

Title: NABOKOV'S AFRICANIST APPENDIX

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Abstract:

This paper re-historicizes Nabokov and his work by turning to an altogether unheralded aspect of his English-language fiction, scholarship, and criticism — namely, his surprising engagement with the histories of race, racism, and in particular the African diaspora through his decades-long study of Aleksandr Puškin's novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin* (1964, rev. 1975). The author of *Eugene Onegin* was descended from Abram Petrovich Gannibal, an African captured, enslaved, and brought to Constantinople where he was purchased as a gift to Peter the Great in 1703. In his own translation and commentary, Nabokov dedicates an entire appendix, titled "Abram Gannibal" — and now published in a separate volume along with a second appendix, "Notes on Prosody" — to a detailed discussion of Pushkin's African descent.

"Abram Gannibal" comprises seventeen individual sections, including: a short sketch of Puškin's genealogy; an inventory of historical documents containing information about Gannibal's life; the approximate dates of Gannibal's birth and death; conjectures on Gannibal's immediate family relations; accounts of Gannibal's enslavement, life in Turkey, career in Russia and Western Europe; and — perhaps most famously — Nabokov's account of his own obsessive cartographic pursuit of Gannibal's exact birthplace. While scholars have examined Nabokov's translational strategies in *Eugene Onegin* and the massive, multi-volume project's influence on his later English-language fiction, "Abram Gannibal" has been overwhelmingly neglected for its excessive, paratextual eccentricity.

Upon closer examination, however, this Africanist appendix remains crucial to the commentator's understanding of Puškin on two counts. First, the appendix is constructed as a kind of historical romance in the vein of Puškin's unfinished novel *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* (c. 1837) and an anonymous German biography of Gannibal upon which it was loosely based. As Nabokov increasingly indulges in forms of unempirical conjecture, he follows Puškin's lead by supplementing the poet's penchant for historical romance. "Abram Gannibal" can thus be reframed as a speculative historical account modeled on Puškin's own prose. And second, Nabokov leverages his broader consideration of the poet's linguistic and cultural hybridity to foreground the complexities of Puškin's ethnic makeup, initiating a preoccupation with interracialism throughout his later fiction. Throughout the appendix, then, Puškin emerges as a thoroughly interracial figure whose murky and mythologized ancestry provides fodder for Nabokov's literary-historical speculation.