

Review of Gannibal: The Moor of Petersburg' by Hugh Barnes

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Introduction

I started reading this book with high hopes. Returning from the London Library with what I expected would be new found treasure.

In many ways this book reveals more about the author than about Gannibal. The traces of Gannibal's life act like a Rorschach Test to the author allowing him to revel in his own fantasies and project his own preconceptions.

Let start with some hard facts about prejudice and misunderstanding.

The book opens: 'Alexander Pushkin was not only Russia's greatest poet. He was also the great grandson of an African slave.'

What on earth does this statement mean? Many Europeans were captured and sold into slavery, then escaped or became free but are not described merely so. Let us compare how Horace's life is treated. Horace is the renowned Roman lyric poet so quite comparable with Pushkin. In the Wikipedia entry his ancestor's slave origins are not the first matter to be brought to one's attention and his ancestor is not described merely as a 'slave' but as someone captured and later freed.

"Horace's father was probably a Venetian taken captive by Romans in the Social War, or possibly he was descended from a [Sabine](#) captured in the [Samnite Wars](#). Either way, he was a slave for at least part of his life. He was evidently a man of strong abilities however and managed to gain his freedom and improve his social position. Thus Horace claimed to be the free-born son of a prosperous 'coactor'" (Note 1)

Barnes general view of Gannibal falls into the stereotype of European historians writing about freed Roman slaves: 'Mary Beard expresses this thus:

'We think we know about slavery; but the ex-slave is much harder. In a desperate search for a useful equivalent, we tend to reach for the caricature of the arriviste, the stereotype of the "man on the make", with more money than taste. '(Note 2)

In keeping with this stereotype Barnes describes Gannibal as an 'interloper', though the word has no bearing on Gannibal's life as he never chose to enter or intrude upon the world he was brought up in. This is not a phrase usually used of Horace. Clearly what Barnes is implying is that Gannibal should have known his place even if the Czar had other ideas. He then states: 'It was the ultimate irony in a bizarre life: the African slave had become a Russian slaveowner.'(p.5)

This is a strange choice of words. If a Roman freedman became an owner of slaves/serfs would that be described as 'bizarre' and in whose eyes was this 'bizarre'? Certainly not in the eyes of Empress Elizabeth who granted Gannibal the estates and serfs.

Later Barnes comments with distaste: '...the social climbing Pushkins...'(p.5)

But why is Barnes trying so hard to be offensive? Is it that he needs an excuse in writing a book about an African to confirm that he has not gone 'native', that he knows the places of things and the proper respect/disrespect due to an African?

But Barnes inability to see the world from the point of view of the subject, from an African point of view can be catastrophic as in his misreading of an innocent statement written to a 'white' Russian: '..I am loyal and work hard, and never cheat, due to my fear of God,... I wish everybody else was like me: conscientious and honest, as much as possible. Apart from my blackness, that is'. Barnes takes this to mean an acceptance of racism. But let us stand aside and imagine he was Jewish and said to a Christian 'I wish everyone else was like me' and then after a moment's hesitation added ' apart from being Jewish, that is'. Would that be read as an acceptance of anti-semitism? Then in discussing Gannibal's choice of a name Barnes indulges in all the negative connotations without asking whether that had anything at all to do with the meaning of the name to his subject. This is a complex subject which Barnes evades by sticking to stereotypes. The British army adopted the name 'Old Contemptibles' which was originally an insult from the Kaiser, and not in any way a reflection of their idea of themselves. What if to Gannibal the name resonated bravery and fearsomeness?

Wounded monkey

There is throughout the discussion an assumption that the only role a Black person would normally have would be as a slave. But this assumption actually plays a far greater role than that. This assumption allows Mr Barnes to completely break all rules of biography. We have a subject who came from Africa, who identified with Africa. and so it would be necessary to try and see the world from an African point of view to understand him. But by describing him as a 'slave' means for Barnes that he becomes a blank sheet and the author is absolved from trying to understand the subject from his own cultural roots and perspective.

The woeful lack of genuine scholarship is endlessly repeated by his quoting comments about Gannibal but providing no discussion of the quality of the source. What sort of person made these remarks, how did they view foreigners in general and Africans in particular. It does not matter to him that he treats negative comments as objective and positive comments as dubious. For example, the absurdity of his quoting a police report of Gannibal 'smiling like a wounded monkey' and then looking at a portrait he writes: "you cannot say if that is the wounded monkey's grin Korf saw at the Winter Palace on the day of his dismissal'. (p.16) Now Barnes has taken an insult and turned it into an objective description. It pays taking this carefully. Firstly, it is unlikely that Korf had ever encountered a wounded monkey and it would be most surprising if

wounded monkeys ever smile. Then we have to ask if Barnes has ever seen a wounded monkey smile that he is trying to see it in the portrait. Korf aware of Gannibal's dismissal expressed an insult. Nothing remarkable there. Barnes attempt to treat the insult as if it were factual description reveals mountains about him, his prejudices, his lack of scholarship or objective scholarly technique. Later he simply refers to Gannibal as 'the 'wounded monkey''.(p.110) This bears consideration: Korf never called Gannibal a 'wounded monkey' but merely as someone 'smiling like a...'. Barnes used this to later actually refer to Gannibal as a 'wounded monkey' concealing his racism behind the apparent cloak of a quotation/misquotation.

Lapses of scholarship

Lapses of scholarship here can be quite frightening. He writes: "Take the nineteenth century Hausa, who said, 'the country of Bornu - I am telling the truth - is country of slaves' (p.46). This gives the impression that we are dealing with direct quotation from a named source. In fact this is third hand reported speech unattributable. Its emphasis on 'telling the truth' raises just that question and very much reminds one of the Western journalist trope of putting into the mouths of taxi drivers whatever whimsy they had on visiting a foreign country. For decades Western journalist reported the most improbable statements attributed to Lagos taxi drivers that would render most Lagosians speechless with mirth. Least of all considerations is that the statement fails of arithmetic. As Fanon following Hegel so correctly put it, the existence of a slave requires the existence of a master - they create each other.

A certain licence may be granted a biographer but not such wild escapes of fancy as 'From his vantage point on deck Gannibal watched the long, frail Turkish caiques dancing on the waves in front of the sultan's palace' (p.57) . No qualification such as 'he may ..' or 'one can imagine ..'. Just pure fantasy.

Barnes ability to use black (sic) and African interchangeably is rather offensive as if every Black person must be African and as if there cannot be a 'White Africans', and by using the lower case crudely refers to skin colour rather than identity. Further it is well known or should be that use of the word 'nigger' by Black people has a different meaning than when used by White people. This complex allusion which affects Pushkin's use of the word 'slave' escapes Barnes who assumes the word means the same in both mouths, his and Pushkins.

Barnes writes of Gannibal's petition to Catherine the Great as follows: "This bold entreaty was a last desperate throw of the dice.' This is a rather strange choice of words as Barnes has indicated that far from being in any desperate circumstances Gannibal was extremely well off with thousands of acres and hundreds of serfs and in any case the petition was for a promotion of one rank. Barnes had also mentioned that the petition was made at time when the Empress was granting generous favours to many of her supporters!

Contradictions never bother Barnes. He states that Menshikov ..'..may have felt it was safer, more convenient, not to put anything in writing.' (p.171) forgetting that earlier he had stated that Menshikov was illiterate, uncritically quoting an English ambassador "I am credibly informed that Menshikov can neither read nor write' the English ambassador Whitworth reported in 1706." (p.125) At one place Barnes describes Gannibal as courageous 'Peter was so delighted with Gannibal's courage during the Russian victory at Lesnaya that he commissioned a portrait of himself on the battlefield, with his black godson in attendance.' (p.118) and then later opines the opposite 'It would be nice to say that Gannibal was a courageous man...The truth is ...he was easily terrified and often a coward' (p.237) This former refers to his actions on a battlefield and the latter to his concerns for the secret police at a time when his enemies were in power and as a matter of historical fact he had experienced sudden and dangerous reversals of fortune in similar circumstances in the past.

Barnes repeats a report that Gannibal 'rigged up a private torture chamber in the cellar of his house in Pernau, complete with pulleys, iron clamps, thumbscrews, leather whips 'and so forth and that he repeatedly hanged ' his wife from the wrists until she confessed to her crimes'. He then adds: 'Unfortunately these documents have vanished without trace.' (p..206) Lets stop for a moment. Here is a vicious and negative allegation to which Barnes states that the evidence has disappeared. Not that there is NO evidence. Any objective review of the allegation would suggest that it was, shall we say, over the top. Since the woman was known to have had affairs and gave birth to an all white baby why would the husband need any further evidence and what would her confession add? But Barnes by saying the evidence has disappeared has dishonestly implied without any justification that it once existed. He then convicts Gannibal of wife beating simply on the grounds that it was common in Russia at the time. Finally Barnes accuses Gannibal of being 'deranged' when he requests that the Church punish his former wife for open adultery and annul their marriage (p.208).

When sent into virtual exile in Kazan by Menshikov Gannibal takes an unexpected and dangerous route which Barnes takes to have been due to 'impatience' (p.181). It does not occur to Barnes that it might well have been a tactic to avoid an obvious ambush and assassination along the way as Menshikov would assume he would take the safe route.

It is noticeable that passages of Gannibal's life that are difficult are treated at length but those times when he is at the height of success are barely covered and quickly skimmed over. Nothing of interest here! We learn nothing of his military achievements which contradict the earlier suggestion that he lacked knowledge.

Barnes had written: 'Not that his was the only black face in the crowd. Negro slaves were a common sight in Petersburg. '(p.2) This would give the impression that no other Black noble had ever existed in Russia. History reveals a rather different story:

“Interestingly enough, the Gannibal was not the first black noble family of Russia. Because the name itself, "abach" means Abyssinian, the princely house of the **Abachidze** has long been known to be Ethiopian in origin. With the rise of Paata to political prominence in the early 17th century, they intermarried with and became lineal ancestors of the royal houses of Imerithia and Georgia of the Caucasus.

The **Arapov** also claim that they derived their name from the word, "arap" or arab, the Russian for Negro. Beginning in 1613, they have filled military posts as generals and such court positions as a governor and a member of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Another family that tradition and legend have traced back to Africa is that of the **Axakov**. They apparently came to Moscow in the entourage of Prince Danila Alexandrovitch of Souzdal, 1251-1303.

An even earlier black immigrant was Chimon Afrkanovich who arrived in Russia at the beginning of the XI century and entered the service of the Grand Duke Iaroslav Vladimirovich of Kiev. A number of his descendants who carried the name, **Isleniev**, held high ranking positions in the army. Petr Alexeevitch, for example, was aide de camp to Catherine the Great.” (Note 3)

This renders most of Barnes musings otiose.

This book is full of false scholarship, it imitates the style of scholarship with none of its actual substance

Rorschach Test

For reasons that remain obscure Barnes engages in long diatribes against modern day Chad and makes an astonishing statement ‘It was always like this’. (p.51) .This clearly invites the reader to imagine that Barnes modern day description reflects what life would have been like in 17th century. This is more extraordinary as he had just explained how much the environment had changed even recently. His omission of the period of the Mali and Songhay Empires, of the period when the University of Timbuctu was a major centre of learning prior to Moroccan invasions makes a travesty of the statement ‘It was always like this.’ but we can put this down to poor scholarship rather than deliberate falsification from racial prejudice. But more to the point the deliberate separation of ethnic groups, Muslim from Christian during the colonial era is omitted and the present day conflict is represented as an eternal verity. We have left bad scholarship and entered the world of calumny. His statement : “The story of Gannibal is timeless’(p.53) is simply absurd. Despite being emphatically corrected that Ganibbal was a prisoner of war, a hostage and not a slave,(p.55) Barnes insists on calling him “The young African slave ...’ (p.54)

Disparaging Peter The Great as a foul mouthed drunk, and describing Gannibal as a ‘monkey’ , a ‘libertine’, a plagiarist, and Pushkin as a mere social climber says more about Barnes than his subjects.

In order to understand Gannibal Barnes mines his own cultural reserves, Othello, Voltaire, Montesquieu... the absurdity of this approach appears to be lost on him. 'Othello' is not an African point of view. He quotes Lord Byron's description of an event in 1813 to be a fair description of an event in 1703! (p.72) He quotes Shakespeare's 'Othello' and states 'incredibly that Shakespeare's lines appear to 'predict' events in Gannibal's life, and 'Gannibal did not only share his blackness with Othello'.(p.200)

What can we make of Barnes description of Gannibal's personal library? In it he finds Machiavelli and Sun Tzu and concludes that they suggest: '... an unhealthy interest in politics and spying?' (p.168) Yet he himself attended Trinity College, Cambridge which in my time used to make Machiavelli's 'The Prince' compulsory reading for all its undergraduates BEFORE attending the college.

This mining of his own culture to reflect on Gannibal's inner life reveals most blatantly the Rorschach test effect.

But Barnes is not alone here. Andrew Kahn, Professor of Russian Literature at Oxford, asserts that Pushkin's skin was white which commits all sorts of errors. Firstly at this distance in time how can he be so sure? How white is White? (Others recount that his appearance revealed his ancestry: 'Pushkin's African ancestry was evident in his appearance, and the poet was proud of the heritage..')(Note 7). But more importantly it enters that vile world where to be African is to be of strongly Black skin. Having relations whose skins are white but who consider themselves as Nigerian as their father I and they find this view offensive. Further to be African is not about skin colour so that Pushkin's claim to be Black is not (obviously) a claim about his skin colour but about his identity. Africans from the continent come in all shades even without inter-marriage. Kahn's reference to Pushkin's skin colour is an attempt to revoke his identity, Pushkin's self claimed identity, on the grounds of his putative skin colour. As is well known 'passing for white' is not about skin colour but about identity. Pushkin did not wish to 'pass for white' even if he could. If a person self identifies as Jewish despite having almost invariably all sorts of genetic antecedents what sort of historian, what sort of bias, inclines one to repudiate this self identity? One can only guess at the uproar that would arise if Kahn suggested that Einstein was not really Jewish on the basis that his parents were non observant as was he himself and he married a Christian. Of course if we follow Kahn's hint most of the Black population of US would no longer be Black. Presumably Mr Kahn would feel entitled to redefine Barack Obama against his own self-identification. This is the length some will go to disassociate Pushkin from his Black world. (Note 5)

One area where Barnes is correct and Kahn is not is about the racism in the Enlightenment. Kahn writes: 'Hugh Barnes's polemical views on Enlightenment racial theories are highly questionable', but Barnes provided testimony and there is much much more. (note 6) One would have expected Khan to provide some sort of testimony before making such a claim. I am not surprised he did not though as Barnes would have shot him down quite easily.

Narrator's voice

The narrative voice of a biography would normally invite you into the world of the subject but Barnes keeps a distance, *froideur*. It is as if the risk of 'going native' must be avoided. Every negative reflection on Africans is taken at face value, every positive reflection must be investigated. After a while this becomes all too tiresome.

He writes of Gannibal: 'He had returned to Russia with an excellent command of French, as well as Dutch, German and Italian.' (p.168) There is no explanation as to how he achieved this and since the statement comes after Barnes accounts of Gannibal's time in France which were described as desultory and conspiratorial (Gannibal's work on fortifications is conveyed as mere lecture notes) one is left with no credible explanation how these skills were acquired.

Coda

What are we to make of Barnes version of history? This Rorschach Test of a certain class of Englishman witnessing the distressing decline of Britain's importance abroad but not accommodating itself to the new multi racial Britain inclusive and entrepreneurial. His view of Russia is as a backward country imitating Europe and of Black people as natural slaves.

This book of 246 pages tells us little about Gannibal and what information it does provide could fit on one page with room to spare. However it tells us a great deal about the author. He is a man widely read but of shallow scholarship, of intellectual pretension but of no substance to it, of great travel but narrowness of vision, a man filled with a dislike of Russia and a hatred of Africans.

There is much bile, spleen and racial stereotyping that is vomited in bucket loads.

However all this is enacted within a specific social vernacular of a certain minor intellectual class of Englishman whose rules once allowed an author to make snide and racial comments while if challenged distance himself by claiming to quote the opinion of others and offering an occasional polite and charming compliment to establish an specious air of respect (p.240). This approach can be illustrated by giving two points of view, one of which is 'politically correct' and the other is not and if the astute reader has any doubts where the author's true preference lay he has only to notice that all politically correct views are challenged whereas the other points of view are taken at face value. A nod is a good as a wink. For those of 'us' in the know the message will be clear: Gannibal is a jumped up ex-slave favoured by a drunken oafish tyrant, scheming his way into high social positions which he should never have been allowed into, a

plagiarist who fabricated expertise using other's knowledge, a libertine, sleeping with high society women who should have known better, a brutal wife beater and torturer, who pretended to be a brave military man when in fact he was easily frightened and a coward and later became deranged, a man who produced a great grandson who for some unknown reason thought of himself as Black when in reality he was mostly white and his work has no connection with illiterate Africa anyway so that this connection should be ignored . While this is usually done with some subtlety and finesse (Note 5) which Barnes' lacks (such as a his misquotations of 'monkey') this sort of dog whistle racism no longer passes as credible today.

As I go about returning this sorry book to the London Library I cannot help but wonder that yet in Barnes' own life time 'the social climbing Pushkin' descendants had married into the British Royal Family and into that of the richest British landowning aristocracy - The Dukes of Westminster (Note 4) . What, one might ask, does Barnes make of this ...'sacrebleu!'

NOTES

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace>
2. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/ex-slaves-of-rome-and-historians-snobbery/>
3. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/secret/famous/pushkingenealogy.html>
4. <https://african-century.org/prince-harry-to-marry-a-girl-of-african-ancestry-so-what/>
5. https://web.archive.org/web/20061211161751/http://www.powells.com/review/2005_10_02.html
6. https://african-century.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kwame_Anthony_Appiahs_Cosmopolitanism_A-1.pdf
7. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/13/opinion/13iht-edschmemann.html>