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# ALEXANDER HERZEN

## ENDS AND BEGINNINGS



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ALEXANDER HERZEN

*Ends and Beginnings*

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*Selected and edited with an introduction by*

AILEEN KELLY

*from*

*My Past and Thoughts*

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HUMPHREY HIGGENS

Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1985

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town

Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in

Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

Introduction and selection © Aileen Kelly 1985

Revised translation © Chatto & Windus Ltd 1985

First published 1968 by Chatto & Windus

First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1985

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Herzen, A. I.

Ends and beginnings.—(The World's classics)

1. Herzen, A. I. 2. Intellectuals—Russia

—Biography

I. Title II. Kelly, Aileen III. Higgins,  
Humphrey IV. Byloe i dumy. Part 3. English

Selections

891.78'308 DK209.6.H4

ISBN 0-19-281604-7

Set by Grove Graphics

Printed in Great Britain by

Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd

Aylesbury, Bucks

## INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDER HERZEN was once described, in an essay by Isaiah Berlin, as one of the three moral preachers of genius born on Russian soil. Like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he placed his extraordinary creative powers in the service of an ideal of how men should live. But – and here he stands alone among Russia's great writers – there was no conflict in him between the artist and the preacher. On the contrary, his memoirs, the work which puts him in the first rank of Russian writers, owe much of their quality as art, as well as social commentary, to the ideal of freedom which pervades them. This ideal was the basis of an original and far-sighted political philosophy, whose relevance to the needs and problems of our own time is in itself sufficient justification for a further edition of *My Past and Thoughts* in English translation.

The problems faced by editors of Herzen's memoirs are compounded by the fact that the author left no authoritative final text of the work. Herzen began writing his memoirs in 1852, and over the next sixteen years published fragments, mainly in the periodicals which he edited in London, *The Pole Star* and *The Bell*. In the 1860s he embarked on a complete edition of the work. Only three volumes were published before his death in 1870, and it was another fifty years before the first complete version (its structure based on indications in Herzen's letters and papers) was published in M. K. Lemke's edition of Herzen's collected works (Moscow/Petrograd 1918–19). The first complete English translation of the memoirs, edited by Humphrey Higgs (4 vols, Chatto & Windus, 1968), was based on Constance Garnett's translation (Chatto & Windus, 1922–7). An abridged version, in one volume, of Higgs' edition, edited by Dwight Macdonald, appeared in 1973. In 1980 a translation by J. Duff of the first two parts of the memoirs was reprinted, together with an introduction by Isaiah Berlin, in the *World's Classics* series of the Oxford University Press, under the title *Childhood, Youth and Exile*. The present volume (its sequel) is an abridgement of the remaining parts, based on the Higgs edition.

As he confessed to a friend, Herzen had had deep hesitations over the form his memoirs should take: a political *apologia pro*

*vita sua*, or a discursive account after the model of Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. He finally opted for the second: hence the work's dazzling multiplicity of genres, styles and moods: comedy, satire, sober analysis, lyrical and philosophical digressions, and a subject-matter ranging in scale from the major upheavals of nineteenth-century Europe (the 1848 revolutions, the rise of the European bourgeoisie and the decay of the Russian serf-owning aristocracy) to the most intimate personal emotions and tragedies. The work also includes a number of polemical articles, responses to the crises of the age, which were first published in *The Bell*.

The present selection from the memoirs, unlike Macdonald's, does not attempt to convey its multidimensional nature.<sup>1</sup> One strand alone has been selected: the strictly autobiographical. Herzen's account of his life, both public and private, though sometimes remarkably frank, is very incomplete. But the frequent gaps and distortions in chronology do nothing to diminish its power as an account of a journey of the intellect and spirit. Though structurally interwoven with the multiple other strands, it can nevertheless stand alone. Like Tolstoy's (much shorter) *Confession*, it owes its dramatic power and unity to one central theme: the savagely destructive questioning, one by one, of contemporary faiths and authorities in the search for an ideal of self-fulfilment which would withstand this annihilating critique. But while the *Confession* is a linear progression to triumphant certainty, *My Past and Thoughts* is a much more complex account of experience and introspection. One of the generation of 'superfluous men' immortalised by Turgenev (Herzen himself wrote a novel on the subject, of which he was the thinly-disguised hero), he possessed to a very high degree the capacity for introspection and subtle dissection of motive characteristic of the type; and he acquired very early a profound scepticism about all political and moral formulae and systems which claimed to accommodate and satisfy men's complex and contradictory impulses. In this sense Herzen was far closer to Dostoevsky than to Tolstoy. The portrait of an individual and a generation presented in this volume sheds much light on the confusion of ideals and the unacknowledged motives behind the political disasters whose seeds were sown in the middle of the nineteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> See p. xvi for the marking of the omissions.

The first two parts of the memoirs, contained in *Childhood, Youth and Exile*, relate the origins of Herzen's political protest in the stifling atmosphere of Nicholas I's Russia. We see the rôle of European romanticism in shaping an ideal of the autonomous and many-sided personality to which the educated élite of Herzen's generation aspired and which, vague though it was, aroused the Russian government's suspicions: the volume ends with Herzen's arrest and imprisonment on a nebulous charge, followed by three years of exile in the remote provincial town of Vyatka.

The present volume opens with the date of 1838, the year of Herzen's marriage and of his transfer (for the remaining eighteen months of his exile) to a town within reach of his Moscow friends. Among the intelligentsia of the capital, the inward-looking romanticism of the previous decade had been replaced by a fascination with the historiosophical schemas of German Idealism, and the burning question of Russia's historical destiny was beginning to separate Russia's intellectual élite into the camps of Slavophiles and Westernisers. Back at the centre of Russian intellectual life (he was pardoned in 1839, although another spell of banishment followed in 1841), Herzen entered into polemics with both camps, in the course of which he elaborated that concept of freedom on which he would build his political philosophy, and which has been brilliantly analysed in the essay by Isaiah Berlin which introduces *Childhood, Youth and Exile*. It was based on the premiss (which owed much to the influence of the Left Hegelians) that the chief obstacle to freedom was man's eternal tendency to immolate himself and others in the name of doctrines, teleologies and moral and political absolutes which were the abstract constructions of his own mind. In his age's obsession with the high-sounding concepts of progress, humanity and the common good, Herzen saw the seeds of new forms of tyranny: his own political ideal was a form of anarchism modelled on the structure of the Russian peasant commune in which social relations would be regulated by the need to maintain a dynamic balance between individual and general goals.

Herzen's onslaughts on political doctrinairism and philosophies of progress were to alienate him from all the major political groupings of his time in Russia and (after his emigration in 1847) in Europe; the autobiographical narrative in *My Past and*

*Thoughts* is increasingly punctuated by polemical digressions and ironical sketches of the organisational confusion and ideological disarray of progressive parties and their leaders after the failure of the 1848 revolution. This material has been excluded from the present volume, with the exception of portraits of members of the Russian intelligentsia which are clearly pertinent to the autobiographical narrative.

Herzen believed that the particular historical experience of his generation contained lessons of great relevance to the problems which Europe was facing. The year before he began his memoirs he published a letter to the French historian Michelet, entitled *The Russian People and Socialism*, in which he declared that the alienation suffered by Russia's 'superfluous men' had given them an enormous compensating advantage in the battle to establish new foundations for human societies. Even the most progressive Europeans, he argued, were conservatives in their deepest being, doomed by their attachment to their cultural heritage to repeat old mistakes in new ways. The Russian intelligentsia had no such ties. Peter the Great's revolution had broken their links with their national traditions, but had replaced them with nothing that could command their allegiance. Nor, as the foundlings of the European family, could they share its commitment to values and institutions which could not be justified by rational argument. Having absorbed the finest fruits of European culture (the socialist vision of a just society), they had no scruples or commitments to hold them back from spelling out, with ruthless logic, all the consequences that followed from them. Herzen's generation of thinking Russians, he concluded, were, intellectually at least, the most emancipated creatures on earth: 'We are free agents, because we are self-made.' With their fearless and clear-sighted consistency they could do much to ensure that the new social order to which all progressive Europeans were striving would not enshrine old forms of oppression under new names.

The bravado of this self-image was a challenge to the view then current among European radicals, that Russia was a barbarous land where even the educated elite were the despot's willing slaves. (The flamboyant Slav nationalism preached by Bakunin in 1848 had done much to foster the suspicions of Marxists in particular that Russian revolutionaries were the conscious or unconscious tools of Tsarist imperialism.) When, in 1852, Herzen

began his memoirs, his desire to vindicate himself and his countrymen had been intensified by a scandal which reverberated throughout the European political emigration: his quarrel with the German radical poet Georg Herwegh, following Herwegh's affair with Herzen's wife and her tragic death. The account of the affair which Herwegh spread among the emigrés cast a shadow on Herzen's personal and political honour. As he wrote to Proudhon, it brought into question the integrity of his wife and himself as representatives of the society of the future; and he had hopes (which were unfulfilled) that a 'court of honour' composed of leading revolutionaries would be set up to judge his and Herwegh's conduct.

Although the long account of the affair contained in this volume was never published during Herzen's lifetime (it first appeared in Lemke's edition of his works), there is no doubt as to the importance that Herzen attached to it. As his Soviet editors suggest, had it not been for his desire to justify his conduct to posterity, the long-contemplated project of his memoirs, to which he proceeded in the same year, might never have been fulfilled. Unfortunately, Herzen's analysis of character and motivation in the chapters concerned with this drama does not show him at his best: even those who have not read E. H. Carr's account of the affair in *The Romantic Exiles* will find their credulity strained by a version of events in which the *beau rôle* is reserved for the author, who spares no effort to convince the reader of his enemy's total moral worthlessness. But the more he blackens Herwegh, the more evasive he is forced to be about the awkward fact that the man whom he represents as a villain and a coward, the object of ridicule in radical circles, was for over two years his only intimate friend in that milieu. However, if one takes account of the circumstances in which it was written, the imaginary 'court of honour' before which Herzen felt that not only he, but also his long-suffering and much-calumniated countrymen were on trial, one can excuse much of the rhetoric of *A Family Drama*.

The defects of these chapters rarely appear elsewhere in this volume, where there is no special pleading: Herzen's desire to explain and vindicate the Russian intelligentsia as a historical phenomenon leads him despite himself into an analysis of the psychology of Russia's superfluous men which results in a picture



much darker, much more complex and contradictory, and altogether more credible than the propaganda image he presented to the West in 1851.

Herzen's account of his conflicts with his own and the next generation reveals that the iconoclasm which he had represented to Michelet as the outstanding characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia was counterbalanced by an equally marked thirst for new faiths and dogmas to fill the void created by their negation. Slavophiles who denounced Western influences on Russian culture drew their faith in a mythical national past from the dreams of European romanticism and German Idealist philosophy; Westernisers who preached the liberation of reason from the bonds of tradition believed uncritically in the universal validity and applicability of European values; while Bakunin, the most radical member of Herzen's generation, wasted his powers in the futile pursuit of his fantasy of universal destruction. The radicals of the 1860s denounced their 'fathers' for compromising with a society and culture that had to be extirpated root and branch; but they themselves were mirror-images of the regime which had warped and stunted them: their bullying intolerance, their neurotic amour-propre and their narrow dogmatism reeked of the barrack-room and government offices.

Herzen's acuteness of vision does not always extend to his own inconsistencies; beneath the self-justifying rhetoric of *A Family Drama* there is more than a hint that the sexual freedom he preached was not in practice extended to his own wife; while his dismissive contempt for the aesthetic deficiencies of the bourgeois culture of mid-nineteenth century France reveals this 'self-made' man to be steeped in the values of an aristocratic caste and a pre-industrial society. But this unintentional self-revelation only adds weight to his depiction of that extraordinary mixture of clarity of vision and self-delusion which characterised all the best representatives of his generation, as it has characterised all great Russian apostles of negation, from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn. Herzen's exploration of the pathology of alienation in *My Past and Thoughts* was, and is, a powerful challenge to the sanguine belief that the dispossessed have only to throw off their chains for liberty and harmony to prevail. It magnificently illustrates his critique, in his most mature political writings, of all forms of political messianism which confer on a nation or class, by reason of its past

history or present distance from power and privilege (or both), special virtues which give it a title to moral leadership or political power.

When he began writing his memoirs, Herzen himself had thought that the Russian intelligentsia, together with the peasants in their communes, possessed such virtues. Like other Russian romantic nationalists, he had believed that the 'historical freshness' and 'untapped forces' of the Russian people guaranteed it a brilliant rôle on a future historical stage. By the time he completed the memoirs, sixteen years later, he had come to believe that history conferred no special immunities from the prejudices, superstitions and persistent delusions which separated human consciousness from the goal of rational autonomy.

The years in which *My Past and Thoughts* was composed thus saw a fundamental shift in Herzen's political vision: from a form of nationalist utopianism characteristic of many of the Russian intelligentsia towards a critique of utopian thought in which he achieved greater consistency than any other European socialist, including Marx. But not only is the autobiographical narrative disappointingly thin and reticent on this crucial period: Herzen also misleads the reader on the date and nature of the crisis which led to the sober realism of his last years. His memoirs would have us believe that it came in 1848, when the events of that year destroyed a faith in the revolutionary regeneration of Europe that until then had been central to his existence. In reality, seduced by Slavophile dreams of renewal from the East, he had frequently suggested in the years before he left Russia that Europe might have reached the end of her development and might be on the verge of a cataclysmic collapse: he had been fond of comparing the existing state of Europe to the last years of the Roman Empire. Unlike the Slavophiles (whose wholesale contempt for the goals of western culture he did not share, any more than he shared their romantic conservatism and their Orthodox faith), he had not asserted that Russia's future as Europe's historical successor was automatically assured. For this to be possible the germ of a new order contained in the 'barbarian' East must first be nurtured with the aid of progressive ideas and technology from the West. But if this condition were fulfilled, he had suggested that it might fall to Russia's lot to put into practice the socialist ideals which were the most precious legacy of a decrepit Europe. The events of

1848 were thus not the unexpected blow that in retrospect he makes them out to be; nor was his despair so total. The darker the West, the brighter might be the saving dawn from the East: this message is conveyed by the contrast between 'old Europe' and 'young Russia' which runs through his propaganda writings of the 1850s. It was not 1848, but the Polish rising of 1863; not the blunders of French and German radicals, but the character of the emerging Russian revolutionary movement, which shattered Herzen's last illusions, and on this subject his memoirs are reticent.

One reason for this is plain: his portrayal of the Russian intelligentsia was directed largely to a European audience; and if it had turned out rather differently from what the readers of *The Russian People and Socialism* might have expected, Herzen had no intention of adding fuel to the anti-Russian feeling among the European Left (augmented in the late 1860s by the rift between Bakuninists and Marxists in the International) by dwelling on the causes of his own disillusionment. But its magnitude can be deduced by comparing his portraits of the Russian radicals towards the end of this volume with the picture of the typical Russian intellectual ('the most emancipated creature on earth') which he had painted for the edification of the West in 1851.

In the 1860s, writing in *The Bell* for a Russian readership, Herzen represented the emancipation of human consciousness as a slow and painful process, in which education and patient propaganda must prepare the way for the transformation of social institutions; and he attacked what he saw as the fatal inconsistency in the young Russian radicals' attempts to bring the new world into being with the methods of the old: force, terror, and the imposition of a single political orthodoxy. But his increasingly bitter polemics with the young radicals on the question of means did not destroy his faith in the revolutionary potential of the Russian peasant. Hence his decision to put the support of *The Bell* firmly behind the Polish rising, in the hope that it would spread to Russia, leading to a peasant insurrection and ultimately a revolution. In his account of this episode in the last chapter of the present volume, Herzen represents himself as having been opposed to the rising from the first, on the grounds that it was premature and ill-prepared, but forced to give it reluctant support largely out of loyalty to a heroic but pathetic figure from the past – Bakunin, who, having spent the preceding decade

in prison and exile, had preserved intact the illusions that Herzen had lost in the aftermath of 1848. In reality, the distance between Herzen and Bakunin in 1863 was by no means as great as it seemed to Herzen in retrospect. The belief in the 'historical freshness' and 'vital forces' of the Russian people, on which Bakunin based his hopes for a successful revolution, was one which Herzen had been proclaiming for over a decade, and from his correspondence in 1863 one may conclude that Herzen allied himself to Bakunin and the Polish cause less from quixotic loyalty than because it offered him the last hope of witnessing that salvation from the East that he had long promised to a sceptical Europe. If the peasantry did not fulfil their hopes, he wrote to Ogarev, the co-editor of *The Bell*, they might as well both retire from the revolutionary struggle. As the rising gained momentum, Herzen became increasingly optimistic about the prospect of the 'dawn of our freedom'. In the event, the peasantry failed him, while the Polish revolutionaries and their Russian sympathisers, in their incapacity for organisation, lack of realism, and confusion as to their goals seemed to re-enact many of the fatal blunders of 1848. The Russian Minerva, as Turgenev had once remarked to Herzen *à propos* his faith in the Russian peasant, was not very different from her European sister – only somewhat broader in the beam.

For Herzen, 1863 was a personal as well as a political catastrophe. His alliance with the Poles did not heal his rift with the extreme Left, and it lost him his only remaining audience in Russia – the moderate opposition, which shared the anti-Polish mood of the nationalist Right. The circulation of *The Bell*, which, when it was smuggled into Russia in the late 1850s, had been read by every section of educated society (including the Tsar's own officials), dropped dramatically and continued to dwindle until in 1867 it ceased publication (it was briefly revived in a French edition). The collapse of *The Bell*, which had shaped the political consciousness of a generation, is recorded laconically in the closing paragraph of this volume. Herzen left no autobiographical account of the years of political isolation and impotence which followed. It is likely that a combination of national pride and self-esteem (he would never directly admit to having shared those delusions which he describes with such olympian detachment) prevented Herzen from leaving a record of the most painful years

of his public life. But *My Past and Thoughts* is a testimony to the wisdom he attained at such personal cost.

A few months before his death in 1870, Herzen published a cycle of letters to Bakunin in which he reflects on the divergence of their respective political paths since the time when, as young radicals fresh from the school of Left Hegelian negation, they had contemplated the ruins of 1848 and called on the forces of destruction to sweep away the whole rotten structure of Europe. Events had since revealed to Herzen the complexity and obliqueness of the paths of history, the obstinate attachment of human consciousness to the traditional and familiar, even when these were the source of its oppression. Their ultimate goal had remained the same; the question which divided them was whether, given the slowness of the pace of progress, they should attempt to force it:

You rush ahead as before, with your passion for destruction, which you take to be a creative passion, smashing every obstacle and respecting history only in the future. I no longer believe in the revolutionary paths of the past; I try to understand the pace of history in the past and the future, in order to know how to go in step with it, not falling behind and not running so far ahead that people can't follow me.

*My Past and Thoughts* is the living record of his achievement.

#### NOTE ON THE OMISSIONS

IN making her selection, the editor has omitted passages of varying length. Some indication of the extent of each omission is given by the use of three different symbols: for part of a paragraph, an ellipsis (. . .) within the text, in square brackets; for one or more paragraphs, an ellipsis in a space; for one or more sections or chapters, an asterisk in a space. Ellipses within the text without square brackets are Herzen's own.

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VLADIMIR  
ON THE KLYAZMA

1838-1839

*Do not expect from me long accounts of my inner life of that period . . . Frightful events, woes of all sorts, are yet more easily put upon paper than quite bright and cloudless memories . . . Can happiness be described?*

*Fill in for yourselves what is lacking, divine it with the heart – while I will tell of the external side, of the setting, only rarely, rarely touching by hint or by word on my ineffable secrets.*

A. I. HERZEN: *My Past and Thoughts*



