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Introduction

In 1847 Alexander Herzen left Russia for western Europe, never to return. 'I found everything I sought – yes, and more,' he would write later, after his first five years abroad, 'ruin, the loss of every blessing and every hope, blows from behind my back, sly treachery, desecration . . . and moral corruption of which you can have no conception' (VIII, 398).[1] Although the west did not give Herzen what he wanted, it did provide the richest personal and political contrast and drama. The product of autocratic, serf-ridden, agricultural Russia, he was to spend the rest of his life in the west, witnessing revolution, parliamentary government and industrialisation. Born into a cosmopolitan generation he was to confront the growing nationalist current in Europe. Having developed, under the influence of the romantics, an overweening self-confidence, he was to undergo the most devastating blows to his ego. And maturing with the euphoric expectations of utopian socialism, he was to suffer the shock of 1848 and live his most productive years in the calm of Victorian England. He stood at a central crossroad of mid-nineteenth century European history. And he had the attributes to make him an unusually sensitive barometer of the period. He had the intellectual power and insight to form a coherent world-view on which the developments he witnessed made a definite and measurable impact. He had the ability – and the capital – to create an important journalistic role for himself on the political scene in Russia. He had the personality to develop a full private life which played an integral part in what he saw as the series of disillusionments he underwent in the west.

[1] This form will be used throughout for reference to A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii* (30 vols., Moscow, 1954–65).

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What set his experience apart, in terms both of interest and of complexity, was the sheer range of new events and ideas which impinged upon him, and his responsiveness to them. Political, social and ideological developments in Russia, France, Italy and England, as well as the dramatic events in his own life, affected him intimately. And he was ready, while retaining the same values, to reappraise his assumptions and his role when experience seemed to challenge them. Moreover, the different facets of his life – his political philosophy, his practical activity and his private life – conditioned each other directly. Changes in one facet had immediate repercussions on the others. The development of each facet cannot, in fact, be explained satisfactorily in isolation. And it is only in studying their interaction that something of the man himself may be recaptured.

The nodal point from which their interaction may best be seen is that of Herzen's changing concept of his role. What role did he wish to play and how did his view of that role change and develop? It is a question that might lead to a better understanding of many historical figures: in the case of the author of *My Past and Thoughts* it is crucial. He was led by both temperament and social and intellectual environment to a remarkably self-conscious approach towards the events of his day – as was demonstrated by his life-long penchant for autobiography skilfully woven into the social and political background.[2] Well aware that he was an outstandingly gifted man within a minute elite, he felt himself born to a role on the grand historical scene. And this role demanded that he be fully in tune with the times, with change – 'In history,' he wrote, 'the worst crime is to be uncontemporary' (XIV, 104). From early youth he understood this role in terms of protest against oppression and commitment to an approaching socialist millennium. The content of his socialism was not precisely spelt out when he left Russia, but it involved every aspect of life. He sought to be the personification of the future society. For him this meant both to work for the socialist utopia and to affirm in his own private life the values he hoped to see embodied socially. It was therefore here, in his view of his role, that his experiences, public and private, were most clearly registered. The changes involved were striking. From preoccupation with interpreting the direction of contemporary history, he was led by the triumph of reaction in 1848 to primary emphasis on a private life true to the ideals he now feared he

[2] It was in his mid-twenties that Herzen made his first attempt at an autobiography.

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might never see generalised; personal catastrophe drove him from this to the desire for immediate involvement in practical political affairs. And the combination of personal and political disillusionment transformed the historico-philosophical assumptions in terms of which he saw his role.

To understand Herzen's experience in the west in the period from the 1840s to the 1860s, it is necessary first to establish his stance when he left Russia in 1847. This requires an outline of the social context from which he sprang, and of his development within it. Herzen was born into the wealthy ranks of the Russian landowning class. Peter the Great had moulded this class into a nobility, formalised by the Table of Ranks, to serve the state. The army and bureaucracy were to draw on western experience, and the nobility were accordingly forcibly westernised in dress, custom, language and culture. This process cut them off from the illiterate and enserfed mass of the Russian peasantry. And the demands of state service prevented them establishing firm provincial ties of the sort that integrated the contemporary British landowning classes into the society around them.[3] The humiliation of the Church by Peter weakened the ideological hold of Orthodoxy on the better educated and more reflective members of the nobility. And at the same time the insensitive bureaucratic machine which evolved from Peter's initiative destroyed for many the sense of personal loyalty and duty to the Tsar. When, in the course of the latter part of the eighteenth century, the compulsory nature of their state service was gradually eroded, a number of noblemen became professionally as well as ideologically cut off from the Russian state. It was among these elements that radical criticisms of the establishment took root, and that European ideas and the European tour exercised their chief attraction. Catherine II herself enjoyed the attention and stimulation of the *philosophes*, and though she took fright at the implications of the French Revolution, she could not prevent Russia from being drawn into the ensuing war. The march to Paris at the end of the Napoleonic Wars stimulated the hopes and imagination of a broad section of the nobility still within the fold of state service. Six hundred men, some from the very highest families, went on trial for the Decembrist rising of 1825 – the rising which was to provide a sense of revolutionary heritage and a source of inspiration for Herzen throughout his life.

[3] On the eighteenth-century background, see M. Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia* (New York, 1966).

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It was to the less heroic majority of the Decembrist generation that Herzen's father belonged. He had enjoyed the European tour, brought back Herzen's German mother, preferred French to Russian and owned a thoroughly western library. An unhappy figure, he personified the political and intellectual impasse created for his kind by a Russia still dominated by autocracy and Orthodoxy. Without himself going beyond cynicism, Iakovlev nevertheless bequeathed a rationalist irony to his son which could be put to more radical purposes.

Herzen was born in 1812, the year in which Alexander I dismissed his reforming minister, Speransky, and faced Napoleon's invasion. The political atmosphere in which he matured was one of almost unrelieved gloom. The ruthless Arakcheev dominated the last years of Alexander's reign, and Nicholas's ascent to the throne in 1825, ushered in with the suppression of the Decembrists, was characterised by an even more stagnant, unimaginative conservatism. The Third Section of His Majesty's Personal Chancellery, the proliferating secret police, epitomised the regime that took as its slogan 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality' – the last merely implying the natural loyalty of Russians to the former concepts. Independent thought and initiative were in effect discouraged by a government which adopted the military approach towards every sphere of national life. As a result, those who began to find fault with the Russian *status quo* were provoked to more and more revulsion. Herzen's generation were even more responsive to progressive political and humanitarian principles than his father's most enterprising contemporaries. They were further estranged from the Russian state. Where the Decembrists had for the most part been officers in the Tsar's army, the men of the forties were outside the army and the bureaucracy, and those who had the option – which by no means all the 'gentry' generation of intelligentsia did – rejected the role of serf-owning farmers. Frustrated by an environment which in relative terms was becoming more and more backward socially, politically and economically, they were driven to intransigent denial. Moreover, they had the Decembrist example before them. To some extent they could draw progressive ideas from Russian poets and writers. And their political impotence, borne in upon them by the hopeless failure of the Decembrists, attracted them to an approach towards political and social progress which stressed ideas and philosophy at the expense of more tangible levers of change. Both the intensity and the nature of Herzen's approach must be seen in this context.

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The particular features of Herzen's outlook derived from his personal experience of Russia. At home he was the emotional focus of his father, his mother, and to some extent the household serfs. Quick and attractive, he aroused near adulation as a child. At university he was a centre of attention and he was the acknowledged heart of his circle of friends in the thirties and forties. He developed an enormous, ebullient ego. In the poet Ogarev he found, while they were still boys, a kindred spirit with a similarly romantic though less egocentric view of life. The friendship they developed seemed to Herzen the épitome of what life could offer. Perhaps most important of all was his relationship with Natalie, which evolved from cousinly affection to the most intense romance. Natalie's devotion played a vital part in heightening his self-esteem, and in creating the exalted view of life with which he came to the west. For while in exile in the provincial town of Vyatka (1835–8) he underwent a crisis of confidence which shook him deeply. Cut off from his university friends, and bored by his job in the local administration, he felt corrupted by the 'vulgar remarks, dirty people, mean ideas and coarse feelings' which surrounded him (*Past*, 232).[4] He was humiliated in his own eyes by his petty interests and above all by what he saw as a sordid affair with a woman whom he felt he deceived since he had no desire to marry her. His dishonourable intentions were clearly exposed by the untimely death of her husband. Natalie appeared as his Beatrice leading him back to the heights his ego demanded. Their courtship was carried on in the most heady, romantic correspondence of the period. Encouraged by his fiancée and A. L. Vitberg, the mystical Russian architect with whom he was living at the time, Herzen passed through a religious period during which he saw their relationship as symbolic of the regenerative power that love would soon exercise over the world. [5] Although the religious mood would fade, and their marriage (1838) would suffer some strain during the forties, Natalie's devotion remained a cornerstone of his self-esteem. When he came to write his memoirs it was his early married life which evoked his most lyrical and self-confident lines. 'There was not

[4] This form will be used throughout for reference to *My Past and Thoughts. The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, translated by Constance Garnett, revised by Humphrey Higgens (4 vols., New York, 1968). I have used this translation for the 4 volumes of Herzen's works covered except when I have preferred my own translation, where reference is made to A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii* (30 vols., Moscow, 1954–65).

[5] On Herzen's ordeal in the 1830s, see F. F. Seeley, 'Herzen's "Dantean" Period', *Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXIII (1954), 44–74.

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the shadow of a sad memory, not the faintest dark foreboding; it was all youth, friendship, love, exuberant strength, energy, health and an endless road before us' (*Past*, 392). His romantic image of their love, their relationship and his consciousness of the envy of others for their idyllic home cast a glow over his whole view of life. He developed and left Russia with what he called 'an overweening confidence in life' (*Past*, 1859). His ego, his extraordinarily gifted and vibrant personality gave him a sense of the richness and beauty of life unusual among his contemporaries and reminiscent rather of the receding age of Pushkin. It would be tested by experience, but when he emigrated, this sense, this sheer *joie de vivre* inspired an intense personal aspiration to lead the full life.

Herzen's lofty image of what life could be chafed against the interference of authority to produce a sweeping denial of the real in the name of the ideal. The oppressive cossetting of a morose and hypochondriac father served as a foretaste of political constrictions to follow.[6] He recalled identifying with his father's oppressed serfs and believed that the sight of their treatment sparked off his lifelong commitment to liberty. His discovery that in the eyes of the Russian state he was illegitimate, since his father had not married his mother in the Orthodox Church, gave Herzen a sense of independence and defiance of that state. The young Ogarev developed a similar protest against the *status quo*. They shared a heady view of their own historical mission in the name of this protest. They identified with the heroes of December 1825. The romantic, idealistic atmosphere they breathed is captured by the scene of their famous vow, on the Sparrow Hills overlooking Moscow, to dedicate themselves to the struggle for freedom. 'Flushed and breathless we stood there mopping our faces,' recalled Herzen. 'The sun was setting, the cupolas glittered, beneath the hill the city extended farther than the eye could reach; a fresh breeze blew on our faces, we stood leaning against each other and, suddenly embracing, vowed in the sight of all Moscow to sacrifice our lives to the struggle we had chosen. This scene may strike others as very affected and theatrical, and yet twenty-six years afterwards I am moved to tears as I recall it; there was a sacred sincerity in it' (*Past*, 69). Their feeling of isolation, both now and in the circles of the

[6] The view that his home life was a crucial factor provoking Herzen's rebellion against authority has been argued in detail by M. Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812—1855* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp. 13–24.

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thirties and forties, increased their sense of their own historical importance.[7] Political opposition never seemed more noble and glamorous than in the Russia of the 'remarkable decade'. The articulate opposition was so small, the odds so overwhelming, the future promise so great.

The point is not to imply an element of posturing, of insincerity in Herzen's social and political crusade: the everpresent offence of serfdom, on which he knew his own privileged opportunities had depended, guaranteed against that. In any case, as a young man he felt the direct impact of government interference in his own life. He was accused of sedition, imprisoned and suffered two intensely frustrating periods in provincial exile (II, 212–13). Political conditions in Russia made it impossible for him to separate his private life from political questions, even if such separation had been theoretically possible. Herzen in fact did not see it as possible even in theory. In his view, sheer lack of social involvement was the cause of Natalie's tendency to morbid introspection, which at times seemed to mar their married life. And the example of his father's generation convinced him that, without social and political commitment, the 'superfluous man's' life is bound to be aimless and distorted. Both his novels, *Who is to Blame?* and *Duty before All* (the latter written after he emigrated) illustrated how one-sided characters were destroyed by the narrowness of their purely personal interests. The point that must be made is, rather, that the socio-political crusade in the name of freedom for all, for the mass of the peasantry, was not set over against but was part of his aspiration to the full life. His literary heroes, such as Schiller's Karl Moor, 'did not cut themselves off by love from general interests of citizenship, art, science; on the contrary, they brought all its animation, all its ardour into these spheres, and, on the other hand, they carried the breadth and scale of these worlds into their love' (II, 68).

Herzen's personal experience of Russia under Nicholas moulded the three central features of his outlook in the forties. In the first place, he saw the overriding problem facing contemporary thinkers and society as the reconciliation of the individual and the community. The free

[7] See I. Berlin, 'A Marvellous Decade, 1838–1848', *Encounter* (June 1955), 34–5, and P. Shashko, 'Unity and Dissent among the Russian Westerners' (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1969), Chapters I–VI, on the atmosphere of the circles. M. Perkal', *Gertsen v Peterburge* (Leningrad, 1971), brings out Herzen's personal acquaintance with major establishment figures in Russian society, which doubtless increased this sense of importance.

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individual and the just and cohesive society were his supreme ideals. And his conception of man as inherently social and political, his view that a satisfying private life implies involvement in 'general interests', not only removed any fundamental contradiction between the two, but made them complementary. The second point is that his outlook was imbued with optimism. He confidently expected the 'future reformation' which would resolve the problem. Finally, the balanced and rich individual life was not merely the end product of this socialist regeneration: he aspired to it himself. Even if the political dimension of his life was to be lived in working towards utopia and not enjoying it, even if appalling social injustice and oppression of the individual continued, he wanted the full life himself, now. It is in terms of these three points that the controversial question of his attitude to western thought and society in the forties may best be understood.

Herzen was brought up on thoroughly western intellectual fare. He was given private lessons in history and language by western tutors. Like many of his peers he was at ease in French and German. Lonely and intelligent, as a boy he enjoyed reading and made full use of his father's library. He tasted Pushkin and Ryleev, but his childhood favourites were Schiller, Voltaire and Rousseau;[8] he greatly admired Shakespeare and Goethe; as a young man he encountered many of the ideas of Schelling and soon after leaving university he discovered the Saint-Simonists; during the thirties and forties he read Blanc, Fourier, Proudhon, Sand and Considérant, among other French authors of the left;[9] he was delighted by Feuerbach and made a close study of Hegel.[10] He was in a position from his earliest youth to draw on the western classics and on the great romantics, socialists and philosophical idealists of the period. That they interacted with his environmentally shaped preoccupations and figured in his thought and work throughout his life was readily acknowl-

[8] Malia, *Alexander Herzen*, and R. Labry, *Alexandre Ivanovic Herzen* (Paris, 1928), give detailed treatment of Herzen's early intellectual mentors. Labry provides a table of the works read by Herzen between 1842 and 1845, pp. 307–11. On Schiller's influence, see also M. Malia, 'Schiller and the Early Russian Left', in H. McLean, M. Malia, G. Fischer eds., *Russian Thought and Politics* (The Hague, 1957), pp. 169–200.

[9] On Proudhon's influence, see R. Labry, *Herzen et Proudhon* (Paris, 1928), and M. Mervaud, 'Herzen et Proudhon', *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, XII (1971), nos. 1–2, 110–88, which includes their correspondence.

[10] On Hegel's influence, see M. Mervaud, 'Herzen et la Pensée Allemande', *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, V (1964), 32–73.

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edged by Herzen himself. He paid particular tribute to Schiller, Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Hegel. Their ideas offered positive attraction as well as compensation for the frustrations of Russian life. Yet it does not follow that his ideas were a mere reflection of western thought. The Russian intelligentsia as a whole would draw from foreign thinkers those elements which helped them to solve their own problems. When they were enamoured of a whole body of ideas, they interpreted them in accordance with their own predilections. The particular impact on Herzen of western philosophical idealism and western socialism must be seen in this light.[11]

He was fully involved in the philosophical debates which characterised the first half of the nineteenth century in Russia. The outlook with which he came to the west was informed by his reading in pure philosophy, and he always considered a knowledge of Hegelianism, 'the algebra of revolution', essential for a man to be 'modern' (*Past*, 402–3). But concentration on pure philosophy was engendered by political impotence and censorship, and in Herzen's case at any rate, once out of this rarefied atmosphere, his primary social and personal interests asserted themselves explicitly. 'An exclusively speculative tendency,' he later remarked, 'is utterly opposed to the Russian temperament' (*Past*, 397). The story of his development after his emigration to the west in 1847 did not involve any shift in his basic philosophical values, and the changes in his concept of his role did not follow from purely philosophical insights.[12] However, in 1840 when he returned from exile to Moscow, he found Hegel in vogue. He had not abandoned his sense of being more concerned with real life and social problems than the Stankevich and early Slavophile circles, but since the German philosopher dominated

[11] Recently there has been a reaction against the view, epitomised by Malia, that Herzen's generation of intellectuals were 'alienated' from Russian society, and that this is the basic explanation for their political ideals. V. C. Nahirny, 'The Russian Intelligentsia: from Men of Ideas to Men of Convictions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, IV (1962), no. 4, 403–35; J. L. Scherer, 'The Myth of the "Alienated" Russian Intellectuals' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1968). While Herzen later certainly exaggerated his reaction to his environment before 1842, he did withdraw, emigrate, engage in revolutionary activity and become estranged from most of his Russian friends. However inherently attractive the intellectual currents from the west, the source and nature of his receptivity to them lay in a growing reaction against his Russian environment.

[12] See E. Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion* (London, 1957), on Herzen's philosophical development. Lampert concludes that his philosophical views were fully formed by the time he left Russia, p. 198.

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the field of intellectual debate, he now plunged into the study of his thought.

In 'Dilettantism in Science' (1842–3) and 'Letters on the Study of Nature' (1845) he made the most important critique of Hegel from the Russian left. His approach to Hegel has generally been seen as a search for philosophical guarantees of the socialist utopia for which he yearned.[13] The philosophy of history, an interpretation of history which would bolster their rejection of the Russian *status quo*, was a primary concern of both Westerners and Slavophiles. And in so far as he accepted Hegel's system, he did see in the dialectic an explanation for the vicissitudes of an historical process which could be seen to be moving forward – and forward far beyond the realm of ideas and the contemporary Prussian state into a utopian future uniting thought and action, the individual and society. He could enthuse over the prospect of the Ideal realising itself (III, 64–88). But Hegel did not create his optimism, and even in the mid-forties his system could provide only qualified support for it in Herzen's eyes. For Herzen questioned the pantheist implications of Hegel's philosophy. Rather than agonising over the rival claims of materialism and idealism, he rejected an Absolute dominating human development because of his prior affirmation of the individual.[14] Moreover, personal experience made him question any rational principle at all in history: the uphill work of restoring Natalie's morale was destroyed by sheer ill-fortune – their son Sasha's illness (II, 316–17). An alarming storm made him ponder, in his diary, the helplessness of man amidst 'the terrible vortex of chance' (II, 370). The discovery that individual men are subject to chance and guaranteed nothing, whatever capacities they may feel in themselves, led him to question any purpose, any definite direction, in history in general. It is comforting 'to think that the fate of man, for example, is secretly preordained, to try to unravel this mystery, to grasp something', but in reality 'there is no concealed secret about the life of each man' (II, 286). He was struck by the earth's dependence on arbitrary developments in the solar system: the whole world, animals, plants, and man could be instantly destroyed – 'It is a terrible thing, but undeniable' (II, 369). He warned against relying on 'a dream about the future which will never be realised

[13] See, for example, A. I. Volodin, *V poiskakh revoliutsionnoi teorii (A. I. Gertsen)* (Moscow, 1962), Chapter 2.

[14] Herzen did not settle in his own mind the dispute between materialism and idealism. See Lampert, *Studies in Rebellion*, pp. 198–205; Volodin, *V poiskakh revoliutsionnoi teorii*, pp. 31–43.

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