# The Brilliant Rage of Alexander Herzen

*Michael McDonald*

After Russia had labored under a harsh dictatorship for decades, unexpectedly a new ruler assumed power. For a few years political liberalization took hold; to most outside observers it seemed as though Russia was finally becoming a "normal" Western-style state. But then the authoritarian nature of the governing regime reasserted itself, and civil liberties were once more harshly curtailed.

Can we make sense of this turbulent period in Russian history? If you're interested in the Gorbachev-to-Yeltsin-to-Putin era, many talented "historians of the moment"—Albert Camus's felicitous phrase for investigative journalists—can explain how Russia moved from *glasnost* and *perestroika* to gangsterism and Pussy Riot over the past two decades. But there is an earlier, Czarist version of this same pattern of harsh political repression, followed by glimmers of hope, followed by a return to repression. It began with the autocratic reign of Nicholas I, which ended with his death in 1855. His son Alexander II succeeded him. While Nicholas's reign was one of the darkest hours of 19th-century Russian authoritarianism, Alexander II freed the serfs and undertook important electoral and judicial reforms before losing much of his youthful enthusiasm for change amid three failed assassination attempts. A fourth attempt succeeded in 1881. Alexander II was followed by his son, Alexander III, whose taste for authoritarian nastiness nearly equaled that of Nicholas.

If your interest runs more to this earlier period, there is only one investigative rabble-rousing journalist worth consulting: Alexander Herzen. Fortunately, an exceptional collection of Herzen's journalism has recently appeared. *A Herzen Reader* is edited, annotated and translated from the Russian by Kathleen Parthé, who bridges the formidable gulf of language and culture that separate us from Herzen's time and place. She judiciously supplements Herzen's articles with explanatory footnotes and prefaces each with comments explaining the context in which it was written. Most fundamentally, however, she deserves great praise for translating Herzen's writing into a lucid and contemporary English that preserves both the urgency and the irony underlying his prose.

Who was Alexander Herzen? Slavicists tend to overlook his work as a journalist and to describe him as the founder of Populism, a distinctly Russian version of socialism, based on the peasant commune, which furnished the ideological basis for much of the Russian revolutionary activity that culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1917. But Herzen's remarkable life encompassed far more than revolutionary theorizing.

Alexander Herzen was born in Moscow in April 1812, shortly before the Napoleonic invasion. The son of a rich Russian landowner named Ivan Yakovlev and a young German woman who lived with but was not married to Yakovlev, the surname he received (*Herz* being the German word for "heart") points to his illegitimate status and underscores the rigid societal norms that prevailed in Czarist Russia as he grew up. Like all educated Russians after 1812, Herzen was a patriot. Nevertheless, reacting to his stigmatization, from an early age he viewed himself as a revolutionary. The youthful Herzen attended the 1825 coronation of Nicholas I, which followed the execution of the Decembrists, a group of Russian army officers who had revolted against the Czar. He vowed then to avenge the victims by devoting himself to the struggle against the throne and what it stood for.

In 1829 Herzen entered the University of Moscow, where he led a demonstration against an unpopular professor. At the university Herzen developed ardent friendships with other serious-minded students in small discussion groups devoted to the exploration of progressive political and social issues. These men and women, the educated sons and daughters of the aristocratic Russian gentry, believed passionately in the power of ideas. They felt affronted by the absurd, backward and confining nature of the old regime. They believed that as

intellectuals they had a sacred duty to come to grips with the greatest thinkers, so as to apply their theories to improve the world. Herzen was twice arrested and found guilty of anti-Czarist agitation: In 1834 he was sentenced to five years in internal exile in Siberia, and in 1840 he was exiled again, this time for a year.

When Herzen's father died in 1846, Herzen came into a large inheritance that allowed him to leave Russia in 1847 and to travel throughout Western Europe. Herzen witnessed the Revolution of 1848 in Paris and considered emigrating to the United States. But going to America would have distanced him from the kinds of revolutionary activities that interested him, so instead he became a Swiss citizen. Herzen lived in Geneva and Nice before moving to London in 1852. There he established the first free Russian press in Europe to combat political oppression in his homeland. The press increased Herzen's fame as a revolutionary, which reached its apogee in the early 1860s. Thereafter, however, a younger and steelier generation of Russian agitators moved to center stage. In 1864, Herzen returned to Geneva to be nearer to continental radical groups, but his influence began to wane. He died in Paris in 1870.

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**A Herzen Reader**
*by Alexander Herzen*
*edited and translated from the Russian*
*with an introduction by Kathleen Parthé,*
*with a critical essay by Robert Harris*
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During his 23 years of exile (wandering, as he himself once put it, from one picturesque European "purgatory" to the next), the prolific Herzen poured out a mass of articles, letters, essays and proclamations. As Isaiah Berlin observed in one of his essays devoted to Herzen, the best of these writings are "original masterpieces of both journalism and art."

Herzen is indeed brilliant, witty and extremely readable. Berlin placed his writing on a par with Tolstoy's. Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky's best biographer and an unsurpassed master of Russian literature, has similarly argued that Herzen's work is comparable to the books of the great 19th-century Russian novelists. Yet despite these accolades, Herzen is comparatively little known to the general reading public in America.

Why this should be is a mystery, one that even so perceptive a critic as Dwight Macdonald found unfathomable: "Most people to whom I mention Herzen have either never heard of him or confuse him with another 19th-century founding father, Herzl, or with the physicist Hertz, he of the waves." Herzen might be loved and esteemed as a classic in Russia and Europe, but, as Macdonald resignedly concluded, "like certain wines, he doesn't 'travel' well. So far, he hasn't crossed the Atlantic." Macdonald wrote those words in 1948 as he was attempting to arouse American interest in Herzen by publishing (in *Politics*, the little magazine he was putting out at the time) excerpts from Herzen's most important book: his sparkling autobiography *My Past and Thoughts*. His efforts were mostly in vain.

*My Past and Thoughts* has been called, again by Joseph Frank, "perhaps the greatest work of its kind published anywhere in the 19th century, ranking with Rousseau's *Confessions* and Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* as the picture of both a life and a time." Macdonald himself, besides comparing Herzen's "classic of autobiography" to Rousseau's, invoked the names of Stendhal, Gibbon, Tolstoy and Henry Adams before impishly adding two notable, if antithetical, modern political figures: Trotsky and Churchill, men "who, like Herzen, knew how to assimilate the personal to the historical." But the American reading public remained unmoved.

Undaunted, Macdonald tried again. He produced a 700-page abridged version of *My Past and Thoughts* (intact, it is nearly three times as long) that appeared 25 years later in 1973. In the preface Macdonald couldn't refrain from noting that "my 1948 observations about Herzen's strange failure to catch on over here are . . . still (alas) relevant." One doubts that the print run for this labor of love was very large. Still, the shortened autobiography was twice reprinted, a modest triumph, before falling out of print and into used bookshops.

Three decades passed before the next attempt to interest the English-speaking world in Herzen. Herzen's champion on this occasion was the Czech-born English playwright Tom Stoppard, whose 2002 trilogy of three-hour plays, *Voyage*, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage*, collectively known as *The Coast of Utopia*, placed Herzen at the center of a complex story that examined the lives, beliefs and peregrinations of a group of 19th-century Russian revolutionaries.[1] Stoppard's trilogy was a smashing success in London. It fared even better when, five years later, it was transplanted to the New York stage and broke a record by amassing no fewer than seven Tony awards.

In a very real sense Stoppard succeeded where Macdonald failed: He raised the level of American awareness of Herzen's importance, at least among theatergoers. But he did so at a massive cost: the loss of Herzen's unique voice as a writer. To see "Herzen" presented on stage, as a character in a play with *Les Mis*-style special effects, is one thing. To read Herzen in his own right is something vastly different. New York bookstores reportedly ran out of Isaiah Berlin's collection of essays, *Russian Thinkers*, during the run of *The Coast of Utopia*. *The Romantic Exiles*, E.H. Carr's dramatic 1933 portrayal of Herzen's life, was also rushed back into print to meet the increased demand to learn more about him and his circle of would-be revolutionaries. Curiously, though, American readers who care to read Herzen himself have had to wait an additional five years for some of his most captivating writing to appear in print. Finally we have *A Herzen Reader*, a selection of one hundred essays and editorials culled from influential columns Herzen wrote for *The Polestar* and *The Bell*, the two journals he edited during his exile in London in the 1850s and 1860s.

Has the wait has been worth it? Yes, and then some. For starters, *A Herzen Reader* contains several passages that are as eloquent as the best parts of *My Past and Thoughts*. But unlike Herzen's masterly autobiography, which in a certain sense is one enchantingly long digression in the manner of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the articles in *A Herzen Reader* are more direct, biting and sharply to the point. Here we witness Herzen not in the guise of aristocratic, Proustian racconteur, but Herzen as intellectual pugilist, a role he relished even more.

Writing for newspapers is a useful discipline, especially for would-be philosophers and theorists. Journalists are compelled to engage with the here and now, to hold their theories up to the glare of reality, to convince by writing with clarity, and to apply their understanding of history to the events of the day. For example, Herzen's great antagonist Karl Marx wrote for the *New York Tribune*, and in many respects Marx's journalistic writing has withstood the test of time more successfully than his more professorial tomes. More recently we have the example of Albert Camus, who in the pages of *Combat* (the Resistance newspaper that he edited during and following World War II in France) successfully expressed his philosophical views by wrestling with the immediate problems of life and politics.

Isaiah Berlin claimed that *My Past and Thoughts* was the "ark" in which Herzen saved the story of his life for posterity. Yet that writing was, Berlin continued, still only an accompaniment to his central activity as a journalist. One might say that if Herzen's autobiography was his "ark", his journals, particularly *The Bell*, was his version of David's sling, through which he sought to fell the Goliath of Czardom.

That indispensable resource in Herzen studies, Isaiah Berlin, best captures Herzen's style of journalism:

> Russia was to the democrats of this period very much what the fascist powers were in our own time: the arch-enemy of freedom and enlightenment, the reservoir of darkness, cruelty and oppression, the land most frequently, most violently denounced by its own exiled sons, the sinister power, served by innumerable spies and informers, whose hidden hand was discovered in every political development unfavorable to the growth of national or individual liberty in Europe.

In short, Herzen was up against a formidable opponent. But like Voltaire, who faced

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[1] See Timothy Frye, "Show Stoppard", *The American Interest* (July/August 2007).

down another *ancien régime* more than half a century earlier, Herzen kept his enemy on the defensive by using the weapons of the engaged intellectual: investigation, exposure, dispassionate argument, ridicule and "the oxygen of publicity", what in Russian is called *glasnost*. For Herzen, as for Voltaire, the essence of intellectual freedom was wit, meaning both intelligence and laughter. "Laughter", Herzen writes, "is one of the most powerful weapons against something that is obsolete but is still propped up by God knows what, like an important ruin which prevents new growth and frightens the weak. Laughter is no joking matter, and we will not give it up."

Four decades before Émile Zola penned his famous open letter to the President of the French Republic, *J'accuse*, in defense of Alfred Dreyfus, Herzen was already publishing respectful, if pungent, open letters to the Czar, reproduced in *A Herzen Reader*, in defense of freedom of speech and freedom for the serfs. Herzen devoted many editorials to combating the physical abuse of serfs and in defense of their rights to land and to liberty:

> [T]here is no fatal necessity demanding that every step forward for the people must be celebrated with piles of corpses. A baptism by blood is a great thing, but we do not share the savage belief that every act of liberation and every triumph must pass through this.

He urged Alexander II to "prevent a great calamity while it is still in your power."

The general principles governing Herzen's journalism were straightforward: "Everywhere, in all matters, to be on the side of freedom against coercion, the side of reason against prejudice, the side of science against fanaticism, and the side of advancing peoples against backward governments." He was an aggressive, self-confident polemicist who repeatedly called upon the readers of *The Polestar* and *The Bell* to assist him by providing him with information. *Vivos voco*, "I summon the living", served as the epigraph to the latter publication. Herzen called upon his fellow countrymen "not only to listen to our Bell but to take their own turn in ringing it", by providing free material for its columns.

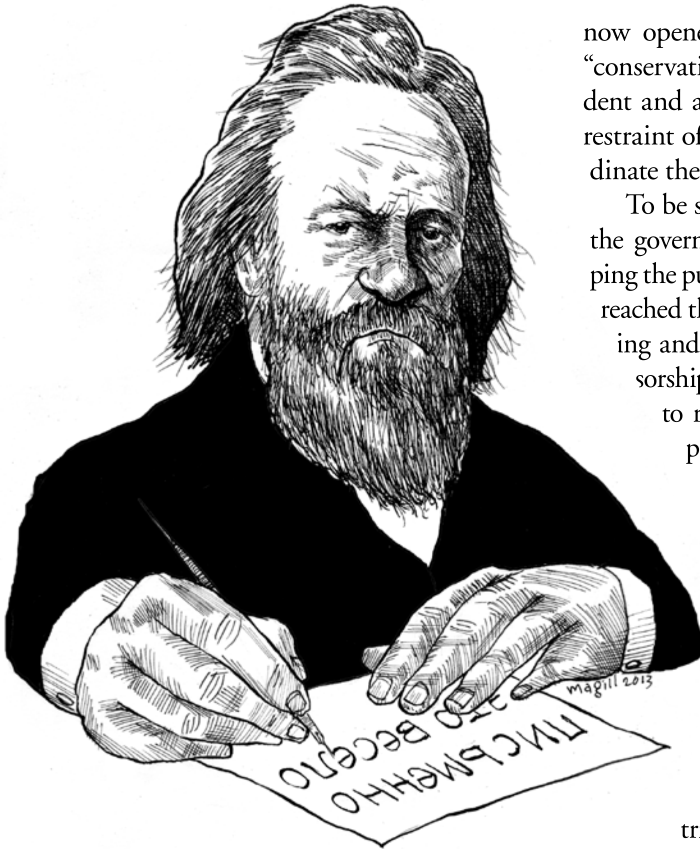
Herzen, in turn, wrote with urgency about events in Russia that, in his words, were moving quickly and needed to be "caught on the fly and discussed right away." His writing is at once caustic and distinguished. It is brilliantly entertaining and at times rises to great feeling and expression. His characteristic tone, as Dr. Parthé observes, is ironic. In Herzen's own words, his aim was "to be Russia's protest, its cry of liberation and its cry of pain." *The Bell* was to be "not just Russia's revenge but its irony—and nothing more."

But Herzen's irony differs from the way the term is commonly applied today, namely to mean the opposite of what you might expect. Rather, for Herzen, irony consists in the recognition that the world in its essence is a paradoxical place and that only with an ambivalent attitude can one grasp its nature. Politics and life are too complicated to be encapsulated in any one theory, and an ironic disposition suited Herzen perfectly as he gazed at fellow Russian revolutionaries who "throw themselves into the stream with a handbook on swimming."

Herzen's irony challenged all those obsessive visions of the world that purport to explain everything with a single principle (such as the divine right of kings or the iron economic laws of history). Herzen remained grounded in the facts, and yet one often finds in his columns subtle explorations of the existential predicament of wanting to change the world without really possessing an unambiguous metaphysical solution to the absurdities of existence. "It is vexing", Herzen editorialized, "that history moves along such muddy and isolated country roads, but only conscious thought takes a direct route." Herzen valued life over pure thought and therefore did not change his ironic stance to accommodate revolutionary ideologies. He declared that "we will also take history's path, maneuvering with it, pressing along together with it."

*A Herzen Reader* offers readers a rich array of intellectual issues to ponder, about not only the world of ideas in Europe and Russia in the 1850s and 1860s, but also how they relate to contemporary goings-on. A few of the most important include freedom of the press, the freedom of Poland and terrorism.

Herzen began publication of *The Polestar* and *The Bell* during the reign of Nicholas I,




**Alexander Herzen**

who saw himself as a ruler appointed by Providence to save his people from the horrors of atheism, liberalism and revolution. Ever the quintessential autocrat, he made it the first aim of his government to eliminate every form of political heterodoxy or opposition. Herzen was an ardent champion of freedom of the press and a unrelenting foe of censorship in all forms. After the Revolution of 1848, censorship became an obsession of Nicholas, and several of Herzen's most vigorous editorials attack him. He persistently demanded "the *emancipation of the word* [emphasis in the original] as the condition and the atmosphere without which there can be no popular advice about the common cause."

Following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in 1856, Czar Alexander II initiated a series of reforms that brought about a measure of liberalization. Among these reforms were the new press laws issued in 1865. The number of periodicals published in Russia increased from 104 in 1855 to 230 in 1860. Topics formerly closed to press discussion, such as the conditions of the serfs and the steps toward emancipation, were now opened. Herzen vigorously opposed the "conservative" reaction to the newly independent and assertive press, which demanded the restraint of journalists and attempted to subordinate the press to governmental authority.

To be sure, even under the liberalized policy the government retained the privilege of stopping the publication of "illegal" ideas before they reached the masses. The cost in personal suffering and the eradication of talent due to censorship was vast. But Herzen was the first to recognize that, paradoxically, the impact of censorship on Russian literature was not uniformly harmful. In fact, Russian literature had flourished under Nicholas's censorship regime. As Herzen noted, no society reads more attentively, to none is the writer a more indispensable presence, than one that endures censorship: "No oppression has ever paid to the written word, to the text, the tribute of a more savage vigilance."

As to Poland, Herzen thought that all nations deserved to be free, and thus he supported the 1863 Polish uprising against Russia. Even Russian liberals, who joined in the wave of passionate Russian nationalism that accompanied the suppression of the Polish insurrection, opposed him on this issue. Russian opinion of all stripes overwhelmingly favored the suppression of the Polish rebels. But Herzen wrote that he was unable to follow his fellow countrymen "along the path of bloody and crude patriotism." As a result, Herzen lost popularity, and *The Bell*'s constituency, made up of enlightened Russian gentry and members of the emerging middle class, began to fracture. For some, no true Russian patriot could endorse Polish independence. Others, more radical than Herzen, concluded that true emancipation could be achieved only by the gun, not the pen, and so embraced the use of political murder.

Herzen opposed what came to be known as terrorism. He not only stated his objection to violent "surprises" as a way of changing history. He also denounced Dimitri Karakozov, a deranged former student who in 1866 fired a shot at Alexander II at the gates of St. Petersburg's summer garden. Karakozov's attack marked the beginning of terrorism, both revolutionary and reactionary,

in that this attack led the czarist state to increase its repression. Herzen dismissed Karakozov as a "pitiful fanatic", but a spokesman for the younger generation of exiles, Nikolai Serno-Solovievich, attacked Herzen for condemning him.

The *Reader* also enables us to see that throughout Herzen's career as a journalist he often made reference to America, that country he had once considered calling his own: "If I were not a Russian, I should long ago have gone away to America." Herzen was won to the idea of a local self-government, possibly in a federated republic of city-states, while observing municipal life during his stay in Italy (October 1847 to May 1848). Like his contemporary Alexis de Tocqueville, Herzen approved of American federalism and local self-government, and lauded the lack of a strong, centralized bureaucracy in America. "Centralization may do a great deal for order and for various public undertakings", Herzen had earlier written, "but it is incompatible with freedom. It easily brings a nation to the position of a well-tended flock or a pack of hounds cleverly kept in order by a huntsman." In *The Bell* he puts the matter succinctly: "Decentralization is the first condition of our revolution."

Herzen vehemently opposed the institution of Negro slavery in America and was an avowed opponent of the Confederacy during the American Civil War. To Herzen, Jefferson Davis was "the greatest political criminal of our time." These are views not unexpected in one who passionately supported the abolition of serfdom in Russia, a point we find hammered home repeatedly in one editorial after another. Considering developments in America also strengthened his resentment of any suggestion that Russia would necessarily follow the evolution of the nations of Western Europe. There were no physiologically fixed lines of evolution fatalistically laid out for every nation. America, thought Herzen, was the supreme vindication of this view: "The manners, morals and habits of the Americans have developed a peculiar character of their own." And the same would be true, *mutatis mutandis*, with Russia. Indeed, "in the future", Herzen writes, "Russia has one comrade, one fellow-traveler—the Northern States."

All told, there is a curious ambivalence in Herzen's writing as in his life. He cherished America but never went there even for a visit. He championed revolution, yet he passionately attacked those revolutionaries who, he thought, opposed individual freedom. Despite his distrust of political fanaticism, however, he did not turn into a cautious, reformist, liberal constitutionalist, and in this respect he differed greatly from Tocqueville; Herzen remained an agitator and a socialist to the end. Nevertheless, he denounced with genuine disgust the younger generation of militant and boorish Russian revolutionaries who countenanced terrorism. Never one to pull punches, he described them as the "syphilis" resulting from the "revolutionary passions" of Herzen's generation of radicals.

Herzen opposed not only the violence of the new generation of revolutionaries, but also their determinism. Again, he rejected theories that posited a single controlling influence determining all future developments. Significantly, he opposed such theories because they denied the capacity of individuals to choose their destinies and instead called for a ruling elite that would direct the lives of the masses.

Herzen's powerful pen treated this issue in a fascinating 1862 essay titled "Cannon fodder of liberation." Addressing the revolutionaries, Herzen wrote:

> No, gentlemen, stop representing yourselves as throwers of thunderbolts and as Moses, calling down noise and lightning through the will of God, stop presenting yourselves as the wise shepherds of human herds! One should be more modest, and stop trying to educate entire peoples, stop boasting about your *enlightened* mind and abstract understanding.

Herzen's outlook is appealing in many ways, but it is not without flaws. First, it was unrealistically utopian. The Slavicist Adam Yarmolinksy rightly observed that Herzen's belief in populism was "fantasy-laden." His idealization of Russian peasants and village communes, which he thought could establish the rule of justice and widespread happiness, amounted to nothing more than a "social myth."

The extreme rhetoric he employed was a second weakness, and here, it must be said, he had something in common with the violent, deterministic radicals whom he denounced. In vilifying his adversaries Herzen tended to

dehumanize them. Thus he described his Czarist opponents as "lice", "maggots", "howling dogs" and the like. Quoting an earlier master of vilification, Herzen approvingly noted a contention of Martin Luther's: "In anger I feel the full might of my being. Hate is the *super-exaltatio* of love." Herzen bequeathed this bloodthirsty rhetoric to the Russian revolutionaries who succeeded him. Although he would have been too humane to act on it, they were not.

We are more than 150 years removed from the historical events in Russia that Herzen described. Yet the pattern he described seems eerily familiar. Reading Herzen today is useful for understanding Putin's Russia, because in some respects it resembles Czarist Russia. It has reverted to a heavily authoritarian style of government after a brief flirtation with genuine political openness. The Kremlin uses the courts, the public prosecutor and the tax police to frighten or ruin anyone who might oppose the government. The Russian parliament, such as it is as a legislature that lacks the power of the governmental purse, has endorsed all this. Still, in other respects Putinism and Czarism are vastly different.

Putin and his subordinates operate according to self-enriching mafia principles. Documents published by Wikileaks supply evidence to this effect. In one of them the American Ambassador to Russia observed that "the government operates more as a kleptocracy than a government." Unlike Czarist Russia, Putin's Russia is not characterized by an approximation of a rational, Prussian-like state, or by any coherent ideology, not even a reactionary one. Instead it is motivated primarily by a quest for wealth and security. Russia today profits greatly from its huge oil and gas exports. As a result, elements of its economy have boomed, and Putin enjoys huge and authentic popularity on that account. Life is better for the average Russian than it has been for at least twenty years.

But even when one takes these substantial differences into account, Herzen's analysis continues to be helpful. In particular, it offers a useful corrective to determinist views. Contrary to those who claim that Russia has and will always have a political culture that subordinates the individual to the state (and that Putinism therefore embodies Russia's historical tradition), Herzen reminds us there is no historical master plan for Russia's future. Instead, Herzen would say, Russia is free to change and may well do so in the future. If it does, Herzen, not Marx, will have been its prophet.

*A Herzen Reader* is an enormous labor of scholarship, to which Robert Harris has contributed a critical essay examining Herzen's reception in Russia and the West. Among many other interesting observations, Harris explains how John Stuart Mill's writing on liberty struck a chord with Herzen, and how the study of Herzen's work flourished during the Soviet era (notwithstanding the mutual antipathy between Herzen and Marx) simply because Lenin once praised his writing. It's an irony one can imagine Herzen savoring.

Herzen has had other friends and supporters, too, who help us appreciate his greatness. Looking into his own character to understand why he took the contrarian stand against despotic power that he did, George Orwell said: "My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. . . . I write . . . because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing." Orwell's ultimate goal was to make this kind of political writing into an art. Most would agree that he succeeded, and the same may be said not only of Herzen but also of his many successors in Russia, from Solzhenitsyn to, most recently, Anna Politkovskaya. These are people who have refused to be co-opted through venal or coercive means, determined to expose injustice and sometimes, as with Politkovskaya, paying for it with their lives. Herzen, who himself received death threats while in exile in London for his journalistic exposés, is again the representative Russian in this respect.

In her introduction to the *Reader*, Parthé aptly cites Leo Tolstoy's brief 1905 diary entry on Herzen: "He awaits his readers in the future." This book shows Herzen's brilliance as a writer. With luck, Parthé's book will at last enable Herzen to find the American readership that he richly deserves, and Dwight Macdonald will finally be able to rest peacefully on this score.

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