Herzen and his Memoirs

Alexander Herzen, like Diderot, was an amateur of genius whose opinions and activities changed the direction of social thought in his country. Like Diderot, too, he was a brilliant and irrepressible talker: he talked equally well in Russian and in French to his intimate friends and in the Moscow salons — always in an overwhelming flow of ideas and images; the waste, from the point of view of posterity (just as with Diderot), is probably immense: he had no Boswell and no Eckermann to record his conversation, nor was he a man who would have suffered such a relationship. His prose is essentially a form of talk, with the vices and virtues of talk: eloquent, spontaneous, liable to the heightened tones and exaggerations of the born storyteller, unable to resist long digressions which themselves carry him into a network of intersecting tributaries of memory or speculation, but always returning to the main stream of the story or the argument; but above all, his prose has the vitality of spoken words — it appears to owe nothing to the carefully composed formal sentences of the French philosophes whom he admired or to the terrible philosophical style of the Germans from whom he learnt; we hear his voice almost too much — in the essays, the pamphlets, the autobiography, as much as in the letters and scraps of notes to his friends.

Civilised, imaginative, self-critical, Herzen was a marvellously gifted social observer; the record of what he saw is unique even in the articulate nineteenth century. He had an acute, easily stirred and ironical mind, a fiery and poetical temperament, and a capacity for vivid, often lyrical, writing — qualities that combined and reinforced each other in the succession of sharp vignettes of men, events, ideas, personal relationships, political situations and descriptions of entire forms of life in which his writings abound. He was a man of extreme refinement and sensibility, great intellectual energy and biting wit, easily irritated amour propre and a taste for polemical writing; he was addicted to analysis, investigation, exposure; he saw himself as an expert 'unmasker' of appearances and conventions, and dramatised himself as a devastating discoverer of their social and moral core. Tolstoy, who
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had little sympathy with Herzen’s opinions, and was not given to excessive praise of his contemporaries among men of letters, especially when they belonged to his own class and country, said towards the end of his life that he had never met anyone with ‘so rare a combination of scintillating depth and brilliance’.1 These gifts make a good many of Herzen’s essays, political articles, day-to-day journalism, casual notes and reviews, and especially letters written to intimates or to political correspondents, irresistibly readable even today, when the issues with which they were concerned are for the most part dead and of interest mainly to historians.

Although much has been written about Herzen — and not only in Russian — the task of his biographers has not been made easier by the fact that he left an incomparable memorial to himself in his own greatest work — *My Past and Thoughts* — a literary masterpiece worthy to be placed by the side of the novels of his contemporaries and countrymen, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky. Nor were they altogether unaware of this. Turgenev, an intimate and life-long friend (the fluctuations of their personal relationship were important in the life of both; this complex and interesting story has never been adequately told), admired him as a writer as well as a revolutionary journalist. The celebrated critic Vissarion Belinsky discovered, described and acclaimed his extraordinary literary gift when they were both young and relatively unknown. Even the angry and suspicious Dostoevsky excepted him from the virulent hatred with which he regarded the pro-western Russian revolutionaries, recognised the poetry of his writing, and remained well-disposed towards him until the end of his life. As for Tolstoy, he delighted both in his society and his writings: half a century after their first meeting in London he still remembered the scene vividly.2


2 Sergeenko (ibid., pp. 13-14) says that Tolstoy told him in 1908 that he had a very clear recollection of his visit to Herzen in his London house in March 1861. ‘Lev Nikolaevich remembered him as a not very large, plump little man, who generated electric energy. “Lively, responsive, intelligent, interesting,” Lev Nikolaevich explained (as usual illustrating every shade of meaning by appropriate movements of his hands), “Herzen at once began talking to me as if we had known each other for a long time. I found his personality enchanting... I have never met a more attractive man. He stands head and shoulders above all the politicians of his own and of our time.”’
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It is strange that this remarkable writer, in his lifetime a celebrated European figure, the admired friend of Michelet, Mazzini, Garibaldi and Victor Hugo, long canonised in his own country not only as a revolutionary but as one of its greatest men of letters, is, even today, not much more than a name in the west. The enjoyment to be obtained from reading his prose - for the most part still untranslated - makes this a strange and gratuitous loss.

Alexander Herzen was born in Moscow on 6 April 1812, some months before the great fire that destroyed the city during Napoleon's occupation after the battle of Borodino. His father, Ivan Alexandrovich Yakovlev, came of an ancient family distantly related to the Romanov dynasty. Like other rich and well-born members of the Russian gentry, he had spent some years abroad, and, during one of his journeys, met, and took back to Moscow with him, the daughter of a minor Württemberg official, Luiza Haag, a gentle, submissive, somewhat colourless girl, a good deal younger than himself. For some reason, perhaps owing to the disparity in their social positions, he never married her according to the rites of the church. Yakovlev was a member of the Orthodox church; she remained a Lutheran. He was a proud, independent, disdainful man, and had grown increasingly morose and misanthropic. He retired before the war of 1812, and at the time of the French invasion was living in bitter and resentful idleness in his house in Moscow. During the occupation he was recognised by Marshal Mortier, whom he had known in Paris, and agreed - in return for a safe conduct enabling him to take his family out of the devastated city - to carry a message from Napoleon to the Emperor Alexander. For this indiscretion he was sent back to his estates and only allowed to return to Moscow somewhat later.

In his large and gloomy house on the Arbat he brought up his son, Alexander, to whom he had given the surname Herzen, as if to stress the fact that he was the child of an irregular liaison, an affair of the heart. Luiza Haag was never accorded the full status of a wife, but the boy had every attention lavished upon him. He received the normal education of a young Russian nobleman of his time, that is to say, he was looked after by a host of nurses and serfs, and taught by private tutors, German and French, carefully chosen by his neurotic, irritable, devoted, suspicious father. Every care was taken to develop his gifts. He was a lively and imaginative child and absorbed knowledge easily.

1 There is evidence, although it is not conclusive, that she was married to him according to the Lutheran rite, not recognised by the Orthodox church.
and eagerly. His father loved him after his fashion: more, certainly, than his other son, also illegitimate, born ten years earlier, whom he had christened Egor (George). But he was, by the 1820s, a defeated and gloomy man, unable to communicate with his family or indeed anyone else. Shrewd, honourable, and neither unfeeling nor unjust, a 'difficult' character like old Prince Bolkonsky in Tolstoy's War and Peace, Ivan Yakovlev emerges from his son's recollections a self-lacerating, grim, shut-in, half-frozen human being, who terrorised his household with his whims and his sarcasm. He kept all doors and windows locked, the blinds permanently drawn, and, apart from a few old friends and his own brothers, saw virtually nobody. In later years his son described him as the product of 'the encounter of two such incompatible things as the eighteenth century and Russian life' — a collision of cultures that had destroyed a good many among the more sensitive members of the Russian gentry in the reigns of Catherine II and her successors.

The boy escaped with relief from his father's oppressive and frightening company to the rooms occupied by his mother and the servants; she was kind and unassuming, crushed by her husband, frightened by her foreign surroundings, and seemed to accept her almost oriental status in the household with uncomplaining resignation. As for the servants, they were serfs from the Yakovlev estates, trained to behave obsequiously to the son and probable heir of their master. Herzen himself, in later years, attributed the deepest of all his social feelings (which his friend, the critic Belinsky, diagnosed so accurately), concern for the freedom and dignity of human individuals, to the barbarous conditions that surrounded him in childhood. He was a favourite child, and much spoiled, but the facts of his irregular birth and of his mother's status were brought home to him by listening to the servants' gossip and, on at least one occasion, by overhearing a conversation about himself between his father and one of his old army comrades. The shock was, according to his own testimony, profound: it was probably one of the determining factors of his life.

He was taught Russian literature and history by a young university student, an enthusiastic follower of the new romantic movement, which, particularly in its German form, had then begun to dominate Russian intellectual life. He learned French (which his father wrote

1 A. I. Herzen, Sobranie sochinenii v tridsatii tomakh (Moscow, 1954–65), vol. 8, p. 86. Subsequent references to Herzen's works are to this edition, hereafter called Sobranie sochinenii.
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more easily than Russian) and German (which he spoke with his mother) and European, rather than Russian, history — his tutor was a French refugee who had emigrated to Russia after the French Revolution. The Frenchman did not reveal his political opinions, so Herzen tells us, until one day, when his pupil asked him why Louis XVI had been executed; to this he replied in an altered voice, 'Because he was a traitor to his country', and finding the boy responsive, threw off his reserve and spoke to him openly about the liberty and equality of men. Herzen was a lonely child, at once pampered and cramped, lively and bored; he read voraciously in his father's large library, especially French books of the Enlightenment. He was fourteen when the leaders of the Decembrist conspiracy were hanged by the Emperor Nicholas I. He later declared that this event was the critical turning-point of his life; whether this was so or not, the memory of these aristocratic martyrs in the cause of Russian constitutional liberty later became a sacred symbol to him, as to many others of his class and generation, and affected him for the rest of his days. He tells us that a few years after this, he and his intimate friend Nick Ogarev, standing on the Sparrow Hills above Moscow, took a solemn 'Hannibal' oath to avenge these fighters for the rights of man, and to dedicate their own lives to the cause for which they had died.

In due course he became a student in the University of Moscow. He was already steeped in Schiller and Goethe; he plunged into the study of German metaphysics — Kant, and particularly Schelling. And then the new French school of historians — Guizot, Augustin Thierry, and, in addition, the French Utopian socialists, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Leroux, and other social prophets smuggled into Russia in defiance of the censorship, and became a convinced and passionate radical. He and Ogarev belonged to a group of students who read forbidden books and discussed dangerous ideas; for this he was, together with most other 'unreliable' students, duly arrested and, probably because he declined to repudiate the views imputed to him, condemned to imprisonment. His father used all his influence to get the sentence mitigated, but could not save his son from being exiled to the provincial city of Vyatka, near the borders of Asia, where he was not indeed kept in prison, but put to work in the local administration.

To his astonishment, he enjoyed this new test of his powers; he displayed administrative gifts and became a far more competent and perhaps even enthusiastic official than he was later prepared to admit,

1 Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 8, p. 64: 'Parce qu'il a été traître à la patrie.'
and helped to expose the corrupt and brutal governor, whom he detested and despised. In Vyatka he became involved in a passionate love affair with a married woman, behaved badly, and suffered agonies of contrition. He read Dante, went through a religious phase, and began a long and passionate correspondence with his first cousin Natalie, who, like himself, was illegitimate, and lived as a companion in the house of a rich and despotic aunt. As a result of his father's ceaseless efforts, he was transferred to the city of Vladimir, and with the help of his young Moscow friends, arranged the elopement of Natalie. They were married in Vladimir against their relations' wishes. He was in due course allowed to return to Moscow and was appointed to a government post in Petersburg.

Whatever his ambitions at the time, he remained indomitably independent and committed to the radical cause. As a result of an indiscreet letter, opened by the censors, in which he had criticised the behaviour of the police, he was again sentenced to a period of exile, this time in Novgorod. Two years later, in 1842, he was once more permitted to return to Moscow. He was by then regarded as an established member of the new radical intelligentsia, and, indeed, as an honoured martyr in its cause, and began to write in the progressive periodicals of the time. He always dealt with the same central theme: the oppression of the individual; the humiliation and degradation of men by political and personal tyranny; the yoke of social custom, the dark ignorance, and savage, arbitrary misgovernment which maimed and destroyed human beings in the brutal and odious Russian Empire.

Like the other members of his circle, the young poet and novelist Turgenev, the critic Belinsky, the future political agitators Bakunin and Katkov (the first in the cause of revolution, the second of reaction), the literary essayist Annenkov, his own intimate friend Ogarev, Herzen, with most of his intellectual contemporaries in Russia, became immersed in Hegel's philosophy. He composed arresting historical and philosophical essays, and stories dealing with social issues; they were published, widely read and discussed, and created a considerable reputation for their author. He adopted an uncompromising position. A leading representative of the dissident Russian gentry, his socialist beliefs were caused less by a reaction against the cruelty and chaos of the laissez-faire economy of the bourgeois west - for Russia, then in its early industrial beginnings, was still a semi-feudal, socially and economically primitive society - than as a direct response to the agonising social problems in his native land: the poverty of the masses,
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serfdom and lack of individual freedom at all levels, and a lawless and brutal autocracy. In addition, there was the wounded national pride of a powerful and semi-barbarous society, whose leaders were aware of its backwardness, and suffered from mingled admiration, envy and resentment of the civilised west. The radicals believed in reform along democratic, secular, western lines; the Slavophils retreated into mystical nationalism, and preached the need for return to native 'organic' forms of life and faith that, according to them, had been all but ruined by Peter I's reforms, which had merely encouraged a sedulous and humiliating aping of the soulless and, in any case, hopelessly decadent west. Herzen was an extreme 'Westerner', but he preserved his links with the Slavophil adversaries - he regarded the best among them as romantic reactionaries, misguided nationalists, but honourable allies against the tsarist bureaucracy - and later tended systematically to minimise his differences with them, perhaps from a desire to see all Russians who were not dead to human feeling ranged in a single vast protest against the evil regime.

In 1847 Ivan Yakovlev died. He left the greater part of his fortune to Luiza Haag and her son, Alexander Herzen. With immense faith in his own powers, and burning with a desire (in Fichte's words that expressed the attitude of a generation) 'to be and do something in the world', Herzen decided to emigrate. Whether he wished or expected to remain abroad during the rest of his life is uncertain, but so it turned out to be. He left in the same year, and travelled in considerable state, accompanied by his wife, his mother, two friends, as well as servants, and, crossing Germany, towards the end of 1847 reached the coveted city of Paris, the capital of the civilised world. He plunged at once into the life of the exiled radicals and socialists of many nationalities who played a central role in the fermenting intellectual and artistic activity of that city. By 1848, when a series of revolutions broke out in country after country in Europe, he found himself with Bakunin and Proudhon on the extreme left wing of revolutionary socialism. When rumours of his activities reached the Russian government, he was ordered to return immediately. He refused. His fortune in Russia

1 The historical and sociological explanation of the origins of Russian socialism and of Herzen's part in it cannot be attempted here. It has been treated in a number of (untranslated) Russian monographs, both pre- and post-revolutionary. The most detailed and original study of this topic to date is Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855 ([Cambridge, Massachusetts], 1961) by Martin Malia.
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and that of his mother were declared confiscated. Aided by the efforts of the banker James Rothschild, who had conceived a liking for the young Russian 'baron' and was in a position to bring pressure on the Russian government, Herzen recovered the major portion of his resources, and thereafter experienced no financial want. This gave him a degree of independence not then enjoyed by many exiles, as well as the financial means for supporting other refugees and radical causes.

Shortly after his arrival in Paris, before the revolution, he contributed a series of impassioned articles to a Moscow periodical controlled by his friends, in which he gave an eloquent and violently critical account of the conditions of life and culture in Paris, and, in particular, a devastating analysis of the degradation of the French bourgeoisie, an indictment not surpassed even in the works of his contemporaries Marx and Heine. His Moscow friends for the most part received this with disfavour: they regarded his analyses as characteristic flights of a highly rhetorical fancy, irresponsible extremism, ill suited to the needs of a misgoverned and backward country compared to which the progress of the middle classes in the west, whatever its shortcomings, was a notable step forward towards universal enlightenment. These early works—the Letters from Avenue Marigny and the Italian sketches that followed—possess qualities which became characteristic of all his writings: a rapid torrent of descriptive sentences, fresh, lucid, direct, interspersed with vivid and never irrelevant digressions, variations on the same theme in many keys, puns, neologisms, quotations real and imaginary, verbal inventions, gallicisms which irritated his nationalistic Russian friends, mordant personal observations and cascades of vivid images and incomparable epigrams, which, so far from either tiring or distracting the reader by their virtuosity, add to the force and swiftness of the narrative. The effect is one of spontaneous improvisation: exhilarating conversation by an intellectually gay and exceptionally clever and honest man endowed with singular powers of observation and expression. The mood is one of ardent political radicalism imbued with a typically aristocratic (and even more typically Muscovite) contempt for everything narrow, calculating, self-satisfied, commercial, anything cautious, petty or tending towards compromise and the juste milieu, of which Louis-Philippe and Guizot are held up to view as particularly repulsive incarnations.

Herzen's outlook in these essays is a combination of optimistic
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idealism — a vision of a socially, intellectually and morally free society, the beginnings of which, like Proudhon, Marx and Louis Blanc, he saw in the French working class; faith in the radical revolution which alone could create the conditions for their liberation; but with this, a deep distrust (something that most of his allies did not share) of all general formulas as such, of the programmes and battle-cries of all the political parties, of the great, official historical goals — progress, liberty, equality, national unity, historic rights, human solidarity — principles and slogans in the name of which men had been, and doubtless would soon again be, violated and slaughtered, and their forms of life condemned and destroyed.

Like the more extreme of the left-wing disciples of Hegel, in particular like the anarchist Max Stirner, Herzen saw danger in the great magnificent abstractions the mere sound of which precipitated men into violent and meaningless slaughter — new idols, it seemed to him, on whose altars human blood was to be shed tomorrow as irrationally and uselessly as the blood of the victims of yesterday or the day before, sacrificed in honour of older divinities — church or monarchy or the feudal order or the sacred customs of the tribe, that were now discredited as obstacles to the progress of mankind.

Together with this scepticism about the meaning and value of abstract ideals as such, in contrast with the concrete, short-term, immediate goals of identifiable living individuals — specific freedoms, reward for the day's work — Herzen spoke of something even more disquieting, a haunting sense of the ever widening and unbridgeable gulf between the humane values of the relatively free and civilised elites (to which he knew himself to belong) and the actual needs, desires and tastes of the vast voiceless masses of mankind, barbarous enough in the west, wilder still in Russia or the plains of Asia beyond. The old world was crumbling visibly, and it deserved to fall. It would be destroyed by its victims — the slaves who cared nothing for the art and the science of their masters; and indeed, Herzen asks, why should they care? Was it not erected on their suffering and degradation? Young and vigorous, filled with a just hatred of the old world built on their fathers' bones, the new barbarians will raze to the ground the edifices of their oppressors, and with them all that is most sublime and beautiful in western civilisation; such a cataclysm might be not only inevitable but justified, since this civilisation, noble and valuable in the eyes of its beneficiaries, has offered nothing but suffering, a life without meaning, to the vast majority of mankind. Yet he does not pretend that this makes the
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prospect, to those who, like him, have tasted the riper fruits of
civilisation, any less dreadful.

It has often been asserted by both Russian and western critics that
Herzen arrived in Paris a passionate, even Utopian idealist, and that
it was the failure of the revolution of 1848 which brought about his
disillusionment and a new, more pessimistic realism. This is not suffi-
ciently borne out by the evidence. Even in 1847, the sceptical note,
in particular pessimism about the degree to which human beings can
be transformed, and the still deeper scepticism about whether such
changes, even if they were achieved by fearless and intelligent revolu-
tionaries or reformers, ideal images of whom floated before the eyes
of his Westernising friends in Russia, would in fact lead to a juster and
freer order, or on the contrary to the rule of new masters over new
slaves - that ominous note is sounded before the great débacle. Yet,
despite this, he remained a convinced, ultimately optimistic revolu-
tionary. The spectacle of the workers' revolt and its brutal suppression
in Italy and in France haunted Herzen all his life. His first-hand
description of the events of 1848-9, in particular of the drowning in
blood of the July revolt in Paris, is a masterpiece of 'committed' his-
torical and sociological writing. So, too, are his sketches of the per-
sonalities involved in these upheavals, and his reflections upon them.
Most of these essays and letters remain untranslated.

Herzen could not and would not return to Russia. He became a
Swiss citizen, and to the disasters of the revolution was added a personal
tragedy - the seduction of his adored wife by the most intimate of his
new friends, the radical German poet Georg Herwegh, a friend of
Marx and Wagner, the 'iron lark' of the German revolution, as Heine
half ironically called him. Herzen's progressive, somewhat Shelleyan,
views on love, friendship, equality of the sexes, and the irrationality
of bourgeois morality, were tested by this crisis and broken by it. He
went almost mad with grief and jealousy: his love, his vanity, his
deep assumptions about the basis of all human relationships, suffered
a traumatic shock from which he was never fully to recover. He did
what few others have ever done: described every detail of his own
agony, every step of his altering relationship with his wife, with Her-
wegh and Herwegh's wife, as they seemed to him in retrospect; he

1 The clearest formulation of this well-worn and almost universal thesis is
to be found in E. H. Carr's lively and well-documented treatment of Herzen
in his The Romantic Exiles (London, 1933). Malia's book (op. cit., p. 194,
note 1 above) avoids this error.
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noted every communication that occurred between them, every moment of anger, despair, affection, love, hope, hatred, contempt and agonised, suicidal self-contempt. Every tone and nuance in his own moral and psychological condition is raised to high relief against the background of his public life in the world of exiles and conspirators, French, Italian, German, Russian, Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, who move on and off the stage on which he himself is always the central, self-absorbed, tragic hero. The account is not unbalanced — there is no obvious distortion — but it is wholly egocentric.

All his life Herzen perceived the external world clearly, and in proportion, but through the medium of his own self-romanticising personality, with his own impressionable, ill-organised self at the centre of his universe. No matter how violent his torment, he retains full artistic control of the tragedy which he is living through, but also writing. It is, perhaps, this artistic egotism, which all his work exhibits, that was in part responsible both for Natalie’s suffocation and for the lack of reticence in his description of what took place: Herzen takes wholly for granted the reader’s understanding, and still more, his un divided interest in every detail of his own, the writer’s, mental and emotional life. Natalie’s letters and desperate flight to Herwegh show the measure of the increasingly destructive effect of Herzen’s self-absorbed blindness upon her frail and exalté temperament. We know comparatively little of Natalie’s relationship with Herwegh: she may well have been physically in love with him, and he with her: the inflated literary language of the letters conceals more than it reveals; what is clear is that she felt unhappy, trapped and irresistibly attracted to her lover. If Herzen sensed this, he perceived it very dimly.

He appropriated the feelings of those nearest him as he did the ideas of Hegel or George Sand: that is, he took what he needed, and poured it into the vehement torrent of his own experience. He gave generously, if fitfully, to others; he put his own life into them, but for all his deep and life-long belief in individual liberty and the absolute value of personal life and personal relationships, scarcely understood or tolerated wholly independent lives by the side of his own; his description of his agony is scrupulously and bitterly detailed and accurate, never self-sparing, eloquent but not sentimental, and remorselessly self-absorbed. It is a harrowing document. He did not publish the story in full during his lifetime, but now it forms part of his memoirs.

Self-expression — the need to say his own word — and perhaps the craving for recognition by others, by Russia, by Europe, were primary
needs of Herzen's nature. Consequently, even during this, the darkest period of his life, he continued to pour out a stream of letters and articles in various languages on political and social topics; he helped to keep Proudhon going, kept up a correspondence with Swiss radicals and Russian émigrés, read widely, made notes, conceived ideas, argued, worked unremittingly both as a publicist and as an active supporter of left-wing and revolutionary causes. After a short while Natalie returned to him in Nice, only to die in his arms. Shortly before her death, a ship on which his mother and one of his children, a deaf-mute, were travelling from Marseilles, sank in a storm. Their bodies were not found. Herzen's life had reached its lowest ebb. He left Nice and the circle of Italian, French and Polish revolutionaries to many of whom he was bound by ties of warm friendship, and with his three surviving children went to England. America was too far away and, besides, seemed to him too dull. England was no less remote from the scene of his defeats, political and personal, and yet still a part of Europe. It was then the country most hospitable to political refugees, civilised, tolerant of eccentricities or indifferent to them, proud of its civil liberties and its sympathy with the victims of foreign oppression. He arrived in London in 1851.

He and his children wandered from home to home in London and its suburbs, and there, after the death of Nicholas I had made it possible for him to leave Russia, his most intimate friend, Nikolay Ogarev, joined them. Together they set up a printing press, and began to publish a periodical in Russian called The Pole Star - the first organ wholly dedicated to uncompromising agitation against the imperial Russian regime. The earliest chapters of My Past and Thoughts appeared in its pages. The memory of the terrible years 1848–51 obsessed Herzen's thoughts and poisoned his blood stream: it became an inescapable psychological necessity for him to seek relief by setting down this bitter history. This was the first section of his memoirs to be written. It was an opiate against the appalling loneliness of a life lived among uninterested strangers1 while political reaction seemed to envelop the

1 Herzen had no close English friends, although he had associates, allies and admirers. One of these, the radical journalist W. J. Linton, to whose English Republic Herzen had contributed articles, described him as 'short of stature, stoutly built, in his last days inclined to corpulence, with a grand head, long chestnut hair and beard, small, luminous eyes, and rather ruddy complexion. Suave in his manner, courteous, but with an intense power of irony, witty ... clear, concise, and impressive, he was a subtle and profound
entire world, leaving no room for hope. Insensibly he was drawn into
the past. He moved further and further into it and found it a source
of liberty and strength.

This is how the book which he conceived on the analogy of *David
Copperfield* came to be composed. He began to write it in the last
months of 1852. He wrote by fits and starts. The first three parts were
probably finished by the end of 1853. In 1854 a selection which he
called *Prison and Exile* — a title perhaps inspired by Silvio Pellico's
celebrated *Le mie prigioni* — was published in English. It was an imme-
diate success; encouraged by this, he continued. By the spring of 1855,
the first four parts of the work were completed; they were all published
by 1857. He revised part IV, added new chapters to it and composed
part V; he completed the bulk of part VI by 1858. The sections dealing
with his intimate life — his love and the early years of his marriage
— were composed in 1857: he could not bring himself to touch upon
them until then. This was followed by an interval of seven years.
Independent essays such as those on Robert Owen, the actor Shcher-
kin, the painter Ivanov, Garibaldi (*Camicia rossa*), were published in
London between 1860 and 1864; but these, although usually included
in the memoirs, were not intended for them. The first complete
edition of the first four parts appeared in 1861. The final sections —
part VIII and almost the whole of part VII — were written, in that
order, in 1865—7.

Herzen deliberately left some sections unpublished: the most
intimate details of his personal tragedy appeared posthumously — only
a part of the chapter entitled 'Oceano nox' was printed in his lifetime.

... Hospitable, and taking pleasure in society ... a good conversa-
tionalist, with a frank and pleasant manner' (Memories (London,
1893), pp. 146—7). And in his *European Republicans* (London, 1893) he said that
the Spanish radical Emilio Castelar declared that Herzen, with his fair hair
and beard, looked like a Goth, but possessed the warmth, vivacity, verve,
'inimitable grace' and 'marvellous variety' of a southerner (pp. 275—6).

Turgenev and Herzen were the first Russians to move freely in European
society. The impression that they made did a good deal, though perhaps not
enough, to dispel the myth of the dark 'Slav soul', which took a long time to
die; perhaps it is not altogether dead yet.

1 *'Copperfield' is Dickens's *Past and Thoughts,*' he said in one of his letters
in the early 60s; humility was not among his virtues. Sobranie sochinenii,
vol. 27, p. 394 (letter of 16 December 1863).
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He omitted also the story of his affairs with Medvedeva in Vyatka and with the serf girl Katerina in Moscow — his confession of them to Natalie cast the first shadow over their relationship, a shadow that never lifted; he could not bear to see it in print while he lived. He suppressed, too, a chapter on 'The German Emigrants' which contains his unflattering comments on Marx and his followers, and some characteristically entertaining and ironical sketches of some of his old friends among the Russian radicals. He genuinely detested the practice of washing the revolutionaries' dirty linen in public, and made it clear that he did not intend to make fun of allies for the entertainment of the common enemy. The first authoritative edition of the memoirs was compiled by Mikhail Lemke in the first complete edition of Herzen's works, which was begun before, and completed some years after, the Russian Revolution of 1917. It has since been revised in successive Soviet editions. The fullest version is that published in the exhaustive edition of Herzen's works, a handsome monument of Soviet scholarship.1

The memoirs formed a vivid and broken background accompaniment to Herzen's central activity: revolutionary journalism, to which he dedicated his life. The bulk of it is contained in the most celebrated of all Russian periodicals published abroad — The Bell (Kolokol) — edited by Herzen and Ogarev in London and then in Geneva from 1857 until 1867, with the motto (taken from Schiller) 'Vivos voco'. The Bell had an immense success. It was the first systematic instrument of revolutionary propaganda directed against the Russian autocracy, written with knowledge, sincerity and mordant eloquence; it gathered round itself all that was uncowed not only in Russia and the Russian colonies abroad, but also among Poles and other oppressed nationalities. It began to penetrate into Russia by secret routes and was regularly read by high officials of state, including, it was rumoured, the Emperor himself. Herzen used the copious information that reached him in clandestine letters and personal messages, describing various misdeeds of the Russian bureaucracy, to expose specific scandals — cases of bribery, miscarriage of justice, tyranny and dishonesty by officials and influential persons. The Bell named names, offered documentary evidence, asked awkward questions and exposed hideous aspects of Russian life.

Russian travellers visited London in order to meet the mysterious

1 op. cit. (p. 191, note 1 above).
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leader of the mounting opposition to the Tsar. Generals, high officials and other loyal subjects of the Empire were among the many visitors who thronged to see him, some out of curiosity, others to shake his hand, to express sympathy or admiration. He reached the peak of his fame, both political and literary, after the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War and the death of Nicholas I. The open appeal by Herzen to the new Emperor1 to free the serfs and initiate bold and radical reforms 'from above', and, after the first concrete steps towards this had been taken in 1858, his paean of praise to Alexander II,2 ending 'Thou hast conquered, O Galilean', created the illusion on both sides of the Russian frontier that a new liberal era was at last dawning, in which a degree of understanding — perhaps of actual cooperation — could be achieved between tsardom and its opponents. This state of mind did not last long. But Herzen's credit stood very high — higher than that of any other Russian in the west: in the late 50s and early 60s, he was the acknowledged leader of all that was generous, enlightened, civilised, humane in Russia.

More than Bakunin and even Turgenev, whose novels formed a central source of knowledge about Russia in the west, Herzen counteracted the legend, ingrained in the minds of progressive Europeans (of whom Michelet was perhaps the most representative), that Russia consisted of nothing save only the government jackboot on the one hand, and the dark, silent, sullen mass of brutalised peasants on the other — an image that was the by-product of the widespread sympathy for the principal victim of Russian despotism, the martyred nation, Poland. Some among the Polish exiles spontaneously conceded this service to the truth on Herzen's part, if only because he was one of the rare Russians who genuinely liked and admired individual Poles, worked in close sympathy with them, and identified the cause of Russian liberation with that of all her oppressed subject nationalities. It was, indeed, this unswerving avoidance of chauvinism that was among the principal causes of the ultimate collapse of The Bell and of Herzen's own political undoing.

After Russia, Herzen's deepest love was for Italy and the Italians. The closest ties bound him to the Italian exiles Mazzini, Garibaldi, Saffi and Orsini. Although he supported every liberal beginning in

1 'Pism'no k Imperatoru Aleksandru vtorому', Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 12, pp. 272-4.
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France, his attitude towards her was more ambiguous. For this there were many reasons. Like Tocqueville (whom he personally disliked), he had a distaste for all that was centralised, bureaucratic, hierarchical, subject to rigid forms or rules; France was to him the incarnation of order, discipline, the worship of the state, of unity, and of despotic, abstract formulas that flattened all things to the same rule and pattern — something that had a family resemblance to the great slave states — Prussia, Austria, Russia; with this he constantly contrasts the decentralised, uncrushed, untidy, 'truly democratic' Italians, whom he believed to possess a deep affinity with the free Russian spirit embodied in the peasant commune with its sense of natural justice and human worth. To this ideal even England seemed to him to be far less hostile than legalistic, calculating France: in such moods he comes close to his romantic Slavophil opponents. Moreover, he could not forget the betrayal of the revolution in Paris by the bourgeois parties in 1848, the execution of the workers, the suppression of the Roman revolution by the troops of the French Republic, the vanity, weakness and rhetoric of the French radical politicians — Lamartine, Marrast, Ledru-Rollin, Félix Pyat.

His sketches of the lives and behaviour of leading French exiles in England are masterpieces of amused, half-sympathetic, half-contemptuous description of the grotesque and futile aspects of every political emigration condemned to sterility, intrigue and a constant flow of self-justifying eloquence before a foreign audience too remote or bored to listen. Yet he thought well of individual members of it: he had for a time been a close ally of Proudhon, and despite their differences he continued to respect him; he regarded Louis Blanc as an honest and fearless democrat, he was on good terms with Victor Hugo, he liked and admired Michelet. In later years he visited at least one Paris political salon — admittedly, it was that of a Pole — with evident enjoyment: the Goncourts met him there and left a vivid description in their journal of his appearance and his conversation.1

1 See entry in the Journal under 8 February 1865 — 'Dinner at Charles Edmond's [Chojecki]... A Socratic mask with the warm and transparent flesh of a Rubens portrait, a red mark between the eyebrows as from a branding iron, greying beard and hair.

As he talks there is a constant ironical chuckle which rises and falls in his throat. His voice is soft, melancholy, musical, without any of the harsh sonority one might have expected from his huge neck: the ideas are fine, delicate, pungent, at times subtle, always definite, illuminated by words that
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Although he was half German himself, or perhaps because of it, he felt, like his friend Bakunin, a strong aversion from what he regarded as the incurable philistinism of the Germans, and what seemed to him a peculiarly unattractive combination of craving for blind authority with a tendency to squalid internecine recriminations in public, more pronounced than among other émigrés. Perhaps his hatred of Herwegh, whom he knew to be a friend both of Marx and of Wagner, as well as Marx’s onslaughts on Karl Vogt, the Swiss naturalist to whom Herzen was devoted, played some part in this. At least three of his most intimate friends were pure Germans. Goethe and Schiller meant more to him than any Russian writers. Yet there is something genuinely venomous in his account of the German exiles, quite different from the high-spirited sense of comedy with which he describes the idiosyncrasies of the other foreign colonies gathered in the 50s and 60s in London—a city, if we are to believe Herzen, equally unconcerned with their absurdities and their martyrdoms.

As for his hosts, the English, they seldom appear in his pages. Herzen had met Mill, Carlyle and Owen. His first night in England was spent with English hosts. He was on reasonably good terms with one or two editors of radical papers (some of whom, like Linton and Cowen, helped him to propagate his views, and to preserve contact with revolutionaries on the continent as well as with clandestine traffic of propaganda to Russia), and several radically inclined Members of

take time to arrive, but which always possess the felicitous quality of French as it is spoken by a civilised and witty foreigner.

‘He speaks of Bakunin, of his eleven months in prison, chained to a wall, of his escape from Siberia by the Amur River, of his return by way of California, of his arrival in London, where, after a stormy, moist embrace, his first words [to Herzen] were “Can one get oysters here?” ’

Herzen delighted the Goncourt, with stories about the Emperor Nicholas walking in the night in his empty palace, after the fall of Eupatoria during the Crimean War, with the heavy, unearthly steps of the stone statue of the Commander in Don Juan. This was followed by anecdotes about English habits and manners—‘a country which he loves as the land of liberty’—to illustrate its absurd, class-conscious, unyielding traditionalism, particularly noticeable in the relations of masters and servants. The Goncourt quote a characteristic epigram made by Herzen to illustrate the difference between the French and English characters. They faithfully report the story of how James Rothschild managed to save Herzen’s property in Russia.
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Parliament, including minor ministers. In general, however, he seems to have had even less contact with Englishmen than his contemporary and fellow exile, Karl Marx. He admired England. He admired her constitution; the wild and tangled wood of her unwritten laws and customs brought the full resources of his romantic imagination into play. The entertaining passages of My Past and Thoughts in which he compares the French and the English, or the English and the Germans, display acute and amused insight into the national characteristics of the English. But he could not altogether like them: they remained for him too insular, too indifferent, too unimaginative, too remote from the moral, social and aesthetic issues which lay closest to his own heart, too materialistic and self-satisfied. His judgements about them, always intelligent and sometimes penetrating, are distant and tend to be conventional. A description of the trial in London of a French radical who had killed a political opponent in a duel in Windsor Great Park is wonderfully executed, but remains a piece of genre-painting, a gay and brilliant caricature. The French, the Swiss, the Italians, even the Germans, certainly the Poles, are closer to him. He cannot establish any genuine personal relationship with the English. When he thinks of mankind he does not think of them.

Apart from his central preoccupations, he devoted himself to the education of his children, which he entrusted in part to an idealistic German lady, Malwida von Meysenbug, afterwards a friend of Nietzsche and Romain Rolland. His personal life was intertwined with that of his intimate friend Ogarev, and of Ogarev’s wife, who became his mistress; in spite of this the mutual devotion of the two friends remained unaltered — the memoirs reveal little of the curious emotional consequences of this relationship.

For the rest, he lived the life of an affluent, well-born man of letters, a member of the Russian, and more specifically Moscow, gentry, uprooted from his native soil, unable to achieve a settled existence or even the semblance of inward or outward peace, a life filled with occasional moments of hope and even exultation, followed by long periods of misery, corrosive self-criticism, and most of all overwhelming, omnivorous, bitter nostalgia. It may be this, as much as objective reasons, that caused him to idealise the Russian peasant, and to dream that the answer to the central ‘social’ question of his time — that of growing inequality, exploitation, dehumanisation of both the oppressor and the oppressed — lay in the preservation of the Russian peasant commune. He perceived in it the seeds of the development of a
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non-industrial, semi-anarchist socialism. Only such a solution, plainly influenced by the views of Fourier, Proudhon and George Sand, seemed to him free from the crushing, barrack-room discipline demanded by western communists from Cabet to Marx; and from the equally suffocating, and, it seemed to him, far more vulgar and philistine ideals contained in moderate, half-socialist doctrines, with their faith in the progressive role of developing industrialism preached by the forerunners of social democracy in Germany and France and of the Fabians in England. At times he modified his view: towards the end of his life he began to recognise the historical significance of the organised urban workers. But all in all he remained faithful to his belief in the Russian peasant commune as an embryonic form of a life in which the quest for individual freedom was reconciled with the need for collective activity and responsibility. He retained to the end a romantic vision of the inevitable coming of a new, just, all-transforming social order.

Herzen is neither consistent nor systematic. His style during his middle years has lost the confident touch of his youth, and conveys the consuming nostalgia that never leaves him. He is obsessed by a sense of blind accident, although his faith in the values of life remains unshaken. Almost all traces of Hegelian influence are gone. 'The absurdity of facts offends us . . . it is as though someone had promised that everything in the world will be exquisitely beautiful, just and harmonious. We have marvelled enough at the deep abstract wisdom of nature and history; it is time to realise that nature and history are full of the accidental and senseless, of muddle and bungling.' This is highly characteristic of his mood in the 60s; and it is no accident that his exposition is not ordered, but is a succession of fragments, episodes, isolated vignettes, a mingling of Dichtung and Wahrheit, facts and poetic licence.

His moods alternate sharply. Sometimes he believes in the need for a great, cleansing, revolutionary storm, even were it to take the form of a barbarian invasion likely to destroy all the values that he himself holds dear. At other times he reproaches his old friend Bakunin, who joined him in London after escaping from his Russian prisons, for wanting to make the revolution too soon; for not understanding that dwellings for free men cannot be constructed out of the stones of a prison; that the average European of the nineteenth century is too deeply marked by the slavery of the old order to be capable of conceiving true freedom, that it is not the liberated slaves who will build
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the new order, but new men brought up in liberty. History has her
own tempo. Patience and gradualism — not the haste and violence of a
Peter the Great — can alone bring about a permanent transformation.
At such moments he wonders whether the future belongs to the free,
anarchic peasant, or to the bold and ruthless planner; perhaps it is the
industrial worker who is to be the heir to the new, unavoidable, collec-
tivist economic order. Then again he returns to his early moods of
disillusionment and wonders whether men in general really desire
freedom: perhaps only a few do so in each generation, while most
human beings only want good government, no matter at whose hands;
and he anticipates Émile Faguet’s bitter epigram about Rousseau’s
dictum that men who are born free are nevertheless everywhere in
chains, ‘it would be equally reasonable to say that sheep are born
carnivorous, and everywhere nibble grass’. Herzen uses a similar
reductio ad absurdum. Men desire freedom no more than fish desire
to fly. The fact that a few flying fish exist does not demonstrate that
fish in general were created to fly, or are not fundamentally quite
content to stay below the surface of the water, for ever away from the
sun and the light. Then he returns to his earlier optimism and the
thought that somewhere—in Russia—there lives the unbroken human
being, the peasant with his faculties intact, untainted by the
corruption and sophistication of the west.

But this Rousseau-inspired faith, as he grows older, grows less
secure. His sense of reality is too strong. For all his efforts, and the
efforts of his socialist friends, he cannot deceive himself entirely. He
oscillates between pessimism and optimism, scepticism and suspicion
of his own scepticism, and is kept morally alive only by his hatred of
all injustice, all arbitrariness, all mediocrity as such—in particular by
his inability to compromise in any degree with either the brutality of
reactionaries or the hypocrisy of bourgeois liberals. He is preserved
by this, buoyed up by his belief that such evils will destroy themselves, and
by his love for his children and his devoted friends, and his unquenchable
delight in the variety of life and the comedy of human character.

On the whole, he grew more pessimistic. He began with an ideal
vision of human life, and largely ignored the chasm which divided it
from the present—which the Russia of Nicholas, or the corrupt
constitutionalism in the west. In his youth he glorified Jacobin radicalism

1 This is the thesis in which orthodox Soviet scholars claim to discern a
belated approach to those of Marx.

2 *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, p. 94.
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and condemned its opponents in Russia – blind conservatism, Slavophil nostalgia, the cautious gradualism of his friends Granovsky and Turgenev, as well as Hegelian appeals to patience and rational conformity to the inescapable rhythms of history, which seemed to him designed to ensure the triumph of the new bourgeois class. His attitude, before he went abroad, was boldly optimistic. There followed, not indeed a change of view, but a cooling-off, a tendency to a more sober and critical outlook. All genuine change, he began to think in 1847, is necessarily slow; the power of tradition (which he at once mocks at and admires in England) is very great; men are less malleable than was believed in the eighteenth century, nor do they truly seek liberty, only security and contentment; communism is but tsarism stood on its head, the replacement of one yoke by another; the ideals and watchwords of politics turn out, on examination, to be empty formulas in the name of which devout fanatics happily slaughter hecatombs of their fellows. He no longer feels certain that the gap between the enlightened élite and the masses can ever, in principle, be bridged (this becomes an obsessive refrain in later Russian thought), since the awakened people may, for unalterable psychological or sociological reasons, despise and reject the gifts of a civilisation which will never mean enough to them. But if all this is even in small part true, is radical transformation either practicable or desirable? From this follows Herzen's growing sense of obstacles that may be insurmountable, limits that may be impassable, his empiricism, scepticism, the latent pessimism and despair of the middle 60s.

This is the attitude which some Soviet scholars interpret as the beginning of an approach on his part towards a quasi-Marxist recognition of the inexorable laws of social development – in particular the inevitability of industrialism, above all of the central role to be played by the proletariat. This is not how Herzen's left-wing Russian critics interpreted his views in his lifetime, or for the half century that followed. To them, rightly or wrongly, these doctrines seemed symptomatic of conservatism and betrayal. For in the 50s and 60s, a new generation of radicals grew up in Russia, then a backward country in the painful process of the earliest, most rudimentary beginnings of slow, sporadic, inefficient industrialisation. These were men of mixed social origins, filled with contempt for the feeble liberal compromises of 1848, with no illusions about the prospects of freedom in the west, determined on more ruthless methods; accepting as true only what the sciences can prove, prepared to be hard and, if need be, unscrupulous
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and cruel, in order to break the power of their equally ruthless oppres-
sors; bitterly hostile to the aestheticism, the devotion to civilised values,
of the 'soft' generation of the 40s.

Herzen realised that the criticism and abuse showered upon him as
an obsolete aristocratic dilettante by these 'nihilists' (as they came to
be called after Turgenev's novel Fathers and Children, in which this
conflict is vividly presented for the first time) was not altogether
different from the disdain that he had himself felt in his own youth for
the elegant and ineffective reformers of Alexander I's reign; but this
did not make his position easier to bear. What was ill-received by the
tough-minded revolutionaries pleased Tolstoy, who said more than
once that the censorship of Herzen's works in Russia was a charac-
teristic blunder on the part of the government; the government, in its
anxiety to stop young men from marching towards the revolutionary
morass, seized them and swept them off to Siberia or prison long before
they were even in sight of it, while they were still on the broad high-
way; Herzen had trodden this very path, he had seen the chasm, and
warned against it, particularly in his Letters to an Old Comrade.

Nothing, Tolstoy argued, would have proved a better antidote to the
'revolutionary nihilism' which Tolstoy condemned than Herzen's
brilliant analyses. 'Our Russian life would not have been the same
during the last twenty years if [Herzen] had not been kept from the
younger generation.' Suppression of his books, Tolstoy went on, was
both a criminal, and from the point of view of those who did not
desire a violent revolution, an idiotic policy.

At other times, Tolstoy was less generous. In 1860, six months
before they met, he had been reading Herzen's writings with mingled
admiration and irritation: 'Herzen is a man of scattered intellect, and
morbid amour propre,' he wrote in his diary, 'but his breadth, ability,
goodness, elegance of mind are Russian.' From time to time various
correspondents record the fact that Tolstoy read Herzen, at times
aloud to his family, with the greatest admiration. In 1896, during one
of his angriest, most anti-rationalist moods, he said, 'In spite of his
enormous talent, what did he say that was new or useful?'

1 Letter to N. N. Gay senior of 13 February 1888. See also letter to
N. G. Chertkov of 9 February 1888.
2 Diary entry for 4 August 1860.
3 Diary entry for 17 May 1896. But on 12 October 1905 he writes in his
diary that he is reading Herzen's From the Other Shore, and says 'Our
intelligentsia has sunk so low that . . . it cannot understand him.'
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the argument that the generation of the 40s could not say what it wanted to say because of the rigid Russian censorship, Herzen wrote in perfect freedom in Paris and yet 'managed to say nothing useful'.

What irritated Tolstoy most was Herzen's socialism. In a letter to his aunt, Alexandra Tolstoy, he says that he despises Herzen's proclamations, which the Russian police suspect him of harbouring.

The fact that he believed in politics as a weapon was sufficient to condemn him in Tolstoy's eyes. From 1862 onwards, Tolstoy had declared his hostility to faith in liberal reform and improvement of human life by legal or institutional change. Herzen fell under this general ban. Moreover, Tolstoy seems to have felt a certain lack of personal sympathy for Herzen and his public position - even a kind of jealousy. When, in moments of acute discouragement and irritation, Tolstoy spoke (perhaps not very seriously) of leaving Russia for ever, he would say that whatever he did, he would not join Herzen or march under his banner: 'he goes his way, I shall go mine'.

He seriously underrated Herzen's revolutionary temperament and instincts. However sceptical Herzen may have been of specific revolutionary doctrines or plans in Russia - and no one was more so - he believed to the end of his life in the moral and social need and the inevitability, sooner or later, of a revolution in Russia - a violent transformation followed by a just, that is a socialist, order. He did not, it is true, close his eyes to the possibility, even the probability, that the great rebellion would extinguish values to which he was himself dedicated - in particular, the freedoms without which he and others like him could not breathe. Nevertheless, he recognised not only the inevitability but the historic justice of the coming cataclysm. His moral tastes, his respect for human values, his entire style of life, divided him from the tough-minded younger radicals of the 60s, but he did not, despite all his distrust of political fanaticism, whether on the right or on the left, turn into a cautious, reformist liberal constitutionalist. Even in his gradualist phase he remained an agitator, an egalitarian and a socialist to the end. It is this in him that both the Russian populists and the Russian Marxists - both Mikhailovsky and Lenin - recognised and saluted.

It was not prudence or moderation that led him to his unwavering support of Poland in her insurrection against Russia in 1863. The wave of passionate Russian nationalism which accompanied its sup-

1 Diary entry for 17 May 1896.  
2 Letter of 22-3 (?July 1862.  
3 Letter to his aunt, Countess A. A. Tolstaya, 7 August 1862.
pression robbed him of sympathy even among Russian liberals. The Bell declined in circulation. The new, ‘hard’ revolutionaries needed his money, but made it plain that they looked upon him as a liberal dinosaur, the preacher of antiquated humanistic views, useless in the violent social struggle to come. He left London in the late 60s and attempted to produce a French edition of The Bell in Geneva. When that too failed, he visited his friends in Florence, returning to Paris early in 1870, before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. There he died of pleurisy, broken both morally and physically, but not disillusioned; still writing with concentrated intelligence and force. His body was taken to Nice, where he is buried beside his wife. A life-size statue still marks his grave.

Herzen’s ideas have long since entered into the general texture of Russian political thought – liberals and radicals, populists and anarchists, socialists and communists, have all claimed him as an ancestor. But what survives today of all that unceasing and feverish activity, even in his native country, is not a system or a doctrine but a handful of essays, some remarkable letters, and the extraordinary amalgam of memory, observation, moral passion, psychological analysis and political description, wedded to a major literary talent, which has immortalised his name. What remains is, above all, a passionate and inextinguishable temperament and a sense of the movement of nature and of its unpredictable possibilities, which he felt with an intensity which not even his uniquely rich and flexible prose could fully express.

He believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were none the less binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulas, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies. He was fully conscious of what he
believed. He had obtained this knowledge at the cost of painful, and, at times, unintended, self-analysis, and he described what he saw in language of exceptional vitality, precision and poetry. His purely personal credo remained unaltered from his earliest days: 'Art, and the summer lightning of individual happiness: these are the only real goods we have,' he declared in a self-revealing passage of the kind that so deeply shocked the stern young Russian revolutionaries in the 60s. Yet even they and their descendants did not and do not reject his artistic and intellectual achievement.

Herzen was not, and had no desire to be, an impartial observer. No less than the poets and the novelists of his nation, he created a style, an outlook, and, in the words of Gorky's tribute to him, 'an entire province, a country astonishingly rich in ideas', where everything is immediately recognisable as being his and his alone, a country into which he transplants all that he touches, in which things, sensations, feelings, persons, ideas, private and public events, institutions, entire cultures, are given shape and life by his powerful and coherent historical imagination, and have stood up against the forces of decay in the solid world which his memory, his intelligence and his artistic genius recovered and reconstructed. *My Past and Thoughts* is the Noah's ark in which he saved himself, and not himself alone, from the destructive flood in which many idealistic radicals of the 40s were drowned. Genuine art survives and transcends its immediate purpose. The structure that Herzen built in the first place, perhaps, for his own personal salvation, built out of material provided by his own predicament - out of exile, solitude, despair - survives intact. Written abroad, concerned largely with European issues and figures, these reminiscences are a great permanent monument to the civilised, sensitive, morally preoccupied and gifted Russian society to which Herzen belonged; their vitality and fascination have not declined in the hundred years and more that have passed since the first chapters saw the light.