ALEXANDER PUSHKIN, THE BOY

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ALEXANDER PUSHKIN, THE MAN
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By W. E. B. DU BOIS

PUSHKIN

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin was born in Moscow, June 6, 1799. He was by descent an octoroon; that is, one of his eight great-grandparents was a black Abyssinian Negro. Some writers have assumed that this Hannibal was of Arabian or Jewish blood, or at most a mulatto, as many Abyssinians are. But Pushkin, who inherited thick lips and curly hair from Abram, and Abram’s contemporaries, had no doubt of his color and race. Pushkin calls himself a “descendant of Negroes.”

Abram Petrovich Hannibal was a black Abyssinian slave brought to Constantinople and stolen by the Russian envoy. Peter the Great became his godfather and gave him an education. He studied military science and fortifications in France and took part in the war of the Spanish Succession. After a brilliant career he died in 1781, having attained the rank of general in the engineering corps. Abram had several children, one of whom became an admiral and commanded the fleet at the battle of the Navarins in 1773. Abram married as his second wife a Livonian gentlewoman, and his granddaughter Nadezhda by her, married Sergei, son of Leo Alexandrovich Pushkin.

The Pushkins were among the oldest families of the Russian nobility and appeared in Russian history as early as the thirteenth century. Seven Pushkins were members of the Parliament of 1613 which called the Romanovs to the throne of Russia, and in the seventeenth century three Pushkins were boyars. In 1698 a Pushkin took part in the conspiracy of the Streltsi and was beheaded by Peter the Great.

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin was brought up as a member of the idle Russian nobility of his time, and trained in French and literature. He began to write when he was twelve and despite his surroundings became distinctly Russian and nationalist in sympathy. In 1811 he was sent to school in the new lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo founded by the Emperor Alexander. Here he spent six years in studying Latin, literature, law, political economy and philosophy.

While at the lyceum, Pushkin lived through the years of Napoleon with his invasion of Russia, the Hundred Days and Waterloo. He began his literary life in the magazines published by the pupils, and by 1817 he was already recognized as a national poet. On graduation he entered the
Foreign Office and lived in St. Petersburg. Here with little actual work to do, he lived a fast life but pursued his literary work. This led to certain radical poems, one especially glorifying political murder. These, with certain of his stinging epigrams, came to the notice of the Emperor, and he was exiled to the south of Russia. He left in May, 1820, and was away from the centers of Russian life for six years. He wandered and traveled, became enamored of the Caucasus and Crimea, and came under the influence of a more inspiring class of companions.

He tried to have his exile ended, but could do nothing until the Czar Alexander died in November, 1825. Twenty-five days of confusion followed until finally Nicholas I became emperor. Pushkin was suspected of being among the Decembrist rebels who opposed Nicholas but finally was summoned to Moscow and was received by the emperor with apparent sincerity. He lived in Moscow from 1826-29. During this time every influence was brought to bear to secure his loyalty to the government, but he was continually on the edge of exile because of his liberalism. He became the hero of the young literary set and very popular, but wild living began again and he gambled heavily. He met at this time, Nathalie Goncharova, his future wife, then a girl of but 17. He proposed to her but was refused.

Finally he ran away to the Caucasus, joined the Russian army and fought in several engagements, but continued to write poetry. Returning to Moscow he was again subject to searching inquiry on the part of the state. His surroundings were disagreeable but perhaps his greatest sorrow was his unquenched love for Nathalie Goncharova. He tried to get the Emperor to let him go to western Europe or to join a diplomatic mission to China, but permission was withheld. He finally joined with his friend Delvig in editing a non-political literary paper called the Literary Gazette, which appeared in 1830. Pushkin was the chief contributor and began a fight against a clique of unscrupulous journalists who had the monopoly of publishing foreign political news. Pushkin finally lost the battle but during its short existence the Literary Gazette maintained a high literary standard.

Finally, in 1830, his second proposal to marry Nathalie was accepted. He knew that he was taking a risk. Nathalie was thirteen years younger than he, a beautiful doll without education, and a costly plaything. Upon pressure from her family, he made overtures to the government and secured some grants for them, and was himself given an estate near Nizhni Novgorod. There while awaiting his marriage he did much excellent writing. In February, 1831, he was married.

Once married, the Pushkins rose in royal favor. They kept house in St. Petersburg and his wife was in great social demand, while Pushkin
himself was bothered with details of housekeeping and finance; and although he belonged "to a six-century-old nobility," he cut a poor figure beside his handsome wife. His own friends, however, formed a literary clique including the widow of a great historian, a number of writers and thinkers and clever women like Madame Smirnova.

The Pushkins had three children: Marie, Alexandre, Gregoire. Their principal difficulties were matters of income and expense, and this interrupted Pushkin's literary life and forced him again into the civil service. In 1834, tired of his social life, he tried again to assert his liberty, but even permission to live in the country in 1835 was refused him by the government.

Meantime the younger literary set had moved further to the left and began to regard Pushkin as reactionary because of his dependence upon government favor. This younger generation, led by Gogol, a great creative genius, swept aside as useless all that Pushkin had done since 1831, but praised his earlier work. Pushkin began editing another magazine in 1836 in which he did remarkable work but there was a conspiracy to ignore it. The objective tendency in his writing began to triumph after 1831. His poetry was more austere and impersonal.

In 1834 a brilliant Alsatian officer, d'Anthes, was adopted by a Russian baron and came to Russia. He began paying marked attention to Pushkin's wife and Pushkin became very jealous. Stung by open references to his supposed complacency, he challenged d'Anthes but his adopted father stopped the affair. Nathalie, however, continued her intrigue with d'Anthes and in 1837 Pushkin again challenged him and the duel was fought secretly. Pushkin fell first, severely wounded, but also shot d'Anthes, wounding him lightly. Pushkin's death, January 29, 1837, had tremendous effect upon public opinion and his popularity proved unexpectedly great. He is today regarded as a literary genius of high rank and the founder of modern Russian literature.

A few words will indicate Pushkin's literary work. Pushkin's narrative poems written between 1820 and 1824 show the influence of Byron, and include "The Captive of the Caucasus," "The Fountain of Bakhchisaray," and "The Gypsies." In the years 1824 to 1830 Pushkin wrote the best lyrics in the Russian language of which "The Nineteenth of October" was perhaps the greatest. The masterpiece of his mature life was "Evgeni Onegin," which he spent eight years writing, from 1823 to 1831. It is a novel in verse and a most original picture of contemporary Russian life. His dramatic poem, "The Bronze Horseman," written in 1833, told of the Petersburg Flood of 1824 and the adventures of a poor clerk with the bronze statue of Peter the Great. It set forth the ambitions and aspirations of the empire. It was a tragic conception which deeply grafted itself on Russian imagination.
Of his plays, "The Tragedy of Boris Godunov," written in 1825, made an enormous impression. Later, he wrote four miniature plays known as "The Little Tragedies." His first attempt at novel writing was "The Nigger of Peter the Great." It was never finished, but was an attempt to found the tradition of Scott's Waverly novels in Russia. Pushkin took here, as of greatest romantic interest, the person of his black great-grandfather. The first chapter deals with Abram's life in Paris, his success in society and his love affair with a French countess who bore him a mulatto child. Only seven chapters were written. His "Tales by Belkin" were written in the same period, and in 1834, he wrote the "Queen of Spades," his masterpiece in prose. A longer novel of this genre was "The Captain's Daughter." Pushkin's only completed historical work was the "History of the Pugachev Rebellion," written in 1834 and regarded as a masterpiece of literary history.

Most of Pushkin's works were published before his death and edited by him. They compose about fifteen volumes. A few were not published until after his death, and he left a mass of manuscripts now preserved in the public libraries of Russia. Since his death there have been numerous editions including posthumous works. His diary was published in 1924 and his correspondence in 1906-08.

The study of Pushkin has become almost a profession. In English, however, there is no complete translation and few entirely satisfactory renderings of chief works. Maurice Baring is his best English critic, and T. B. Shaw his best translator. Leo Wiener's anthology of Russian literature has a bibliography of Pushkin, and his work is also treated in "Modern Russian Poetry" by Avrahm Yarmolinsky and Babette Deutsch, 1923. The best English biography is by Prince D. S. Mirsky, Dutton, 1926.

POSTSCRIPT

The Encyclopædia of the Negro is a proposed project for the publication of four volumes which shall succinctly, fairly and authoritatively place before the public the chief facts concerning the Negro race. The project has not yet received necessary financial support, but PHYLON will from time to time publish short sketches to indicate the kind of article which the Encyclopædia proposes to publish. The biography of Pushkin is an example. It is not to be regarded as done in the final form in which it may appear in the Encyclopædia. It simply seeks to show something of the possible method of treatment of similar biographies.

A pertinent question arises in this case as to whether an Encyclopædia of the Negro should include a person like Pushkin. In the narrow sense of the word and according to continental usage, Pushkin was in no sense a Negro; and the mere fact that he was an octoroon had little to do with his
cultural development. On the other hand, according to usage in America and according to the biological school of racial theory, the fact that this great literary figure was the result of miscegenation is of vital interest.

Our Encyclopædia, for instance, must include Frederick Douglass, although his father was white. We could not very well exclude Alexandre Dumas, although he was a quadroon. There are any number of octoroons in the history of the United States who would unquestionably be included in this Encyclopædia by popular demand as, for instance, John Hope, President of Atlanta University; Governor Pinchback of Louisiana; President Vincent of Haiti; Francis L. Cardozo of South Carolina; John Mercer Langston; Archibald and Frank Grimke; and many others. All these were octoroons with quite as little Negro blood as Pushkin. Or if turning to the other extreme we thought to include in an Encyclopædia of the Negro only persons of unmixed Negro descent, we would land in inextricable confusion and have to omit most of the colored members of the advisory committee who have been promoting this Encyclopædia.

Eventually, of course, problems like these would have to be settled by an editorial board who might include in the Encyclopædia persons with a slight amount of Negro blood who had been culturally identified with the Negro race, and omit mulattoes and even Negroes without apparent mixture, like Ra Nehesi, Pharaoh of Egypt, who, although a full-blooded black, had no cultural connection with Negroes.