in producing erudite studies, the second and dominant mode, fed by the same German Romantic vision of history which created the imperative of national purity of blood and hence gave impetus to philosophical and political racism, prompted those who participated in the process of creating an "official" myth to view culture and therefore poetry and poets as the true gauge of national worth. A Russian national poet of the first order thus became necessary to prove the validity of

Russia's imperial enterprise and to assert the health of its growing empire. This second tendency, most compellingly expressed by Gogol and Dostoevsky and arguably simply a particularly Russian variant of the pan-European trend, cast Pushkin as the paradigmatic Russian precisely because he was capable of assimilating other nationalities, much as the Russian Empire itself expanded by incorporating neighboring ethnic groups. In this way, largely through the figure of Pushkin, concerns largely confined earlier to the specialized realms of historiography and ethnography moved into the broader public literary arena: "to conflate—once and for all—the various independent components of Russian nationality."⁶⁹

The image of Pushkin thus evolved in the latter half of the nineteenth century as two faces of the same coin: as an increasingly "official" myth suppressing Pushkin's exotic foreign origins developed through sanctioned commemorations, while fascination with and exploration of Pushkin's blackness was confined for the most part to a small, select group of scholars engaged in producing erudite studies.

Beginning with Gogol's famous comment that "Pushkin is an extraordinary and perhaps the singular expression of the Russian soul," public, official literary commentators played up the interpretation of Pushkin as the expression of the Russian national essence.⁷⁰ References to the African origins of the poet were disregarded in light of a larger, more urgent vision: to find a creditable exemplum of the national *Geist* so that Russia could be deemed worthy to join Western civilization on an equal footing with countries like England, Germany, and France.⁷¹ Belinsky further propagated this notion with his statement that Pushkin expressed the Russian national spirit; Apollon Grigoriev followed with his own formulation that "Pushkin is the representative of all our spiritual singularity . . . He is still the single complete essay [*ocherk*] of our national personality. He is our distinctive type." Finally, in 1880, in his Pushkin speech, Dostoevsky proclaimed that Pushkin surpassed the great poets and writers of all other nations precisely because of his ability to embrace the foreign:

No, I state categorically that there has never been a poet with such universal responsiveness as Pushkin. It is not only a matter of responsiveness but also of its amazing depth, the reincarnation in his spirit of the spirit of foreign peoples, a reincarnation that is almost total and is therefore miraculous . . . This we find in Pushkin alone, and in this sense, I repeat, he is a unique and unprecedented phenomenon, and as far as we are concerned, a prophetic one . . . for it is precisely in this that his national, Russian strength was most fully expressed, in the national spirit of his poetry, the national spirit in its future development, the national spirit of our future, which is already concealed in the present and is expressed prophetically. For what is the strength of the Russian

national spirit if not its striving, in its ultimate goals, for universality and common humanity?⁷²

Dostoevsky does not speculate on the origin of Pushkin's unique capacities. What we witness here nonetheless is the culmination of the evolution of Pushkin as a metaphor for imperial hybridity, a trope of national quintessence which endorses assimilation as a higher form of national purity, a figure unquestionably appropriate to a multicultural empire seeking to absorb a variety of peoples from contiguous lands. Here then Dostoevsky makes an apology for Russian imperialism in the broad sense, and, more specifically, for Russia's exalted role on the stage of international affairs.⁷³

Pushkin biographers (including biographers of Gannibal) and scholars, on the other hand, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, remained fascinated with Pushkin's Africanness, if often less comfortable with his "blackness." Indeed, as indicated above, the ideologists and biographers engage in the same project of creating Pushkin as the national poet of Russia, but they approach it in different ways. From the middle of the nineteenth century on, the scholarly tradition fully acknowledged the fact of Pushkin's African roots in an attempt to account specifically for his singularity. Both P. A. Annenkov and P. I. Bartenev—considered to be the first biographers of Pushkin—recognized Pushkin's African roots and called Gannibal a "Negro," though they never went so far as to call Pushkin himself "black" or "mulatto." Annenkov dwells upon the recently discovered facts of the Gannibal story in his work *Pushkin in the Alexandrine Era (Pushkin v Aleksandrovskaia epokhu)*, drawing attention to the fact that aspects of Gannibal's biography as it had come down through family tradition were based more on fiction than on fact. In an attempt to correct the historical infidelity of Pushkin's portrayal of his ancestor in *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, Annenkov accounts for Gannibal's negative characteristics, which he enumerates, as part and parcel of his ethnic background: "his Abyssinian, soft, cowardly, and altogether hot-tempered nature."⁷⁴ Moreover, Annenkov attributes the contradictory components of Pushkin's personality specifically to his mixed origins: "which united in one person the African blood of the Gannibals with the pure Russian soul."⁷⁵

P. I. Bartenev also features many references to Pushkin's blackness in the reminiscences he collected from Pushkin's contemporaries. Like Annenkov, he is interested specifically in Pushkin's hybrid genealogy, but, in Bartenev's case, Pushkin's mixed ancestry accounts, at least in part, for the uniqueness of his talent: "The ardor of Africa and the sobriety of the Great Russian—that is Pushkin's prose. His verse is fiery and at the same time measured. Feeling governed by reason."⁷⁶ Most important in this context, Bartenev first makes explicit what we believe to be the underlying, if often unstated,

presence of Gannibal in Alexander Pushkin as a paradigm for the intersection of nationality, ethnicity, and empire. In Bartenev's words: "In the same way, the law noted by historians in modern times that great peoples arise from the mixture of different tribes, when applied to individuals is confirmed by our poet: besides Russian and African blood, in his veins flowed German blood as well."⁷⁷ Hence it is through Pushkin's very difference, his ethnic and racial hybridity, that the Russian people are elevated into one of the great nations of the world. Thus Bartenev comes to the same conclusion as Dostoevsky while making explicit what Dostoevsky leaves unspoken.

The 1899 celebration of the centennial of Pushkin's birth cast by the tsarist government as a blatant apologia for empire constituted a logical extrapolation of Dostoevsky's vision in the political sphere. Excerpts from an article published on the first page of the newspaper *Moscow News* (*Moskovskie vedomosti*) on May 26 (Pushkin's birthday) of that year convey the tenor of the commemorative discourse:

Russia treasures Pushkin not only because he is the first of all Russian poets, but also because he stands in the ranks of the first poets of Europe, and consequently of all humanity. He is dear to Russia in that he first led her as a full member into the greater family of cultured peoples and gave her the opportunity to proclaim to them her own new *Russian* word . . .

With his works, he showed that the Russian people are not one of those peoples of the East which strives only to adopt the latest fruits of European civilization . . . , but that the Russian people is capable of surpassing its teachers in many ways and in enriching the culture of mankind along with other creative peoples, new ideas and new ideals . . .

Pushkin first sensed and understood the great *spiritual* superiority of the Russian people over the peoples of Europe and first expressed this consciousness not only in words which exuded profound, sincere conviction, but also in the living images of his artistic creations.⁷⁸

If, as Marcus Levitt suggests, "The 1899 jubilee was broadly aimed at acculturating the Russian and non-Russian masses," then one begins to understand the delicate balance that needed to be established to propound Pushkin as the standard for official nationality.⁷⁹ On the eve of the twentieth century, with virulent racism running high in western Europe, Pushkin's importunate Gannibal lineage was broached—and creatively diffused—by the anthropologist Dmitry Anuchin in an extensive article, "A. S. Pushkin: An Anthropological Sketch," written in 1899 in honor of the centennial. Anuchin provides a purportedly scientific study of Pushkin's African heritage, basing his conclusions on the large body of Western racially charged ethnographic literature. The importance of Anuchin's work is that, through looking at Eu-

ropean travelers' accounts and consulting with academics who had studied the region, he "establishes" the location of Gannibal's homeland in Abyssinia.⁸⁰ He then attempts to assess the effects of Pushkin's Gannibal origins on the poet's character and temperament. Though Anuchin acknowledged the fact of Pushkin's difference—"Pushkin was not a fully Russian man"—his agenda was to disarm the salient fact of Pushkin's blackness by staking the claim that Pushkin was Abyssinian—that is, not "black."⁸¹ In this sense, he is the first in a long line of scholars who have denied Gannibal's and hence Pushkin's blackness per se in an attempt to circumvent Pushkin's inconvenient bloodline in light of his indisputable genius: "Actually, if Ibrahim Gannibal was a Negro, then his own far from ordinary personality, and in particular the brilliant personality of his great-grandson poet, must present itself as the notable exception in the history of Negro races."⁸² As we can see from the beginning of this thread of Anuchin's argument, race does matter here.

Among other strategies, Anuchin deploys an analysis of an incorrectly documented portrait of Abram Gannibal⁸³ to justify his claim that Gannibal was not black: "The technique of the portrait is not very important, the painter was obviously not skillful . . . but in any case, before him was not a thick-lipped wide-nosed Negro, but a dark-skinned Hamite with facial features that resemble those of the white rather than the Negroid race."⁸⁴ By reducing a complex question to the issue of mere physical indicators, Anuchin simplifies his task greatly. He then attempts to prove that Pushkin was not perceived as dark-skinned by many of his contemporaries. He insists that those inhabitants of southern Russia who were surrounded by darker-skinned peoples—or those of Pushkin's acquaintances who were themselves dark-complected, like A. O. Smirnova—did not perceive Pushkin as swarthy, while the fair-skinned peoples in the capital cities may have viewed him as dark-skinned.⁸⁵

In the final twist of Anuchin's argument, we witness the complete effacement of the significance of Pushkin's African heritage. This *pièce de résistance* consists of his analysis of the components of Pushkin's "African traits"—i.e., his thick lips, curly hair, and prominent brow—which Anuchin ultimately compares to the modern (nineteenth-century) physiognomy of the Jew, reflecting an admixture of Semitic blood, which can be accounted for as a result of Pushkin's "Abyssinian" origins.⁸⁶ In this last stroke of his pen, in the final installment of his serialized article, Anuchin has literally "washed the Ethiope white," while at the same time retaining Pushkin as the "other" present in Russian culture, the Jew.⁸⁷

PUSHKIN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the twentieth century, invocations, interpretations, suppressions, and repressions of Pushkin's Gannibal ancestry became increasingly important as modes of appropriation by the Soviet cultural establishment of Pushkin's cultural legacy and the putative authority that came with it. This is perhaps not surprising given the fact that in the formation of their empire, the Soviets encountered many of the same challenges faced by their tsarist predecessors a century earlier; in their use of Pushkin as a culture myth Soviet ideologists responded similarly as well. Indeed, as Marcus Levitt has suggested, "The process of turning the literary holiday into an official instrument of political and cultural policy begun in 1899 reached its zenith under Stalin in the late 1930s."⁸⁸ We can, moreover, extrapolate this argument to apply to the construction of Pushkin in Soviet culture across the board, since the appropriation of his legacy became a cornerstone of Soviet cultural policy. While we find the same, often vexed, oscillation between denial and fascination with Pushkin's African origins in the twentieth century that we did in the nineteenth, we also find that the strategies for confronting and exploiting the issue became more complex and the spectrum of responses more politically charged.

At one extreme lay those who denied Gannibal's place in Pushkin's biography, including ultranationalists who even rejected Pushkin because of his African roots and certain Soviet Russophiles who "whited" Gannibal out of Pushkin's biography, suppressing references to Gannibal's origins or to Gannibal himself.⁸⁹ More insidious and deeply engrained in the very fabric of the Soviet appropriation of Pushkin, however, was the trend we have seen earlier to accept Gannibal's African roots, while denying his "blackness"; this was part and parcel of the official Soviet "line" which rendered Gannibal a canonic fact of Pushkin's biography, neutralized by rote memorization, while trotting Pushkin forth as Russia's great African poet when politically opportune, as when welcoming African students to Moscow. That all of these strategies existed to "whitewash" Gannibal testifies to the potency, even when latent, of Pushkin's African roots as a not insignificant constituent element of the cultural construct of Pushkin as Russia's great national poet.

While most Soviet scholars, like Soviet school texts, followed Anuchin in denying Pushkin's "blackness," the strategies employed to this end by two of the top Russian Pushkin scholars of the twentieth century—one Soviet and one émigré—are particularly revealing. We have already noted that Yury Lotman almost completely excluded Gannibal from his biography of Pushkin. It is even more significant that in his article on Pushkin's Lycée nickname, "a mixture of a monkey and a tiger," he spends much ink in an attempt to prove that the nickname is a marker of Pushkin's ties with French culture, never

even mentioning Africa. Yet given the plethora of contemporary references associating Pushkin's African heritage with his "monkeylike" appearance, it is hard to imagine that Pushkin's nickname "monkey" came about as innocently as Lotman attempts to prove. Tellingly, in citing as evidence for his claim Fiquelmont's description of Pushkin cited earlier in this introduction, Lotman omits the words here given in italics: "It's impossible to be more ugly—it's a cross between the exterior of a monkey and tiger. *He comes from an African race, and in the color of his face there remains an impress of something wild in his look.*"⁹⁰

If Lotman's silence is indicative of the prevailing strain in Soviet Pushkin scholarship, Vladimir Nabokov adopts a rather more complicated tactic in his extended essay on Pushkin's African forebear. Thus, Leona Toker describes and debunks Nabokov's own purported debunking of myth:

The bulk of [Nabokov's] text is a critical scrutiny of these documents [presented by Nabokov's predecessors]. It dismantles their slapdash romanticized accounts of Gannibal's origins and early experience and cancels or subjects to doubt most of their so-called facts. In the end, however, Nabokov himself comes out with an avowedly unsanctioned yet breathtakingly beautiful theory of Gannibal's origins, a wild surmise to end all wild surmises.⁹¹

Thus, while Nabokov was perhaps the first twentieth-century scholar to entertain the possibility that Gannibal was "Negroid," he nonetheless does so, as Toker points out, only in the context of offering his reader a loaded choice: "It is upon nonbelievers in the Abyssinian theory that the burden of the proof rests; while . . . those who accept it must waver between seeing in Pushkin the great-great-grandson of one of those rude and free Negro nomads who haunted the Mareb region or a descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, from whom Abyssinian kings derived their dynasty."⁹² Nabokov himself makes it clear that he favors the "breathtakingly beautiful" version tracing Gannibal's origins to biblical royalty of Hamitic descent. Moreover, the time and energy Nabokov expends in expounding his vision of Gannibal's origins is as eloquent as Lotman's silence on the subject as indications of the centrality of the issue to Pushkin as culture myth.

SOVIET PROPAGANDA AND PUSHKIN'S BLACKNESS

As the quotation from Marcus Levitt cited above indicates, celebrations of significant anniversaries in Pushkin's life served as nodal points for the elaboration of the Soviet Pushkin myth within an evolving political context. Certainly the 1937 commemoration of the centennial of the poet's death was par-

ticularly significant in this respect, for it marked as well the culmination of the process, begun even before the 1917 Revolution, first of repudiating, then of usurping the classical Russian literary canon into the ideological framework of Soviet culture. Hardly surprisingly then, some of the richest cultural texts—and precisely those with regard to the role of the Gannibal heritage in the construction of the Soviet Pushkin—were created at the time of preparations for the anniversary celebration.⁹³

In this context the eminent Soviet director Grigory Aleksandrov's famous film-musical, *Circus*—made in 1936, a year before the monumental Stalinist celebration of the centennial of Pushkin's death—provides eloquent testimony to the resonance of Pushkin's racial ambiguity in Soviet mass culture, despite the fact that Pushkin is never directly mentioned in the film. *Circus* tells the story of an American circus performer, a white woman named Marion Dixon, who is driven out of her home country when she gives birth to a black baby. Brought to the Soviet Union to perform by an evil German impresario who blackmails her by threatening to reveal her secret, the American ultimately finds love and acceptance for both herself and her child and remains in the U.S.S.R. In the dramatic culminating scene of the movie, the villain, standing in the middle of the circus ring, displays the child to the audience and announces in outrage, "She was the lover of a Negro. She has a black child. A white woman has a black child . . . It's a racial crime. There's no place for her in civilized society. There's no place for her among white people." The audience merely laughs at him and grabs away the child. Resonating with Isaak Dunaevsky's mass song, "Wide Is My Motherland," which is reprised throughout the film, the ethnically diverse audience passes the child from one hand to another (from a Russian woman to a Ukrainian man to a sailor to a Jew—played by the famous Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels—and to a black man in military uniform), all the while singing a lullaby, figuring a myth of Communist inclusiveness. While Pushkin is never explicitly mentioned in the film, we would argue that the association is no less unmistakable for remaining unspoken, just as it always hovers beneath the surface of the Pushkin cult as a mainstay of Soviet imperial ideology.

Indeed, the Soviet authorities did utilize the convenient fact of Pushkin's African lineage in the development of relationships with both African nationals and African Americans, beginning in the 1920s. Though it was only during the Harlem Renaissance that Pushkin's name became widespread in the larger African American community, Soviet officialdom found that emphasizing the African origins of its national poet was extremely effective in propagandizing the lack of racism in Soviet society.⁹⁴ This acknowledgment of Pushkin's African roots on the part of the Soviet authorities greatly impressed many African Americans—including such distinguished figures as the poet Langston Hughes, the journalist Homer Smith, the activist

William L. Patterson, and the singer Paul Robeson, all of whom mention Pushkin's African origins in their reminiscences of time spent in Russia.⁹⁵ The promise of a life free of the humiliation of racial discrimination prompted a significant number of African American activists to take a sympathetic interest in the Soviet Communist experiment and even to spend time living in the U.S.S.R. Aside from segregation in the United States, the rising threat of Nazism in Germany was also a potent force impelling African Americans to seek a racially just society in the U.S.S.R. Thus, in 1937, in the *Negro Worker*, a journal devoted to spreading the word of Communism to African and African American communities, William L. Patterson exclaimed: "Its [the Soviet Union's] perpetuation of Pushkin's memory deals a smashing blow at the fascist myths of racial-national superiority. This is the great significance of Pushkin's centenary to the Negro people."⁹⁶ Paul Robeson's presence at the 1949 celebration of the sesquicentennial of Pushkin's birth in the U.S.S.R. is emblematic of the simultaneous Soviet exploitation and denial of the intersection of Pushkin's African blood and Soviet internationalism, an ambivalence apparently shared by Robeson himself, who made no mention of Pushkin's Gannibal ancestry in his jubilee speech on Russia's great national poet.⁹⁷

As African countries sought greater independence, the Soviet Union endeavored to strengthen its ties with them and to Communism in the region. Beginning in the 1950s, increasing numbers of Africans were encouraged and invited to attend a variety of educational institutions in the U.S.S.R. In 1960 the Friendship University (renamed in 1961 in honor of the recently assassinated Patrice Lumumba of Congo) was established in Moscow specifically for the training of the inhabitants of the former colonies in Africa. This educational exchange increased knowledge of Pushkin's heritage among the inhabitants of different African countries. Despite the dominance of the Abyssinian or Ethiopian tradition concerning Gannibal's place of origin, a number of African countries—Guinea, Mali, Mauritius, and Senegal among them—have honored Pushkin in one way or another over the years.⁹⁸ In support of its claim to Gannibal and therefore Pushkin as a native son, Ethiopia holds vast materials on Pushkin and his great-grandfather.⁹⁹ As early as 1957, it dedicated an entire issue of the *Ethiopian Observer* to Alexander Pushkin. In tourist guides, Ethiopia even bills itself as the homeland of Pushkin's great-grandfather, though representatives from other African countries challenge this honor.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, as we shall see, in the late 1990s, the Ethiopian version of Pushkin's origins became hotly contested—by the countries of Benin, Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, and Nigeria—during the bicentennial of Pushkin's birth.

THE ALTERNATIVE LITERARY TRADITION

Though official Soviet narratives and rituals for the most part suppressed or defused Gannibal's and thus Pushkin's blackness, some of Russia's most talented, formally innovative, and politically recalcitrant writers in the twentieth century subverted the party line by exposing its obverse side. They thus countered the official Pushkin and official Soviet culture by returning the repressed, by speaking that which has so often been left unspoken, thereby demonstrating the extent to which the status of Pushkin as the mythical figure of the national poet draws its power precisely from that which is consigned to silence.

In what is probably the first major text in this subversive counter-tradition, the prescient dystopian novel *We* (*My*, 1920–21), Evgeny Zamiatin was the first writer to expose the paradigm—and among the most effective. Placed in the twenty-sixth century, the novel describes what happens when a perfect society, exemplified by the OneState and populated by “numbers” rather than by individuals, is disrupted by the desire for personal freedom and the destabilizing forces of creativity and sexuality. In Zamiatin's novel, narrated by the engineer-turned-chronicler D-503, Pushkin's image appears twice. As an icon of official culture, he is represented directly—in bronzed form; his bust occupies a prominent place in the Ancient House, the repository of historical curiosities, things currently unknown, unnecessary, and unwanted: “On a little bracket on the wall was a bust of one of their ancient poets, Pushkin, I think. This asymmetrical snub-nosed face was looking straight at me with a barely detectable smile.”¹⁰¹ Zamiatin counters the official Pushkin by portraying a possible descendant of Pushkin in the character R-13, the state poet, whose most distinctive feature is his “Negroid lips.” R-13 becomes a disruptive force in the novel; he challenges all the rules and destroys the easy symmetry and organizing principles of the OneState. In the course of the novel, he discovers that he is unable to continue churning out mathematical verses extolling the virtues of the OneState, and he allies himself with a conspiracy to bring it down.¹⁰² In so doing, R-13 realizes the potential of the unofficial representation of Pushkin as a revolutionary, life-giving force.¹⁰³ Poetry and literature in Zamiatin's terms are the simultaneously creative and destructive forces ready to challenge the psychological entropy of the state and its submissive subjects figured in the bronze image of the “official” Pushkin. Thus in *We* Zamiatin, conflating Pushkin as unbound creative power with the noble savage, the Scythian, of his earlier essay “Scythians?” (“Skify li?” 1918), discloses the duality of Pushkin's image, which may be mustered to legitimate or to subvert authority. It is the “African” Pushkin, moreover, who eludes deadening convention and institutionalization and who becomes the lifeblood of poetry. Thus, beginning with the “Negroid lips” Zamiatin imputes to R-13, the state poet-turned-rebel, a counter, “black” Pushkin emerges as the poet's African blood

becomes a complex metaphor for creativity, originality, independence, and vitality. In the same vein, Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), the futurist poet who became a Soviet state poet but ultimately committed suicide because he could not bow to the state's demands, rejects Pushkin transformed into the “dead matter” of the monument, while embracing the living, African Pushkin (“Afrikanets”) in his 1924 lyric, “Jubilee” (“Tubileinoe”). He calls out to Pushkin: “I love you, but alive, not a mummy.”¹⁰⁴

The urge to reclaim Pushkin from the ossifying traditions of official culture manifested in the 1937 centennial of Pushkin's death recurs in works written for that occasion by the fiction writer and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov, the formalist critic and writer of historical fiction Yury Tynianov, the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, and the poet and critic Vladislav Khodasevich. The works all four of these authors composed at the time of the jubilee can be seen as reactions against the “sham Pushkin” created by official Soviet culture, and all four invoke, at least implicitly, the Gannibal legacy as a vibrant, creative force.¹⁰⁵ Bulgakov's play *The Last Days (Poslednie dni)*, written in 1934 to 1935 for the centennial but not actually performed until 1943, appears at first glance to have little relevance to our topic, but upon closer consideration it actually presents the paradigm we are suggesting in rather direct form. In this play, which purports to document the final days of Pushkin's life, the poet never appears on stage at all, but remains beyond the range of the audience's vision as the unraveling of his fate is chronicled in conversations among members of his family, the court, literary society, and the secret police. Yet, as the second act of the play reveals, Pushkin's silence in the play is eloquent. The second act takes place at a ball at the palace of the Princess Vorontsova. The scene opens on a conversation in the garden between Nicholas I and Pushkin's wife. Most interesting, however, is the following line from the stage directions: “By the colonnade, immobile, is a Negro in a turban.”¹⁰⁶ After Natalia Pushkina goes back inside, Zhukovsky comes out and the Tsar asks him, “Vasily Andreevich, I can't see very well from here. Who is that man in black [*chernyi*, literally “black man”] standing by the column?” (32). While Zhukovsky does not answer Nicholas directly, it becomes immediately clear that the “black man” is Pushkin, who appears in the place seemingly occupied at the opening of the act by the “Negro in a turban.” The image is further complicated, however, by the fact that Nicholas is displeased that Pushkin is “in black,” i.e., because he is in civilian clothes rather than in the uniform required by the humiliating rank of *Kammerjunker*, generally held by much younger and less distinguished men, which Pushkin was forced to accept so that his wife could attend court functions. Here, we would argue, Bulgakov gives us a potent image of the rebellious “black” poet, relegated to the margins by the intrigues of the philistines and bureaucrats who surround him and displace him from center stage.

By the same token, the lyrical introduction to Tynianov's unfinished novel on Abram Gannibal provides a tantalizing window into the "silences" of accepted conventions about Pushkin: that he was proud of his mixed origins, and that a pure "Great Russian" nobility never existed in anything other than official mythology.¹⁰⁷ Tsvetaeva in "My Pushkin" also focuses in large part on Pushkin's blackness as a defining moment in Pushkin's creative persona. Tsvetaeva's idiosyncratic essay was written in emigration, as if to suggest that her claim on Pushkin and all of his unofficially acknowledged traits could not be made within the confines of official Soviet culture, thereby implicitly valorizing Pushkin's own "outsideness."¹⁰⁸ Khodasevich focused on Pushkin's Gannibal heritage in his unfinished biography of Pushkin, written in emigration during the mid-1930s, and excerpted in the émigré press during the centennial year.¹⁰⁹ Khodasevich, seeking an explanation for the extremes of Pushkin's personality, finds the source of his unruliness in his Gannibal ancestry and describes the clan as if it were an elemental force: "They began to take him calling to his relatives—that numerous Gannibal clan [*gannibalshchina*], that being fruitful and multiplying since the times of Abram Petrovich, settled all over Pskov *guberniia*. The *gannibalshchina* led a chaotic, rowdy, hospitable life. They would visit each other with their entire families for weeks on end. When the guests prepared to head home, their hosts would not let them go, ordering the horses unharnessed or hiding the trunks and suitcases. Uncles Petr and Pavel Isaakovich especially distinguished themselves in their drinking sprees and hospitality: African ardor was united in them with the breadth of Russian nature."¹¹⁰

The tradition of invoking Pushkin as African as a subversive, creative counterforce to the stagnating Soviet cultural bureaucracy flourished in the late Soviet years as well. In the late 1960s, the dissident Andrei Sinyavsky, writing under his pseudonym Abram Tertz, invoked Pushkin's African ancestry as a metaphor for free and subversive creativity in his *Strolls with Pushkin* (*Progulki s Pushkinym*), penned while its author was a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp during the Brezhnev regime. An irreverent deconstruction of the "wreaths and busts" of the official Pushkin, *Strolls with Pushkin* proved to be one of the most controversial works of the glasnost period. The publication of a small passage from the work in the Soviet Union in 1989 called forth a virulent outcry by Russian chauvinists who viewed the work as an attack on Russia's greatest poet.¹¹¹ It is certainly not irrelevant that in *Strolls with Pushkin* Sinyavsky-Tertz invokes the same opposition adumbrated by Zamiatin in *We* between the mummified Pushkin of academic convention and imperial mythogony, on the one hand, and the subversive, savage Pushkin, on the other, here performed in a series of scintillating metaphors, including Gannibal as biography turned trope, to reclaim Pushkin from canonicity. As in Tsvetaeva's *My Pushkin*, here Pushkin's blackness becomes an exaggerated figure, merging with writing itself, an emblem of the different, the uncontrollable, of rebellion against ossified authority.

Also in the latter years of the glasnost era, Tatiana Tolstaya, one of the most talented of Russia's younger writers, wrote a story entitled "Limpopo."¹² The title is drawn from the Soviet children's classic *Doctor Aibolit (Doctor Ouchithurts)* written by Kornei Chukovsky. Doctor Aibolit, who like his Western counterpart Dr. Doolittle can "talk to the animals," in Chukovsky's poem goes off to the mythical African country of Limpopo to serve as a veterinarian. Tolstaya, however, reverses Chukovsky. The central, though silent, figure in her long story is an African student called Judy who has come to the Soviet Union to become a veterinarian. She becomes involved with a poet named Lenechka, who envisages that their union will result in the birth of a new Pushkin: "if our luck holds we'll get a Pushkin right off; if not, we'll go at it again and again, or wait for our grandsons, great-grandsons" (144). As it turns out, their luck does not "hold," and Lenechka's hopes are dashed when Judy dies of a chill she contracts in the inclement Russian weather. Lenechka, bereft of Judy and therefore of his hopes for the regeneration of Russian poetry and culture, "lost his reason after Judy's death and ran into the forest on all fours—though they do say that he's alive and that some frightened children saw him lapping water at a stream, and there's a group of engineers, aficionados of the mysterious, who organized a society for the capture of 'the wild mid-Russian man,' as they refer to him scientifically" (189). While we cannot do justice here to the complexity of Tolstaya's narrative—or to the complicated cultural allegory it embodies in its extravagant digressiveness, allusiveness, and wordplay—let us suggest here that the incorporation of the alterity figured by Judy becomes necessary to the health of Russian culture. Without it, the Russian poet himself becomes a "wild man." Here Tolstaya invokes Pushkin's most famous statement of his poetic legacy, the 1836 lyric "I raised myself a monument not made by hands" ("Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi"), and suggests that cultural amnesia and xenophobia have impoverished Russian literature, transforming the Russian poet, that perennial gauge of the Russian national "self," into the very "wild Tungus" to whom Pushkin presages he will bring the music of his lyre. The African, in the person of the fictional Judy, then, becomes precisely that unruly otherness, perpetually suppressed by Soviet patriots and officials, which could, if embraced, reinvigorate Russian culture and community. Written on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tolstaya's story presages the disintegration of empire, with the attendant exposure of its unsettling heterogeneity and the subsequent postcolonial revanche in the form of colonial subalterns claiming their voice—and the black Pushkin.