

Vivos voco: Herzen's Past, Present and Future

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Rather than a complete philosophy of history, a close reading of Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) yields a finely tuned relationship to the past, present, and future, a relationship that was articulated in his essays, editorials, memoirs, and correspondence.¹ Descended from Russia's late eighteenth-century educated nobles, Herzen is variously credited with being the progenitor of Populists, Bolsheviki, Soviet dissidents, and contemporary Russian investigative journalists. Seeing himself as a historian of the present, he chose "Vivos voco!" (I summon the living) as the motto for *The Bell (Kolokol)*, the bi-weekly newspaper that represented his most significant attempt to stimulate a free exchange of information about Russia during the reform years of 1857–1867.

Attentive to both his country's past and his own biography, Herzen chronicled — for a European audience — the development of revolutionary ideas among Russia's writers and elite officers, including his beloved Decembrists.² *Past and Thoughts (Byloe i dumy, 1868)* and *From the Other Shore (S togo berega, 1848–50)* remain the most deeply mined sources for Herzen's historical ideas; what they yield is greatly enriched by other essays (e.g., "Robert Owen" ["Robert Ouoen," 1860], "Ends and Beginnings" ["Kontsy i nachala," 1862–63] "Letters to an Old Friend" ["K staromu tovarishchu," 1869]), *Letters from France and Italy (Pis'ma iz Frantsii i Italii, 1847–52)*, topical articles written for *The Bell*, and the private correspondence, amounting to several thousand letters, that has survived.³ Herzen described no system, expressing his thoughts "in passing," and it is left to others to discover what system there may be (Zen'kovskii 2001, 266). In place of anything explicit, the reader finds key words and clusters that include: libretto/plot/map/path/algebraic formula/pattern in the carpet; needle/thread; contingency/chance/accident; disease/pain/doctor/anatomical theater; and improvisation/freedom.⁴ Irina Sizemskaja found that these are

¹ This essay originated in a paper presented at the Centenary Conference on Slavic Studies, which took place at the University of Leiden, Netherlands, 9–11 October 2013.

² Excerpts from "Du développement des idées révolutionnaires en Russie" have been translated in Parthé 2012a, 3–27.

³ A work in progress, provisionally titled "Herzen: A Life in Letters," by the author of this article, will include translated and annotated excerpts from the letters, in dialogue with Herzen's many correspondents.

⁴ Vasilii Rozanov had little patience for Herzen in general, and the use of metaphors in particular: Образов, сравнений так много, что хоть открывая базар: но ни одной idée fixe ("There are so many images and



employed both as metaphors, “adequately expressing the essence of his understanding of the historical process,” and as concepts, “setting down a very important historiosophic premise, namely, the variability of the historical process” (2013a, 147–54).⁵ The clusters appear in analyses of the past and considerations of the future, yet Herzen inevitably steers the discussion back to a sober look at the present, where one path must be selected over another and responsibility taken for choices made, that is, where freedom is most fully experienced in an ongoing debate. The clearest statement Herzen made about his beliefs and methods is that “*the goal of history is the present*” (Sizemskaiia 2013a, 149).

Herzen’s well-known metaphor of the libretto — or, more accurately, of its absence — appears in the first chapter of *From the Other Shore*, a work that he began after departing Russia in January 1847 but prior to his witnessing the outbreak of revolution in Europe in 1848. One of two dialogic “voices” insists that history’s path has not been pre-determined.

Если б человечество шло прямо к какому-нибудь результату, тогда история не было бы, а была бы логика. [...] libretto нет. А будь libretto, история потеряет весь интерес, сделается ненужна, скучна, смешна. [...] В истории все импровизация, все воля, все *ex tempore*, вперед ни пределов, ни маршрутов нет, есть условия, святое беспокойство, огонь жизни и вечный вызов бойцам пробовать силы. (VI 36)⁶

The use of the term *libretto* is not facile; wherever he found himself, Herzen attended opera performances, and he heard some of the great performers of the day. His daughter Olga was taken to the continent at an early age by the opera-loving Malwida Meysenbug, an acquaintance of Richard Wagner, and given professional training as a singer, and his photographer cousin’s daughter was a successful singer on the European stage. For Herzen, “libretto” carried a precise meaning and narrative power when applied to the interpretation of history. This passage — and others in *From the Other Shore* — are so fresh and unexpected that, two hundred years after the author’s birth, scholars are still mesmerized by their charms; the book was a favorite of Herzen’s as well and he never sought to revise it in light of subsequent events, but he would be the first to say that what he wrote in the remaining twenty-plus years of his life took this concept much further.⁷

The essay “Robert Owen” was completed in 1860 and published the following year in *The Polestar (Poliarnaia zvezda)*, ultimately to be included in Part VI of *Past and Thoughts*; it continues Herzen’s ruminations on the lack of a fixed narrative that would explain the past

comparisons that you could set up a bazaar, but there is no *idée fixe*”). (Rozanov 2012, 328–36).

⁵ Sizemskaiia does not agree that Herzen’s ideas require organization by others; the absence of a “doctrinaire attitude” (*doktrinerstvo*) merely creates the illusion of the absence of a system (2013a, 147). I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this article who alerted me to another, on-line, version of Sizemskaiia’s thoughts on the same subject (Sizemskaiia 2013b).

⁶ “If mankind were headed for some sort of result, then there would be no history, just logic. [...] there is no *libretto*. And if there were a *libretto*, history would lose all interest, and become unnecessary, boring, and ridiculous. [...] In history all is improvisation, all is will, all is *ex tempore*; there are no frontiers, no itineraries, only conditions, a sacred anxiety, the fire of life and the eternal call for warriors to try their strength.” References to Herzen’s work are given with volume and page numbers in brackets.

⁷ Not everyone was mesmerized. Rozanov agreed that there was a musical element to Herzen’s writings, but complained that it took the place of any theme, or of anything at all concrete; there was a just a nightingale, satisfied with his own song, and the unceasing, genuinely annoying, ringing of bells. (Rozanov 2012, 333–34).

or chart the future, and on the possibility for each person to play a worthy role, adding their own line of poetry to the composition.

Не имея ни программы, ни заданной темы, не неминуемой развязки, растрепанная импровизации истории готова идти с каждым, каждый может вставить в нее свой стих. [...] Возможностей, эпизодов, открытий в ней и в природе дремлет бездна на всяком шагу. (XI, 246)⁸

However, explained Herzen, the situation of man in history is complicated, for he is simultaneously “*the boat, the wave, and the pilot*. If only there were a map!” An 1867 letter to Grigorii Vyubov similarly explained that “in history we play a double game of both witnesses and actors,” and if we lack sufficient passion, we turn from activists into professors (XXIX, i, 230). For Herzen, history only became interesting when it was relieved of the passivity of predetermined plots and algebraic formulas.⁹ Vladimir Kantor describes all of Herzen’s work as “litigation” (*tiazhba*) with history (2013, 77). Man was born for the present, but that did not deprive him of receiving an inheritance from the past and leaving something of his own making to the future.

Гордиться должны мы тем, что мы не нитки и не иголки в руках фатума, шьющего пеструю ткань истории... Мы знаем, что ткань эта не без нас шьется, но это не цель наша. [...] И это не все: мы можем *переменить узор ковра*. Хозяина нет, рисунка нет, одна основа, да мы одни-одинехоньки. (XI, 249)¹⁰

Writing to his son Sasha in 1867 about the theory of free will and the complexities of family life, Herzen said that there were no general rules “but an improvisation of how to behave — understanding, tact, an aesthetics of conduct,” which a mature person developed in himself (XXIX, i, 147–48). The pairing in Herzen’s thought of *improvisation* and *freedom* was the focus of several contributions to a 2012 volume from a Moscow conference in honor of Herzen’s jubilee. Erikh Solov’ev credited Herzen with pioneering the concept of ‘open history’ in *From the Other Shore*, and of never forgetting Russia’s historical paths and the possibility of “free historical choice” (Solov’ev 2012, 135–46). His RAN colleague Irina Sizemskaja took this a significant step further, revealing an “algorithm” by which Herzen was able to link the past, present and future, without resorting to a “*sharply delineated necessity*” (2013a, 150).

⁸ “Having neither a program, a set theme nor an unavoidable *dénouement*, the disheveled improvisation of history is ready to walk with anyone, and anyone can add to it a line of verse. [...] A multitude of possibilities, episodes, discoveries in history and in nature, lies slumbering at every step.”

⁹ Herzen was wary of abstractions in a more personal sense as well. Ogarev’s move to Switzerland was perceived as a retreat from effective action into mathematics and music, abstractions that prevented his old friend from maintaining a clear view of people (e. g. the young revolutionary *émigrés*) and events, although it marked an improvement over his previous binge drinking (XXIX, i, 34; XXX, i, 26).

¹⁰ “We should be proud of not being thread or needles in the hands of fate as it stiches up the motley fabric of history... We know that the fabric is not sewn without us, but that is not our goal. [...] And that is not all: we can *alter the pattern in the carpet*. There is no one in charge and no set design, just a foundation, and we are all alone.” Eight years later, arguing against Bakunin’s determinism, Herzen said that it was not at all the case that the path forward could not be altered; it could be changed through circumstance, through understanding, and through personal energy — this was no virgin birth (XX, ii, 588).

In essays and private letters, Herzen's interest in people and places from Russia's past is unexceptional, at times even dismissive. Basically, if he found himself near a site of historical interest (e.g. Bogoliubovo, Vladimir, Borodino, Peter the Great's little house in Petersburg) and had nothing better to do, he might take a look; it was the same during his two decades in Europe. Exiled in 1841 to Novgorod, he complained that he had requested a posting to Odessa, the empire's newest city, but was sent instead to its oldest municipality. "Novgorod the Great and Vladimir on the Kliazma" was composed while he was still living there, but not published until the first issue of *The Polestar* in 1855. After mentioning — in passing — the glory of medieval Novgorod, he said that town was now in a pitiful state, neither genuinely Russian nor successfully European.

Грязный, дряхлый и ненужный стоял он, пока Петербург подрастал, обстроился; но в нем не осталось ничего старинного русского и не привилось ни одной капли европейского; нравы Новгорода представляют уродливую и отвратительную пародию на петербургские. [...] Новгород невыносимо скучен. Это большая казарма, набитая солдатами, и маленькая канцелярия, набитая чиновниками. (II, 47–48)¹¹

Years later, when the 1862 millennium was celebrated in Novgorod by the dedication of a massive, mute bell covered with depictions of what Herzen called a random collection of historical figures, he took revenge in his own *Bell* with several sharply-worded articles, observing that "the absurdity of the celebration in Novgorod had exceeded all expectations." (Parthé 2012a, 175).¹² In general, he believed that far too many commemorative events were being organized at a time when reform — not self-congratulation — should have been the imperial government's focus. It is worth noting that he sounded a different note when he reminded Ogarev in 1869 about the dangers of violent revolution, recalling, disapprovingly, the sight of statues in Nancy and Strasbourg that had been mutilated by the Jacobins (XXX, i, 144, 393). That same month, he concluded his fourth open letter to Bakunin with a similar observation, warning that the French revolutionaries had sufficiently punished statues, paintings, and monuments, saying that "we don't have to play at being iconoclasts" (XX, ii, 593).

While the pageant of the past did not attract Herzen's attention, banned works about his country's history did, and the Free Russian Press became a venue for "declassifying" records of Russia's secret political history. In *Gertsen protiv samoderzhavii* and other volumes, Natan Eidelman made an exhaustive study of these manuscripts, which favored the late eighteenth century, a period of special significance for Herzen, for having formed his father's generation, and the Decembrists. Herzen joked in 1869 about borrowing for a revived *Kolokol* the motto Pugachev supposedly used on coins bearing the image of Peter III: *Redivivus et ultor*, "Resurrected and seeking vengeance" (XXX, i, 143, 392–93).

Personal connections to history interested Herzen, who linked his life to the 1812

¹¹ "It stood — dirty, decrepit, and unnecessary, while Petersburg was built up. In it, however, there remained nothing that was Old Russia, and it accepted nothing European. Novgorod's ways were a misshapen and repellent parody of Petersburg. [...] Novgorod is unbearably boring. It is a large barracks, packed with soldiers, and a small office building, packed with officials."

¹² Several of these essays from 1862 are among the hundred translated in *A Herzen Reader* (Parthé 2012a).

occupation of Moscow (he believed that his father's role was misrepresented in *War and Peace*, XXX, bk. 1, 139), the 1825 revolt, the Polish rebellions of 1830 and 1863, the 1848 uprisings in Europe, the 1861 Emancipation of the serfs, and the first attempt on the tsar's life in 1866. The history of his father's family took up many pages in his memoir and letters, while his mother's German origins were barely acknowledged; Marx's later comment that Herzen was half-Russian but all Muscovite was not far off the mark (Gurvich-Lishchiner and Ptushkina 1987, 466). When Nikolai Astrakhov died in 1842, Herzen used the word *byloe* (the past, bygone times) in a letter to his friend's widow. He continued to find this word useful for evoking rich memories of time spent in a stimulating circle of friends and family, which he preserved in *Past and Thoughts (Byloe i dumy)* after being separated by distance and death from almost everyone for whom he cared deeply. Diary entries from 1842–1844 clearly privileged the present over the past and action over theory. Nothing in the world was more foolish than to neglect the present because it was the only sphere in which one could act, and yet “we do not know how to value it” (II, 217, 369). The result of a “cursed lack of attention to the present has the effect of rendering us only capable of remembering what we have lost” (II, 393).¹³

As early as 1838, Herzen's correspondence makes his temporal preference very clear. With plans to marry his cousin Natalie Zakharina progressing, he wrote to her that “Herzen has no past, there will be only two Herzens: Natalie and Alexander,” handily dismissing his older half-brother Egor Herzen as irrelevant to family history (XXI, 267). The precarious health of Natalie and of several children born to the couple bound Herzen ever more tightly to the present, in fear of what the morrow might bring to both ailing mother and baby. In January 1845, he wrote a joint letter to Ogarev and Nikolai Satin saying that he could claim possession only of the present, in which all of past life was reflected. Rejecting the impersonal goals of “moral castrati” like St Augustine, Herzen declared his readiness for a present in which anything might happen, rejecting abstractions in favor of the very process of being.¹⁴

Надобно одействовотворить все возможности, жить во все стороны — это энциклопедия жизни, а что будет из этого и как будет — за это я не могу вполне отвечать, потому что бездна внешних условий и столкновений. (XXII, 218)¹⁵

Historian Timofei Granovskii's public lectures during the mid-1840s focused on themes from the European past, but they were very much an event (*sobytie*) in the present for Herzen, Chaadaev, and many others. Herzen wrote about them for publication, and in his

¹³ Ivanov-Razumnik placed great importance on these diary entries in his “Filosofia istorii Gertsena” (1908), an excerpt from his book *O smysle zhizni*, repinted in (Ivanov-Razumnik 2012, 341–63). A critical essay by Oxford scholar Robert Harris in (Parthe 2012a) provides a detailed discussion of Ivanov-Razumnik and many others who have written about Herzen.

¹⁴ In the autumn of 1869, when Ogarev had failed to heed warnings about Bakunin and Nechaev's activities, Herzen reminded him that all uprisings in history were organized by ascetics with a single passion (XXX, i, 207).

¹⁵ “One must activate all possibilities and live in all directions – this is the encyclopedia of life, and what will be, and how things will go – that I cannot answer for, because there are a huge number of external conditions and possible collisions.”

diary marveled at Granovskii's ability to make audiences contemplate the present, without turning his lectern into a political space, which would have soon brought unwanted attention from the vigilant III Department (II, 317, 351). A quarter-century later, in the midst of a family crisis, Herzen "devoured" a new book on Granovskii, which reminded him of what he and his Moscow circle had been (XXX, i, 254–55). The small number of letters between the two men that have survived are rich with insights, like Herzen's 1849 description of himself as "a series of phenomena, somehow sewn together on the living thread of remembrance" (XXIII, 136).

Herzen's preference for the present grew even stronger once he left Russia and found himself in a speeded-up version of life with trains, telegrams, lots of daily newspapers, and revolutionary ferment. Still wary of misty images of the past and abstract visions of the future, Herzen wrote back to Moscow in January 1848 that "one must not use the past or the future to bar the way to the present" (XXIII, 57–58). Later that same year, Herzen concluded that Russia was in an even more difficult position than Europe because it had to relinquish ties to "two pasts — the pre-Petrine and the post-Petrine." (XXIII, 112). After spending a thousand years on the soil and only two centuries in school, learning how to imitate Europe, "nous sommes à la veille de notre histoire" (XX, i, 32). He believed that, more than western Europeans, Russians were a people of the future, but "*the future does not exist, it is made by people,*" and much work lay ahead (XXIV, 200).

By 1851, Herzen was painfully cognizant of a new threat to his personal happiness — his wife Natalie's ultimately fatal attraction to the German poet Georg Herwegh — yet he bravely claimed to friends back in Moscow that he had "come to love *the element of chance* in life" because it was wiser to accept contingency than to make clever plans, and even a terrible present must be embraced (XXIV, 182). This belief was cruelly tested when, over the course of six months, he lost his mother and younger son in a shipwreck, and then his wife to grief-induced illness. Two months after Natalie's death, he wrote to Maria Reikhel that, despite the pain, he was not trying to put things behind him. A gravestone could not obscure these memories, and, for the people involved, these events would never really be the past. "They are here [with us], immutable, irreparable" (XXIV, 299).

By the end of this *annus horribilis*, Herzen had moved to London and resumed the memoir begun in the 1830s, with the idea of recording as soon as possible the shattering events of recent years. Reflecting later on the chapters covering 1847–1852, Herzen gave a unique interpretation of his reminiscences — continuing to refer to them as записки (notes), while explaining why he had chosen not to give these notes greater unity than when they were first recorded.

Спать их в одно — я никак не мог. Выполняя промежутки, очень легко дать всему другой фон и другое освещение — *тогдашняя* истина пропадет. «Былое и думы» — не историческая монография, а отражение истории в человеке, *случайно* попавшемся на ее дороге. (X, 9)¹⁶

¹⁶ "I cannot weld them into one solid thing. When filling in the gaps, it is very easy to give everything a different background and a different illumination, but the truth of that moment in time would be lost. *Past and Thoughts* is not a historical monograph, but the reflection of history in a man who *accidentally* found himself

Herzen made frequent use of “chance/contingency” (*sluchainost'*) and related concepts, with increasingly negative connotations. Reacting in *The Bell* to news of the April 1866 attempt on the tsar's life, he says that “in general we cannot stand surprises, whether at birthday celebrations or in the public square: the first kind never succeed, and the second kind are almost always harmful” (XIX, 58–65).¹⁷ In letters from his final years, there is less of the earlier acceptance of the “element of chance” and a greater fear of what the next shock might be in Russia, Europe, or in the lives of family members and close friends (XXX, i, 258–59). His thoughts become increasingly pessimistic and gloomy, qualities that Nikolai Strakhov saw in all Herzen's work, and which Vladimir Kantor elevates to the idea that the insane, demonic side of history was central to Herzen's point of view (2013, 76–79, 89).

In the passage cited above from *Past and Thoughts*, the *accidental* nature of historical events is joined to the image of a *path*, where at times a crossroad requires choosing between several possible directions forward, as in the tale of the Russian knight Ilia Muromets, to which Herzen frequently refers. Early in Alexander II's reign, Herzen saw the tsar as that knight, and counseled him to choose wisely and not be satisfied with matching Europe in technological progress while failing to modernize political institutions, saying that for Russia, the result would be “Genghis Khan with a telegraph” (XIII, 38).

Once established in London, Herzen set up the Free Russian Press, whose primary purpose became to reflect on events as they occurred, and to help Russia with what would likely be a painful period of change. Back in 1843, Herzen had praised de Custine's ability to “catch things on the fly” while travelling through Russia (II, 311). Fourteen years later, he set a similar goal for *The Bell*, saying that “events in Russia are moving quickly, they must be caught on the fly and discussed right away” (XII, 367).¹⁸

Herzen's intention in founding this paper was very close to what he wrote to Moscow friends concerning *From the Other Shore*: “It is not science, but an exposé” (XXIV, 182–84). He explained to a German political émigré that twice a month “je fais des vivisections des Russes and de la Russie” (XXIV, 2012) and to Grigorii Vyrubov he pointed out the difference between merely studying a disease and being both doctor and patient (XXIX, i, 230). Herzen added to his repertoire of metaphor/concepts (to preserve Sizemskaja's distinction) the examination of present history as an anatomical exercise; one cannot know with absolute certainty how an illness will turn out, and much the same could be said of political theory as practiced on real people.¹⁹ He famously expanded on the metaphor of illness in a series of open letters to Turgenev called “Ends and Beginnings.”

[...] мы вообще не врачи — мы боль; что выйдет из нашего кряхтания и стога, мы не знаем — но боль заявлена. [...] Мне же особенно посчастливилось, — место в анатомическом театре досталось славное и возле самой клиники; не стоило смотреть в атлас, ни ходить на лекции парламентской терапии и метафизической патологии;

on its path.” (X, 9). Vladimir Kantor (2013, 66) makes a persuasive case for the mythic quality of the memoir, especially in its exaggeration of Herzen's imprisonment and internal exile.

¹⁷ An abridged version of this essay has been translated in Parthe 2012a, 276–80.

¹⁸ Announcements related to the founding of *The Bell* can be found in Parthe 2012a, 54–58.

¹⁹ In “Aphorismata,” his supplement to “Dr. Krupov” from the late 1860s, Herzen's narrator speaks of Krupov as having almost achieved “a medical understanding of *universal history*” (XX, i, 112). Kantor sees Krupov as a key to Herzen's philosophy of history (2013, 77–87).

болезнь, смерть и разложение совершались перед глазами. (XVI, 147–48)²⁰

Herzen made good use of his “seat in the anatomical theatre” until 1867, when changes in Russia led him to believe that investigative journalism could no longer be effective. The emancipation and other reforms had been incomplete, and he had already lost liberal readers, after he supported the Poles in 1863, and then young radicals, after he criticized the would-be assassin Karakazov in 1866. The conservatives, obliged to keep up with his journalism during negotiations leading up to the emancipation, had long since deserted Herzen. Shortly before the 1912 centenary, Rozanov preempted any claims for Herzen’s lasting importance by calling him a man who, with artificial airs of the Alexandrine era (one assumes that he means Alexander I), tried to impress succeeding generations in a way that was “not very attractive” (Rozanov 2012, 331).

In the final issue of *The Bell*, before what he hoped would be a six-month hiatus, Herzen included an excerpt from Part VII of *Past and Thoughts* called “Apogei i perigei.” Once again, he cited the folk tale about Ilia Muromets that he had formerly used to characterize the tsar; this time, Herzen was the knight, frozen indecisively between the extremes of autocracy and revolution.

Точно потерянные витязи в сказках, мы ждали на перепутье. Пойдешь направо — потеряешь коня, но сам цел будешь; пойдешь налево — конь будет цел, но сам погибнешь; пойдешь вперед — все тебя оставят; пойдешь назад — этого уж нельзя, туда нас дорога травой заросла. Хоть бы явился какой-нибудь колдун или пустынник, который бы снял с нас тяжесть раздумья. (XI, 312)²¹

After publication of *The Bell* ceased, Herzen began thinking aloud, in letters to Ogarev, about their place in history, with a wavering degree of optimism. He did not fear the judgment of the future, because he and Ogarev had “walked a straight path” (XIX, ii, 496). However, it was not always clear whether their work had been successful in the present, or whether only in the future would their ideas be understood and implemented (XXX, i, 34).

Мне страшно, *caro mio*, но я так вижу пределы всех. [...] знаю, что теперь, наконец, я — прошедшее; итак, я вижу, что все идет, как шестерня лошадей, привязанных к дышлу, но без вожжей, что иногда закрываю глаза. (XXX, i, 265)²²

²⁰ “We are not the doctors, we are the pain; what will become of our moans and groans we do not know, but *the pain has been revealed*. I have been particularly fortunate: I have been furnished with a first-rate seat in the anatomical theater and next to the clinic itself. It is not worth my while to look at an atlas, or attend lectures on parliamentary therapy or theoretical pathology; disease, death, and dissolution were taking place before my eyes.” In his prescient book *Will the Soviet Union Last until 1984?*, dissident Andrei Amalrik described his own experience of discussing the USSR with foreign visitors as that of a fish talking to an ichthyologist.

²¹ “Like the lost knights in fairy tales, we stood waiting at the crossroads. If you went to the right, you would lose your horse but survive. If you went to the left, the horse would be fine but you would perish. If you went straight ahead, everyone would abandon you, and if you went back... but that was no longer possible, that road was overgrown with grass. If only some sort of magician or monk would appear, who could relieve us of the burden of this decision.”

²² “I’m terrified, *caro mio*, but I so clearly see everyone’s *limits* [...] and I know that now, finally, I am *the past*.”

A source of increasing concern for Herzen were the Russian nihilists flocking to Switzerland, “strange people for whom history does not exist” (XXX, i, 50). They neither knew nor acknowledged history, or they believed that they would bring history to its final form (XXX, i, 198–99). In 1869, he wrote a series of open letters “To an Old Friend,” Bakunin, which only appeared, with cuts, in a posthumous volume, printed the following year in Geneva. Unlike his impetuous fellow exile, who was forming alliances with young radicals, including Sergei Nechaev, Herzen said that he had no fear of the word «gradualness» (*postepennoŝtʹ*), which had been tarnished by the weak-willed behavior of governments that claimed to favor reform. “Like continuity, gradualness is inseparable from any process of understanding” (XX, ii, 583).²³ Sizemskaja takes this quote to mean that he ultimately believed that interference in the historical process was justified only when it did not involve the destruction of things worth saving (Sizemskaja 2013a, 153–54). Herzen was clear in his admonition to Bakunin at the end of the second “letter”:

Ты рвешься вперед по-прежнему с страстью разрушения, которую принимаешь за творческую страсть... ломая препятствия и уважая историю только в будущем. Я не верю в прежние революционные пути и стараюсь понять шаг людской в былом и настоящем. (XX, ii, 586)²⁴

During the last week of Herzen’s life, as unrest — set to explode later that year — grew in France, he wrote a final, metaphorically-rich letter to Ogarev about the history of the present.

Что будет — не знаю, я не пророк, но что история совершает свой акт здесь — и будет ли решение по + или по -, но оно будет здесь, это ясно [...] что до окончания V акта и до занавеси — жить лучше здесь. Даже чисто зрителем. (XXX, i, 299)²⁵

Herzen followed his own advice to live in all historical directions, championing the Decembrists’ brave example and peasant socialism’s great potential, while dissecting the ever-changing present scene in Europe and Russia, mostly in reaction to what he read about in the papers and some times saw for himself on the streets. He offered a cogent eyewitness account of the events of 1848, both for those who remembered the French Revolution and for those who would live to see 1905 and 1917. Everything Herzen experienced found reflection in the improvisational masterpiece that is his memoir. He understood the

And thus I see that it is all moving forward, like a team of six horses tied to a shaft but without any reins — sometimes I just shut my eyes” (XXX, i, 265). Earlier in 1869, in a letter to the French historian Edgar Quinet, Herzen referred to Russia as a boat without a pilot, unable to turn away from the rocks in time (XXX, i, 10).

²³ There at least two ways to express the concept of “continuity” in Russian: *preemstvennostʹ* (borrowing and adapting from the past) and *bespreyvnoŝtʹ* (the absence of *vzryvy*, explosions or other abrupt and violent changes). Herzen used the latter word in his letter to Bakunin.

²⁴ “As always, you rush ahead with a passion for destruction that you see as a creative passion... smashing anything that gets in your way, and respecting history only in the future. I don’t believe in the old revolutionary paths and I am trying to understand *the pace of humankind* in the past and the present.”

²⁵ “What lies ahead — I don’t know. I’m not a prophet, but it is clear that history is concluding its act here. Whether the resolution is positive or negative [...] until the end of Act V and the curtain, it is better to live here, even as a mere witness.”

instrumentality of history in a way that focused on how it affected the lives of ordinary people, which was, in the end, his only measure of progress. Alexander Herzen was a «historian of the present,» and his insights about paths to choose and to avoid are remarkably applicable to Russia in the twenty-first century.²⁶

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²⁶ For a recent appraisal, see Parthé 2012b.