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The God that flickered

by Gary Saul Morson

On Alexander Herzen and the revolutionary mind.

Perhaps the best way to understand the psychology of radicals is to read accounts of former believers. In that classic collection of essays by disillusioned communists—*The God That Failed*—six major writers evoke what passionate belief feels like and analyze the kinds of thinking that sustain it. In the opening selection, Arthur Koestler describes the heady moment when “the new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past” when one still lived among “those who don’t know.” One has at last achieved complete serenity and assurance, except for the “occasional fear of losing faith again, losing thereby what alone makes life worth living.”

The most important lesson Koestler learned was what might be called “preemptive refutation,” a series of techniques guaranteed to handle any counter-evidence. When, as a novice reporter for a communist paper, he pointed out that every word of a major story was false, the editor explained that Koestler still had the “mechanistic” outlook instead of the proper dialectical one revealing what was “objectively” happening. Once you have assimilated dialectics, Koestler explains, “you were no longer disturbed by facts,” which fell automatically into place. The only remaining difficulty was adjusting to a rapid shift in the party line. Then you had to search your memory to convince yourself that you had always accepted the new truth. It’s just what Orwell describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “Oceania was at war with Eastasia. Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia.” The whole process reminded Koestler of the croquet game in *Alice in Wonderland* “in which the hoops moved around the field and the balls were live hedgehogs. With this difference, that when a player missed his turn and the Queen shouted ‘Off with his head,’ the order was executed in earnest.”

Dostoevsky, the only nineteenth-century thinker to foresee what we have come to call totalitarianism, drew on his own experience as a former revolutionary to represent the radical mindset from within. He asked himself: what would Russian intellectuals do if they ever gained power? And he realized that, although his generation was not as bloodthirsty as the radicals to follow, they, and he himself, could be drawn into committing horrible crimes in the sincere

conviction that they were pursuing justice. The relative moderates, who above all want to dissociate themselves from the conservatives, can always be shamed into going along with anything. It is a mistake to think that the decent people we know would never endorse, let alone commit, vile deeds. “And therein lies the real horror,” Dostoevsky explains. In Russia, and eventually everywhere,

the purest of hearts and the most innocent of people can be drawn into committing . . . the foulest and most villainous act without being in the least a villain! . . . The possibility of considering oneself—and sometimes being, in fact—an honorable person while committing obvious and undeniable villainy—that is our whole affliction today!

Dostoevsky learned a great deal from Russia’s most literate revolutionary, Alexander Herzen (1812–70), who died just a century and a half ago. Unlike Koestler, Herzen never renounced his faith in revolution, but he came to see its glaring flaws and ever-present dangers. His ironic dissections of revolutionary thinking and behavior cut to the heart of delusions that, in spite of all his insight, he never surrendered. Clinging to radical faith, he acutely probed his own mindset to show what made it so irresistible. “There are few diseases so intractable as idealism,” he wrote. For him, revolution was the God that flickered.

Herzen grew up in the sort of lordly privilege that in Russia was still taken for granted but that even the most eminent English aristocrats found hard to fathom. Serfdom claimed the overwhelming majority of the population, and a few magnates owned as many as a hundred thousand “souls” (adult male serfs). Even when he was imprisoned, Herzen’s connections allowed him to live in supreme comfort, with delicacies brought to his cell. When he was exiled to Siberia, Herzen was given a coveted administrative post that involved, among other duties, writing reports about political exiles, including himself. As for living arrangements, his father sent a servant to make life easier for him.

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Herzen's mother was a German girl with whom his father had fallen in love and whom he smuggled into Russia disguised as a boy. His father gave his illegitimate son the name "Herzen" (from the German word for heart) and showered blessings upon him. Like the aristocrats Tolstoy describes in *War and Peace*, Herzen's father spoke French better than Russian. When he heard that the tsar had read Nikolai Karamzin's history of the Russian state, he tried to get through it but soon threw it down contemptuously. "It is nothing but Izyaslaviches and Olgoviches: to whom can it be of interest?" As a youth, Herzen was repelled by the old man's utter disdain for human nature and his assumption that people are capable of every evil act. "The soul of man is darkness," he used to say. By the time Herzen recorded these words, he had come reluctantly to acknowledge their wisdom.

Herzen attended university, got into political trouble, and suffered through a soft exile that showed him how corrupt Russian officialdom really worked. Upon his return to Moscow and Petersburg, he joined or interacted with intellectual circles whose members shaped modern Russian thought. His descriptions of the first Slavophiles, whose ideas about authentic folk Russia were adapted from German philosophy; of Russia's greatest literary critic, "furious" Vissarion Belinsky; and of the future founder of modern anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin, all gave birth to the "ideological hero" of Russian literature.

The author of some mediocre fiction, Herzen found his true vocation when he traveled to Western Europe and, after the failed European revolutions of 1848, decided to stay there. He used his wealth to found the first great Russian émigré journals, *Polar Star* and *The Bell*, which he described as machines manufacturing that rarest of Russian commodities, free speech. At its apogee, from 1857–62, *The Bell* was read throughout Russia, including by the new tsar, Alexander II, then preparing the liberation of the serfs and other major reforms. The empress wept over it, and high government officials, no less than radicals, devoured it, in Herzen's words, "as though it had been stuffed with truffles." "Complain to the tsar, do what you like," one minister is reported to have said to a critic, "even write to *The Bell*, if you must, it's all the same to me."

Herzen's literary reputation rests primarily on two long works and a number of brilliant articles. (See Kathleen Parthé's splendid collection, *A Herzen Reader*, Northwestern University Press, 2012.) *From the Other Shore*, a series of essays and philosophical dialogues, meditated inconclusively on the heartrending failures of the 1848 revolutions.

His greatest achievement was his autobiography, *My Past and Thoughts*, an odd mixture of stories, satires, nostalgic reminiscences, philosophical meditations, and incomparable portraits of the greatest figures of the day, including not only the shapers of Russian thought but also influential Europeans: Mazzini, Orsini, Proudhon, Kossuth, James Rothschild, and, especially, Garibaldi. Published spasmodically from 1854 on (including sections written to appear only posthumously), the work was designed so that "history . . . is caught in the act." When Herzen recalls the past, he also evokes the moment of reminiscing with all its hopes and fears, so that two moments are simultaneously palpable. For Herzen, the act of recalling the past—accurately or fallaciously,

wisely or foolishly—is itself an essential part of individual lives and historical movements. Remorse and hope, the traces of bygone days and the anticipation of possible futures, shape every present moment. Herzen therefore left each separately published part unrevised when he brought them together in book form, so that, as he explained, each part “retains the color of its own time and of varying mood—I should not care to rub this off.”

Whenever an event prompts a political or philosophical thought, Herzen records it as it first occurs to him, and so we catch his thinking in the act, too. “Parentheses are my joy and my misfortune,” he observes, and he hopes that in this work, with all its “annexes, superstructures, extensions, there is a unity.” If there is, it is the unity of his own charismatic personality which Tolstoy described as a “rare combination of scintillating brilliance and depth.” Henry James famously described the great Russian novels (among others) as “loose, baggy monsters,” but this autobiography is the loosest and baggiest of all. It works, as Isaiah Berlin observed, because it is essentially spontaneous conversation, and we do not demand that conversations display architecture.

My Past and Thoughts could also be described as a series of anecdotes, and Herzen may be the greatest anecdotalist who ever lived. He had an eye for the moment when people reveal more than they intend about themselves or show their whole personality in a single remark. Standing by, and occasionally prodding an interlocutor to a telling comment, Herzen exhibits endless varieties of irony, and irony was for him not just a rhetorical device but a view of life as a whole.

He recounts the wonderful story of how, when he was a Siberian official, his boss had to reply to an official document written in bureaucratic jargon so convoluted that neither he nor his top aides could make any sense of it. It turned out that his staff contained a man who knew bureaucratic language well enough to craft a proper reply without the slightest understanding of what was being said. And so forms generate forms *ad infinitum*: is this not bureaucracy at its essence?

Then there was the pedantic French governess who “even at night in her bed . . . was more concerned with teaching the proper way to sleep than with sleeping,” or so Herzen was convinced. A vegetarian fanatic’s knock-down argument—“Do you know that a man always nourished on vegetable food so purifies his body as to be quite free from smell after death?”—provoked Herzen to reply: “That’s very pleasant . . . but what advantage will that be to me? I won’t be sniffing after death.” When one revolutionary appalled Herzen by explaining that “it would be sufficient to massacre two or three million of the inhabitants of the globe and the revolution would go swimmingly,” another tried to calm him: “Listen, you have lost sight of one fact, perhaps; Herzen is speaking of the whole human race; in that number there would be at least two hundred

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thousand Chinese.”

When Tsar Nicholas I refused to allow Herzen to take his wealth out of Russia, he sold his assets to the cunning James Rothschild. As soon as the Russian government refused to honor the note, it discovered that its new owner, Rothschild, would scuttle the massive state loan it was negotiating with him. And so, as Herzen explains, “Nicholas Romanov, that Petersburg merchant of the first guild . . . did at the Imperial command of Rothschild pay over the illegally detained money, together with the interest and the interest on the interest, justifying himself by his ignorance of the laws, which in his social position he could certainly not be expected to know.”

While Russian intellectuals tended to live in a cloud of abstractions, Herzen displayed a singular ability to endow ideas with flesh. For the young thinkers of the 1830s, Hegel’s philosophy seemed more real than the people around them, so that “everything that in reality was direct, every simple feeling, was exalted into abstract categories and came back from them without a drop of living blood, a pale algebraic shadow. . . . The very tear that started to the eye was referred to its proper [Hegelian] classification.” Herzen’s anecdotes reverse this process, let us understand how such a devotion to abstraction was concretely experienced, and, with trademark irony, restore blood to the algebraic shadows.

Herzen’s reputation as a prodigious thinker derives from his skeptical assessments of radical thought and the intellectual shibboleths of his day, many of which are still with us. Then as now, intolerant thinkers warded off criticism by claiming that their ideas were “science,” and so beyond reasonable doubt. As Herzen observed, “the mysticism of the Gospel” had been replaced by “the mysticism of science.” Except that this was not real science: for one thing, it was a set of fixed dogmas rather than a process of evolving inquiry; for another, putative “social sciences” were hardly sciences at all; and for yet another, philosophical and political conclusions derived from a real science were mistakenly regarded as part of it. The theologian Vladimir Soloviev famously paraphrased the illogic of Russian radicals who derived socialism from Darwinism: “Man is descended from the apes; therefore, we must love one another.”

“Science is not a special school or doctrine,” Herzen observed, “and so it can become neither a government, an arbitrary law, nor a persecution.” Fanatics are always smuggling “pious rhetoric” into “physiological and geological lectures.” In this way, Herzen explained, they “discover” purpose and other essentially metaphysical or theological concepts in nature. They invent (and continue to invent) various God substitutes. Rejecting “providence,” for instance, they attribute to nature a “law of progress” that extends into human history. In one of the dialogues in *From the Other Shore*, a wise old skeptic cautions a young idealist against this “religion of science”:

Could you please explain to me why belief in God is ridiculous and belief in humanity is not; why belief in the kingdom of heaven is silly, but belief in utopias on earth is clever? Having discarded positive religion, we have retained all the habits of religion, and having lost paradise in heaven we believe in the coming paradise on earth. . . . Faith in life after death gave so much strength to the martyrs of the early centuries, but then the very same faith supported the martyrs of the revolution.

Liberals as well as radicals believed, and thought science confirmed, that history had an upward direction, a belief we can still detect when ideas are condemned as backward-looking or praised as “of the future,” as if later were guaranteed to be better. In several eloquent passages, Herzen (or the ironic speaker of his dialogues) insisted that “history is going nowhere.” Historical determinism, no less than “the law of progress,” is entirely false. “The disheveled improvisation of history” contains more possibilities than those actually realized: “A multitude of possibilities . . . lies slumbering at every step.”

When Herzen’s liberal friend Turgenev insisted that Russia’s destiny was to follow Western Europe and liberalize, Herzen, who despised the “bourgeois mediocrity” of the West, replied that Russians were, mercifully, better than the ugly bourgeoisie and that the concept of destiny was in any case inapplicable. Russia is no Venus de Milo, Turgenev countered, and resembles other European nations “except, perhaps, that she is a little broader in the beam.” “We Russians,” Turgenev explained, “belong . . . to the European family, genus *Europaeum*, and consequently by the laws of physiology are bound to follow the same path. I have never heard of a duck, belonging to the breed of duck, breathing with gills.”

Herzen replied that “the general plan of development admits of unforeseen derivations,” and, if we are going to use biological analogies, then wolves, foxes, and dogs are all variations on the same theme: “The future is a variation improvised on a theme of the past.”

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In a number of passages, Herzen outlines a distinct view of causality. Determinists typically claimed, and still claim, that the only alternative to iron-clad laws is sheer chance, and scientists have discovered too

much regularity for that to be true. Herzen describes a third causal model: laws in the background act as loose regulating principles while contingency, including both chance and human choice, operates in the foreground. “The general laws, of course, remain the same,” he explains to Turgenev, “but they may vary in their particular application, till they appear absolutely opposite in their manifestations . . . development in nature and in history, far from not being able to turn aside, is bound to be continually turning aside.” As the most insightful Herzen scholar, Aileen Kelly, observes in *The Discovery of Chance: The Life and Thought of Alexander Herzen* (2016), this is the very model that Darwin—the real Darwin, not his presentation in textbooks or journalistic paraphrases—proposed for evolution. Herzen, Kelly explains, “would combine the notion of

chance in this Darwinian sense with a radical humanism . . . that he would oppose to all teleological narratives of history and human life.”

In Herzen’s view, determinism is not only mistaken but also dangerous because it reduces people to puppets and renders all their strivings meaningless. “Are we to shed real blood and real tears for the performance of a charade by providence? If there is a predestined plan, history is reduced to an insertion of figures in an algebraic formula,” he writes in a line that may have inspired the snarl of Dostoevsky’s underground man that determinism makes life resemble solving “twice two makes four.” The result is always given in advance. And so, the underground man memorably concludes, “Twice two makes four is simply a piece of insolence. . . . I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five can sometimes also be a very charming little thing.”

The utopians insist that history has a goal, but if we ever reached it, Herzen observed, humanity “would have come to rest, a finished article, an absolute status quo, like the animals.” “There is no *libretto*,” Herzen famously concluded. “If there were a *libretto*, history would lose all interest, become . . . ludicrous. . . . In history, all is improvisation, all is will, all is *ex tempore*,” much like Herzen’s own writing.

Those who posit a goal are all too often willing to sacrifice any number of people to reach it because, however many must die, the future is infinite and so far more people will be saved. In Dostoevsky’s novel *The Possessed*, one revolutionary argues that even “a hundred million heads” is a cheap price to pay since “despotism in some hundred years [alone] will devour not a hundred but five hundred million heads.” Herzen, as well as Dostoevsky, was more than prescient in foreseeing the results of such reasoning.

Since those who argue this way typically claim the authority of science, Herzen insisted that nature has no goals. On the contrary, it values every present moment, pouring itself into the intoxicating smell of a luxuriant flower which passes away almost immediately. More important, life is lived only in the present, and each person “lives not for the fulfillment of an idea, not for progress, but solely because he was born; and he was born . . . for the present . . . we are . . . not dolls destined to suffer progress or embody some homeless idea.”

And what if progress is infinite, and so a goal is never reached? What if—as actually was to happen, of course—each generation should be sacrificed for a future that can never be reached; what if time and again the eggs are broken and the omelette is never made? This is the myth of Sisyphus made historical. In the most famous passage in *From the Other Shore*, the old skeptic tells the young idealist who believes in the law of progress:

If progress is the end, for whom are we working? Who is this Moloch who, as the toilers approach him, instead of rewarding them, only recedes, and as a consolation to the exhausted doomed multitude . . . can give back only the mocking answer that after their death all will be beautiful on earth. Do you truly wish to condemn all human beings alive today to the sad role . . . of wretched galley slaves, up to their knees in mud, dragging a barge . . . with the humble words “progress in the future” inscribed on its bows? . . .

This alone should serve as a warning to people: an end that is infinitely remote is not an end, but, if you like, a trap; an end must be nearer—it ought to be, at the very least, the laborer’s wage, or pleasure in the work done.

This is just the sort of thinking Lenin had in mind when he said that workers left to their own devices would always value their own lives more than the revolution and so would never rise above “trade-union consciousness.”

Herzen grew increasingly aware that his most cherished values—unconstrained thought, free speech, and a respect for each individual’s human dignity—were all threatened by the revolutionaries themselves. We revolutionaries, he remarks with dismay, “look with amazement and indignation at the impudence of a sincere and free man who dares to doubt the truth of this [radical] rhetoric; such doubt is an affront to us.” We have seen, and we will continue to see, “the fight of a free man against the liberators of humanity. The bold words . . . of Proudhon angered the official revolutionaries. . . . they placed him under a revolutionary anathema for his bold words.” Time and again, free thought is sacrificed to “some collective noun.” Herzen also foresaw that the workers and peasants in whose name the revolution would be made would also be sacrificed to one or another collective noun. The skeptic in *From the Other Shore* asks: “Do you want . . . the slave labors of Egypt offered by the Communists?”

For Berlin and Kelly, this is the true Herzen, and it is certainly the one from whom we have the most to learn. But there is another Herzen, who prevailed over the skeptical one, and that unfortunate triumph also has a lot to teach us.

Despite knowing all that is wrong with radical thought, Herzen could not resist its pull. Time and again, he admits that there is no knowing what the revolution will bring, and that the revolutionaries are not the sort of people to trust, only to enjoin his readers to follow them anyway. In an introduction to *From the Other Shore*, Herzen advises his son, to whom the work is dedicated, “not to remain on this shore,” a line that gives the work its title. Join the revolutionaries crossing to the other shore, regardless of what is to be found there. “The religion of the coming revolution is the only one I bequeath you,” he writes. There is no trace here of Herzen’s trademark irony.

What overcame Herzen’s better judgment? In part, it was his deep aristocratic distaste for everything bourgeois, vulgar, philistine, mediocre, and prudent, for the liberal world and its middle-class virtues. They value “Moderation and Punctuality,” he answered Turgenev: “The life of the middle class is full of small defects and small virtues; it is self-restrained, stingy, and shuns what is extreme and superfluous.” The liberal West finds its final

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form in "petit bourgeois vulgarity." All that Western parliamentarianism, constitutionalism, democracy, gradualism, and liberal reformism runs counter to the glorious extremism of the Russian spirit. Whatever faults we Russians have, Herzen wrote in an open letter to Jules Michelet, "Russia will never be *juste-milieu* [happy medium]" and will never make a revolution that stops half-way. Unfortunately, he was right about that.

"Momentary relief makes one forget the disease itself," Herzen insisted, and so, as Lenin was to conclude, "the worse, the better." Herzen readily fell prey to the rhetoric of apocalyptic destruction for its own sake: "Preach the tidings of death . . . the good tidings of the coming redemption." He quotes his old friend Bakunin's favorite line, "The will to destroy is also a creative will," and agrees that there is no need even to consider what will rise from the rubble:

We are called upon to execute institutions, destroy beliefs . . . holding nothing sacred, making no concessions, showing no mercy. . . . When everything is engulfed . . . when the waters subside and the ark has come to rest, then men will have other things to do, many other things. But not now!

Herzen could easily resist the mysticism of "science," but not the mysticism of "revolution." Later Russian thinkers were to call this kind of thinking "revolutionism." As Nadezhda Mandelstam was to observe of the early Soviet intelligentsia:

the decisive part in the subjugation of the intelligentsia was played not by terror and bribery . . . but by the word "Revolution," which none of them could bear to give up. It is a word to which whole nations have succumbed, and its force was such that one wonders why our rulers still needed prisons and capital punishment.

When Herzen wrote of "the tragic position of thinkers," he was referring to those like himself who cling to the art, civilization, and humane liberal values of the old world while still believing in the beneficent inevitability of the new. Our position, he wrote, resembles those wise pagans at the end of the Roman Empire who could embrace neither the decadent senility of the old world nor the barbarous infancy of the new. All logic and evidence lead to skepticism, Herzen conceded, but one needs belief. "You think that doubt, calm on the surface is easy," the old skeptic in *From the Other Shore* confides, "But can you know what a man, in a moment of pain, weakness, exhaustion, might not be ready to give for a belief?" "Many times in moments of weakness and despair," wrote Herzen in *My Past and Thoughts*, he wished that he had died on the barricade and so "borne two or three beliefs with me to the grave."

Reflecting on a disastrous decision to support one hopeless rebellion, Herzen describes his wavering with special honesty and power:

How, whence, did I come by this readiness to give way, though with a murmur, to this weak yielding, though after rebellion and a protest? I had, on the one hand, a conviction that I ought to act one way, and, on the other, a readiness to act quite differently. This wavering . . . has not even left me with the faint comfort of recognizing that my mistake was involuntary. . . . I did not for one moment believe in the

success of the [uprising of] the 13th of June; I saw the absurdity of the movement and its impotence How many misfortunes, how many blows, I should have been spared in my life, if . . . I had had the strength to listen to myself . . . [instead of] being easily carried away.

Intellectuals in general, even when they are not fanatics, are easily carried away by revolutionary rhetoric. Sometimes it seems they turn to it by tropism, the way a plant turns to the light. As with Herzen, no results, however frequent and disastrous, can induce them to give up the radical romance that has shaped their very identity.

In *The Possessed*, right after the revolutionaries have pledged themselves to taking “a hundred million heads” and have signed on to whatever crimes the leadership might deem expedient, one character observes: “I confess I am in favor of a more humane policy, but as all are on the other side, I go along with the rest.” We have all encountered people who would rather side with those two miles to the left of them than be seen in the company of those two feet to the right.

Herzen’s work, then, is important for two reasons. It dissects the shortcomings of radical thought while exemplifying its irresistible pull for a certain sort of leftist mind. Russians refer to “fellow travelers,” those who side with the revolution without really signing on to it. They waver, but go along. And this wavering shows: never trust a fellow traveler until he has boarded a train going elsewhere.

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