

INTRODUCTION: INTIMACY AND HISTORY. THE GERCEN FAMILY DRAMA RECONSIDERED

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Abstract

In her Introduction to this special issue, Irina Paperno lays the conceptual and empirical foundations for this collective project that reexamines the notorious story of the Herzen family drama of 1848-1852 – its role in the making of Alexander Herzen's memoirs, *My Past and Thoughts* (*Byloe i dumy*), and in the creation of a far-reaching cultural tradition. The Introduction outlines Herzen's efforts to turn intimate life into a historical narrative by way of literary structures, which were underwritten by Hegelian philosophical paradigms. The introduction tells the story of the love affair itself, focusing on the convergence of the intimate and the historical. It also describes how the story of the family drama was written and published, between 1852 and 2001, by Herzen, members of his immediate circle, and distant scholars, some of whom became emotionally involved in the Herzen family drama. Paperno argues that, in the end, the story of the Herzen family drama turned into a paradigmatic text, or institution, of Russian intelligentsia culture: the intimacy-history connection became both publicly observable and reproducible.

Keywords: *Herzen; Family Drama; Herwegh*

Opening Remarks

The image of Aleksandr Ivanovič Gercen (1812-1870) has retained its power to this day. He has been regarded as a revolutionary activist; a significant contributor to European radical literature; the main spokesman for Russia to

the European public in the wake of the 1848 revolution, in which he participated; the sole “uncensored voice” speaking to the Russian public in the years 1853-1863 (through his Free Russian Press operating from Geneva and London); the first theorist of Russian socialism; the first historian of Russian revolutionary thought; but for many he was simply and indisputably a great Russian writer.

In this regard, the assessment of his close friend and fellow revolutionary, Michail Bakunin, is emblematic. In 1863 Bakunin reported to the underground organization *Zemlja i volja* (Land and Freedom) that Gercen was, first and foremost, a man of letters – a writer of genius – who combined all the advantages and disadvantages of his profession. He went on to say that in the future free Russia Gercen would be quite at home as a brilliant writer or even a statesman, but that, with his demoralizing skepticism, he did more harm than good to the revolutionary cause.¹

Gercen can be also considered the creator of Russian cultural institutions. Thus, he developed the idea of a community of intellectuals aspiring to a revolutionary role in history, later commonly called the “intelligentsia”. It was in his first address to a Western audience in 1849-1850, the essay ‘La Russie’, written as a letter to “G.H.”, or Georg Herwegh, that Gercen notably described an educated minority within the Moscow nobility. Alienated from the Russian society, involved in the culture of Europe, it boils with “passions and energy” and, devoid of other outlets, produces “brilliant individualities, full of eccentricity”. Their position is “truly tragic”. It is from this milieu, Gercen further insisted, that “the whole literary movement” in Russia came forth.²

It would be hard not to see a self-portrait in this passionate description and an attempt to define a socially significant role for himself and the people of his circle. It was, indeed, a circle of friends and family that served as a prototype for Gercen’s vision of a new community. United in a common struggle with oppression – domestic and political – and, at present, living mostly in the shadow of failure, this community was meant to be the germ of the new world.³

As a writer, Gercen created the image of an *intelligent* – an alienated, thinking, struggling individual, markedly ineffective in his private and public endeavors – in love as well as in revolution. Such is the hero of Gercen’s novel *Kto vinovat?* (*Who Is To Blame?*, 1845-1846) and the autobiographical protagonist of his memoirs, *Byloe i dumy* (*My Past and Thoughts*; written in 1852-1868).

In the end, it is as a writer that Gercen reached the future Russia. Indeed, the power of his personal image and his vision of the intelligentsia community – a network of people bound by a shared sense of the social and historical significance of their private lives – have been preserved and

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