THE FAMILY DRAMA AS AN INTERPRETIVE PATTERN IN ALEKSANDR GERCEN’S BYLOE I DUMY

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Abstract
In his autobiography, Alexander Herzen tried to come to terms with the problematic relationship between history and private life. Herzen’s views changed considerably while he was writing Byloe i dumy (My Past and Thoughts). In his essay, Ulrich Schmid argues that four different modes can be discerned in his conception of the history-private life relationship. This essay shows that each conception is related to a private catastrophe which Herzen interprets against a specific philosophical background. Herzen starts with a Hegelian conception: the illegitimate son of a Russian aristocrat, he encodes Russian society as a family tyrannized by a patriarchal Czar. After the failed revolutions of 1848 and the Herwegh affair, Herzen modifies his views: history is not propelled by rationalism, but by human action. In this second conception Herzen relies on the Polish thinker August von Cieszkowski. Later Herzen turns to Proudhon and his ironical affirmation of opposites: he covers up his own affair with Natalie Tuchkova-Ogareva by keeping the Herwegh affair in a half-public, half-secret status. Finally, in the 1860s Herzen witnesses the decay of his own family and interprets his alienation from his children in a Darwinian key.

Keywords: Herzen; Family Drama

The most quoted sentence from Byloe i dumy (My Past and Thoughts; written in 1852-1868) is probably Aleksandr Gercen’s characterization of his autobiography as a “reflection of history in a man who accidentally got in its way.” Initially, Herzen planned to describe political history and private
biography in a narrative with two intertwined plots – one plot would provide the hermeneutic clue for the other. This is clearly a Hegelian conception. In Phänomenologie des Geistes (The Phenomenology of Spirit; 1807), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel holds that individual life mirrors world history in a double sense: the individual directs history and at the same time is directed by history. Hegel conceptualizes the interaction between individuality and history as a dialectic movement:

Der Weltlauf ist also einerseits die einzelne Individualität, welche ihre Lust und Genuss sucht, darin zwar ihren Untergang findet und hiermit das Allgemeine befriedigt. […] Das andere Moment des Weltlaufs ist die Individualität, welche an und für sich Gesetz sein will und in dieser Einbildung die bestehende Ordnung stört.2

(The course of the world is, on the one hand, individuality itself, which seeks to fulfil its pleasure and delight. By doing so, it perishes and satisfies the whole. […] The other moment of the course of the world is the individuality that wants to be the law and disturbs with this illusion the existing order.)

In presenting his own life, as many have noted, Gercen draws on Hegel’s parallel between history and individuality but adds the significant reservation “accidentally”. When Gercen set out to write Byloe i dumy, he was far from seeing in his fate a necessary movement of the absolute Spirit. On the contrary: Gercen’s autobiography has to be read as a response to a severe crisis. After the failed revolutions of 1848 and numerous personal buffets of fate in the following years, Gercen tried to make narrative sense of his defeat, one that threatened to destroy all meaning in his previous life project. Before his emigration to Western Europe, Gercen shared the Hegelian belief that history would in fact lead eventually to freedom, if only the consciousness of freedom was spread in Russia.

As many scholars believe, Gercen had departed from a strictly Hegelian philosophy of history by the time he began to write his autobiography.3 While Hegel believed that eminent individuals were “the managing directors of the World Spirit”,4 Gercen began to advocate a more pragmatic view. Especially for the author of the later chapters of Byloe i dumy, history was not the rational process of a Spirit evolving its self-consciousness, but rather an accidental sum of uncoordinated actions. Gercen understood history as a challenge for the persistence of human will: when facing history, man has to take a pragmatic or even an ironic stance. The unpredictable process of history forces man to improvise, to respond flexibly to new challenges of reality.5

Eventually, Gercen naturalizes history. Historical events are, in his view, like natural phenomena – their effects can be horrible or benign but in
neither case are they ruled by rationality. Already in his philosophical dialogues *S togo berega* (*From the Other Shore*; 1847-1850), Gercen uses a biological metaphor to characterize the historical process. History has its own “embryogenesis” and does not follow the dialectics of “pure reason” (VI, 29). The same imagery returns in an 1856 chapter from *Byloe i dumy*:

 наше историческое познание, наше деяние в том и состоит, что мы нашим разочарованием, нашим страданием доходим до смирения и покорности перед истиной и избавляем от этих скорбей следующие поколения. Нами человечество прозревается, мы его спохмелье, мы его боли родов. Если роды кончатся хорошо, все пойдет на пользу; но мы не должны забывать, что по дороге может умереть ребенок или мать, а может и оба, и тогда – ну, тогда история с своим мормонизмом начнет новую беременность… Е sempre bene, господа! (X, 122)

 (Our historical duty, our activity consists in the goal that we reach acceptance and recognition of the truth through our disappointment and our misery and that we liberate future generations from these evils. Through us mankind becomes sober, we are its hangover, we are its birth pains. If the birth goes well, it will be useful for us, however, we may not forget that the child or the mother or both may die – and then, well then mormonic history starts a new pregnancy… *E sempre bene*, gentlemen!)

 On a more abstract level, Gercen characterizes the parallel between history and nature in the 1860 essay ‘Robert Owen’, which was later included in the text of *Byloe i dumy*:

 ни природа, ни история никауда не идут и потому готовы идти всюду, куда им укажут, если это возможно, т. е. если ничего не мешает. Они слагаются à fur et à mesure бездной друг на друга действующих, друг с другом встречающихся, друг друга останавливающих и увлекающих частностей. (XI, 246; italics in the original)

 (Neither nature nor history are going anywhere, and that is why they are ready to go *everywhere* they are directed, *if this is possible*, that is if nothing obstructs them. They are composed à *fur et à mesure* of an immense number of particles acting upon and encountering each other, repelling and attracting each other.)

 History thus acquires a specific literary quality. It is prosaic because it is not teleological. This argument can be observed very early in Gercen’s work. Already in 1847, in his story ‘Doktor Krupov’, Gercen daringly formulated
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the notion that history was the “autobiography of a madman” (IV, 264). It is precisely the prosaic senselessness of history that lends itself to narrative elaboration. Gercen inscribes his own biography into the accidental narration of world history as a poetic micro-plot. A man’s autobiography can endow the crazy plot of history with a poetic sense. Therefore, as I would argue, Byloe i dumy is much more than the “reflection of history in a man” – it is an attempt to prevent the impending collapse of history by narrative means. Gercen’s life project can thus be characterized as the poetic taming of prosaic reality. In ‘Robert Owen’, he himself uses the metaphor of poetic sense for his assessment of human action in history:

([..] The confused improvisation of history is ready to go with anybody who can put his verse into it, and if it resounds, it remains his verse as long as the poem is not interrupted, as long as the past wanders in its blood and mind. There is a mass of possibilities, episodes, and revelations in history and nature on every step. [...] Man’s participation is sublime and ripe with poetry; it is a kind of creative act.)

Byloe i dumy first emerged as a work in progress. Gercen wrote his autobiographical text from 1852 until his death, subsequently taking up and reworking older pieces. Chapters were regrouped, additions made, drafts left out. These changes may be interpreted as the endeavor to achieve consistency – or as Gercen would have it: as a poetic reformulation of historical prose. In this study, I will try to show that the motif of the family drama organizes the structure of Gercen’s attempt to connect autobiography and history. Gercen employs this motif both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. In Gercen’s narration, the family drama is not merely a private matter, but an archetypal figuration of conflict, individual and historical, if not metaphysical, which can be adapted to various situations. The family crisis persists as an interpretive pattern throughout the whole text of Gercen’s autobiography and performs different functions in changing contexts.

Byloe i dumy should not be considered as an ideologically homogenous text. Gercen’s conceptualization of history underwent significant changes during the extended process of writing. Troubling life experiences in the 1850s and 1860s forced him to revise the basic theoretical structure of his autobiography several times. Gercen was an astute follower of the main
philosophical trends in his time. I will try to show that each application of the interpretive pattern of the family drama to Gercen’s life, as it is presented in his memoir, can be connected with a specific theoretical approach to history. Briefly, Gercen’s development can be characterized as a growing disillusion with Hegel’s optimistic philosophy of history. Gercen’s interpretation of history became more and more pragmatic: he did not trust the revolutionary power which Hegel ascribed to the human consciousness anymore and, as I would argue, subsequently turned to August von Cieszkowski’s “philosophy of action”, later to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s ironic reconciliation of opposites, and eventually to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which definitely renounced the metaphysics in history.

The Russian Years: The Heroic Expectation of the Rebellious Son

In a certain sense, it could be argued that Gercen’s biography starts with a family drama. He was the illegitimate son of a Russian aristocrat and a German woman from the petty bourgeoisie. Gercen’s presentation of his childhood and youth is highly interesting, not so much for what he tells but for what he withholds. Gercen’s mother is virtually absent from his memoir; he mentions her only en passant. Gercen’s father receives a very ambivalent treatment in Byloe i dumy. He is neither a blustering tyrant nor a loving parent. Gercen keeps a carefully calculated distance from his father. One of the bizarre details we learn about him is that he had his journal ironed before reading it in order not to catch a cold in his fingers (VIII, 93). Gercen notices with bewilderment that his father never once opened a window in his study or his bedroom, and did not even allow them to be cleaned during his absence – he locked the rooms up (30). Gercen presents his father as an eccentric non-person deprived of all patriarchal authority. Gercen’s condescending intonation clearly signals that his father leads the senseless life of a parasite. His critique includes his father’s complete lack of “abandon” (89); Gercen is later to reproach Georg Herwegh using exactly the same wording (X, 240). It is indicative that Gercen carefully avoids any hint at the possibility that his rebellion against the Russian social order could be triggered by the envy of an outsider who lacks a proper aristocratic pedigree. He wants to present his life not as a struggle to gain a sound position in a society which ultimately is to blame for his declassement, but rather as a sublime fight for freedom and democracy.

Gercen camouflages his illegitimate birth with the euphemism “awkward situation” (“ložnoe položenie”, VIII, 32). He downplays all the problems linked to this family drama and treats it in an astonishingly positive manner: “I depended a lot less on my father than children in general. I liked this autonomy which I had invented for myself” (33). Moreover, Gercen does
not even provide his father with a family name – he mostly speaks of him as “the old man” (“starik”; 89). In doing so, Gercen inverts the actual problem. In fact, it was his father who denied the family name Jakovlev to his son Aleksandr. The narrative downgrading of Gercen’s birth father has a double effect. On one hand, Gercen takes late revenge on his father and injures him by the same token – the father is pushed into namelessness. On the other hand, Gercen leaves the paternal position open for somebody who is really worth rebelling against. This person is – of course – the “highest sergeant-major”, Czar Nicholas I (166, 282).

The confrontation between Nicholas I and Gercen is the leitmotif of the first parts of Byloe i dumy. Gercen portrays this fight as the opposition of injustice and morality, tradition and innovation, oppression and freedom, indifference and engagement. Gercen criticizes Nicholas for his complete lack of human emotions. The Czar appears in Byloe i dumy as someone who is cold and ruthless. For example, in one episode, he does not take any notice of two petitioners who are arrested by policemen (139).

During this first phase, the family drama serves as an interpretive pattern for the construction of a sublime text. The patriarchal system of Nicholas’ reign is presented as rotten and wretched through and through. Gercen leaves no doubt that the Czarist monarchy has lost its legitimacy completely. It is precisely the uneven distribution of power that endows the conflict with a sublime quality: the private man Gercen, equipped solely with intellect and high moral standards, challenges the iron colossus of the Russian state. The fact that the Czar’s administration wants to get hold of him only corroborates his righteousness. In a system of social order that is ripe with corruption, falseness, and oppression, Gercen chooses the only identity that is acceptable to him: the identity of the outlaw. Since the law itself is unjust, Gercen has to engage in a fight against the state, which is responsible for the ubiquitous injustice.

Taking a clue from Lidija Ginzburg, Irina Paperno has noted that the text of the first five parts of Byloe i dumy, from Gercen’s birth until the relation of the catastrophes of 1848-1852, repeats the structure of Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes.8 This intriguing contention is definitely correct for the Russian chapters, but, I suggest, not necessarily accurate for the autobiographical representation of the years in exile in the West. Gercen sets out to describe his biography by analogy to the Spirit, which leaves itself and aims to return at a higher level. Gercen’s heroic tone reproduces Hegel’s romantic pathos from Phänomenologie des Geistes. Hegel had celebrated the individual self as the source of highest morality:

Das Gewissen also in der Majestät seiner Erhabenheit über das bestimmte Gesetz und jeden Inhalt der Pflicht legt den beliebigen Inhalt in sein Wissen und Wollen; es ist die moralische Genialität, welche die
The conscience in its majesty and aloofness above the positive law and the content of duty endows its knowledge and will with its own content; it is a moral geniality which recognizes the inner voice of its knowledge as a godly voice.)

The same moral self-affirmation can be found in Gercen’s narration of his Russian years. Gercen’s reading of Hegel is a reading not so much of intellectual, but of emotional kinship. In a letter from 1842, Gercen characterized his experience with *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in sublime terms: “At the end of the book it is as if one were entering the sea: depth, transparency, the hovering of the Spirit – *lasciate ogni speranza* – the shores vanish...” (XXII, 28). Gercen is put into the sea of his own life with the hopeful expectation of reaching the safe haven of absolute knowledge – such is the Hegelian point of departure of *Byloe i dumy*. However, the life text that Gercen had to represent in his autobiography developed in another direction. The fight between “son” Gercen and “father” Nicholas did not elevate history to a higher level, but rather, paralyzed it in an unsolvable conflict between the two opponents.

Inside and Outside: the Enabling Power of Catastrophes

Gercen altered his heroic conception of history considerably when describing the years following his emigration in 1847. The failed European revolutions of 1848 incited Gercen to put forward a new view on history. Gercen’s life project was not sublime any more but acquired a distinct tragic quality. However, the point of departure remained basically the same. The revolutionaries of 1848 had endowed their republican dreams with romantic pathos directed against the reactionary powers in Europe – especially against the Czarist government. The Russian invasion of Hungary in 1849 even reinforced the negative image of Nicholas who acquired the nickname “gendarme of Europe” as a result.

New for Gercen was the insight into the growing probability that he himself would not be able to see the fruits of his own revolutionary endeavors. During the 1850s, he created a myth of familial tradition – if he could not bring his life project to a positive end himself, his children would continue his work. In a “moral testament” addressed to his son, Gercen wrote on New Year’s Day 1859: “The four of you [Gercen’s children] [...] form the living continuation of our life. [...] If it is possible to return to Russia, go back there, your place is there.” His disillusionment with this plan was to
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become Gercen’s main concern in the 1860s, when he realized that his children pursued their private interests rather than their father’s political aspirations. But, in the 1850s, Gercen cherished the image of a chain of generations as a source of comfort.

Despite their failure, the political events of 1848 basically fit into Gercen’s conception of history. The attempt to establish democratic structures in Germany, Austria, France, and Italy must be assessed — following Gercen’s metaphor — as a poetic draft that was eventually overcome by prosaic reality. The failure to inscribe a poetic revolutionary text into the prose of the existing social order did not prove the truth of the latter. Contrarily, Gercen would maintain that the poetry of revolution represents a higher truth than the facts of reality. Gercen even gives quite an original re-definition of Hegel’s famous saying “Everything existing is reasonable and everything reasonable exists” from the introduction to his *Philosophie des Rechts* (*Philosophy of Right*; 1820). Traditionally this sentence has been interpreted in Russian culture — most prominently by Vissarion Belinskij — as proof of the philosopher’s reactionary approval of the political status quo.\(^\text{11}\)

In his book *Du développement des idées révolutionnaires en Russie* (*Evolution of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*; 1851), Gercen interprets Belinskij’s view on Hegel as an expression of Russian half-erudition (VII, 237). The same argument is repeated one year later in a chapter from *Byloe i dumy*, in which Belinskij is criticized for his preference for theoretical study over political action. Gercen inverts the sense of Belinskij’s interpretation of Hegel and argues that any resistance against the existing political order is in itself reasonable as long as it appears in reality (IX, 22).

It is precisely this formula that politically legitimizes Gercen’s autobiographical project. But *Byloe i dumy* is not only about the initially sublime and subsequently tragic fate of a man in the turmoil of history. It is, to a considerable extent, also an extended self-therapeutic narrative. Gercen’s autobiographical project — as he approached it in the early 1850s — can be understood as an attempt to cope with a double crisis. Gercen clearly parallels the failed revolutions of 1848 with his own tragic life experience during these years: the drowning of his mother and son in 1851 off the coast of Southern France and his own marital crisis which ended with the untimely death of his wife Natal’ja with her newborn son in 1852. In the introduction to the chapter “Западные арабески” (“Western Arabesques”), Gercen explicitly links his intimate life with history in a formula that has been cited often:

Чего и чего не было в это время, и все рухнуло — общее и частное, европейская революция и домашний кров, свобода мира и личное счастье. (X, 25)
(What did not happen at that time, and everything crashed – the public and the private, the European revolution and the roof of my home, the freedom of the world and my personal happiness.)

Originally, in *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen elaborated a succinct conception of the double-sidedness of public and private tragedy. The chapters dealing with the political evolution as well as the chapter “Oceano nox” were originally published in the journal *Poljarnaja zvezda* (*Polar Star*) in 1859 with the English title “Outside” (X, 447). This programmatic notion seems to indicate that at that time Gercen still intended to complement the political account with a confession of his private catastrophe. Gercen planned to use the title “Inside” for a detailed account of his wife’s affair with Herwegh. However, Gercen hesitated to publish the intimate part of the story. Mel’gunov wrote to Gercen on October 13, 1856:

Ты спрашиваешь, печатать ли интимную часть “Записок”? Как публика, я сказал бы: “Разумается, печатать.” Но вопрос о “приличии” можешь ты один решить: почему бы нет? Большая часть твоих читателей или уже знает или догадывается en gros, что ты мог бы сообщить теперь en détail. Наконец, дело твоего личного такта найти середину между романтической стыдливостью и цинической откровенностью. А в таком рода у тебя недостатка нет.  

(You ask whether to publish the intimate part of your “Notes”? As your audience, I would say: “Of course, publish them”. But you have to decide the problem of “propriety” yourself: why not? The majority of your readers already either know or guess en gros what you could now communicate en détail. Finally, it is a question of your personal tact – to find a balance between romantic shyness and cynical openness. And you do have a fine sense of tact.)

The main reason for not publishing the “inside” chapters was, as I will argue later in more detail, Gercen’s new love story with Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva, his best friend’s wife. Admittedly, neither Gercen nor Tučkova-Ogareva deceived Nikolaj Ogarev, who was told of their involvement at its early stages and with whom Gercen continued to discuss his relationship with Tučkova.

There was no intrinsic reason for withholding the Herwegh affair from Gercen’s audience: as Mel’gunov correctly points out, most of Gercen’s readers were acquainted with the basic facts of the story anyway. The high degree of literary shaping that was given to the affair by Gercen testifies to the fact that Gercen initially really planned to make this intimate text accessible to his audience. The new situation that developed in the 1860s prevented
him from doing so. The omission of the Herwegh affair even affected the very composition of *Byloe i dumy*. After Gercen had renounced the idea of publishing his private story, he also dropped the subtitle “Outside” for his account of the political events in the later editions of *Byloe i dumy* (XXX, 625). By doing so, he radically changed his Hegelian conception of history mirroring individuality and vice versa.

The highly elaborated draft for the “Inside” part is ripe with stylistic signals. Gercen tried to find an account that provided the crash of both his public and private aspirations with a narrative sense. He found such a sense in a romantic plot that combined the lofty with the tragic and demonic. The first four parts of *Byloe i dumy* draw on a multitude of romantic clichés that can be easily recognized. First, Gercen engages in an enthusiastic friendship with Ogarev. Then he is arrested by the Czarist police. Finally, he has a sublime love relationship with a woman he transforms into an angel. After this introduction, Gercen tries to establish a narrative that would, on the one hand, preserve the romantic icon of Natal’ja and, on the other hand, lay bare the despair caused by his wife’s affair with Georg Herwegh.

It is remarkable how deeply Gercen’s account of his family drama is still permeated with romanticism even in the context of utmost disillusionment – and the author of *Byloe i dumy* is well aware of this specific style of presentation. Gercen chose to narrate a version of his private catastrophe wherein Natal’ja was presented as an innocent victim of a cunning villain and seducer. Gercen stuck to this one-sided interpretation even six years after his wife’s death. In a letter from September 23, 1858, Gercen confessed: “In my life I knew two truly great and noble personalities: our late Natal’ja and Ogarev” (XVI, 211).

In *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen insists on the authenticity of his romantic feelings as a young man. He explicitly stresses the time gap between the present and the narrated time and underlines the continuity of his emotional engagement. The deeply romantic account of his juvenile oath with Ogarev on the Sparrow Hills is followed by an explication:

Сцена эта может показаться очень натянутой, очень театральной, а между тем через двадцать шесть лет я тронут до слез, вспоминая ее, она была свято искренна, это доказала вся жизнь наша. (VIII, 81)

(This scene may seem artificial and very theatrical, but I am still moved to tears after twenty-six years when I think about it. It was, in a holy way, sincere and our whole life proved this.)

The same holds true for the description of his love for Natal’ja in *Byloe i dumy*. Gercen inserts into his autobiography a series of his letters from prison
to Natal’ja and thus preserves the original romantic tone of his writing from the 1830s. He also quotes a few sections from Natal’ja’s letters. It is clear, however, that Gercen does not faithfully reproduce Natal’ja’s own wording but modifies her letters in order to assimilate them to his own stylistic ideal of poetic sincerity.14 On the verge of kitsch, a footnote in Byloe i dumy points to traces of Natal’ja’s tears shed over Gercen’s letter (VIII, 394).

Critics have been irritated by the unaltered romantic tone in which the mature Gercen presents his love for his bride. Martin Malia even speaks of “maudlin sentimentality” and criticizes Gercen for “little gain in common sense over his youth”.15 However, Gercen’s inclination towards romanticizing should be seen not within the framework of psychological norms of maturity but rather as a compositional device. Gercen must stick to his romanticism in order to reinforce the tragic dimension of his loss.

A similar alteration can be observed in Gercen’s characterization of Georg Herwegh. From his very first appearance in Byloe i dumy, the German revolutionary is surrounded by an aura of hypocrisy, deception, and menace. However, he is not the kind of detestable villain Nicholas I is. The wickedness of the Czar is easily recognizable, but Herwegh threatens Gercen, his revolutionary project, and his family in the guise of an ally. From the very beginning of Byloe i dumy, Gercen presents Herwegh very negatively, as a person who is not to be trusted:

В нем не было той простой, откровенной натуры, того полного abandon, который так идет всему талантливому и сильному и который у нас почти неразрывен с даровитостью. Он был скрытен, лукав, боялся других, он любил наслаждаться украдкой, у него было какая-то не мужская изнеженность, жалкая зависимость от мелочей, от удобств жизни и эгоизм без всяких границ, rücksichtslos, доходивший до наивности цинизма. (X, 240-241)

(Herwegh did not have the sincere and simple nature, that complete abandon which fits the gifted and powerful and which among us is not to be separated from talent. He was taciturn, malicious, ruthless, he feared others, loved secret private distractions, he was spoiled in an un-masculine way, depended miserably on petty details and the commodities of life, he displayed an unlimited egotism, rücksichtslos, to the point of naive cynicism.)

Furthermore, Gercen applied to Herwegh the same narrative device he had already used in the description of his father. As is the case in the scenes with Gercen’s father, Herwegh is rarely addressed by name. The narration in Byloe i dumy is not as radical as Gercen’s letters from 1852, in which Herwegh is consequently dismissed as “subject”, but it shows the same tendency. In Byloe i dumy, Gercen claims to have discerned Herwegh’s true nature at first
sight. As his private letters from the late 1840s prove, this presentation is a distortion of the facts. In 1849, Gercen praised Herwegh as his only ally in the West. As late as January 22, 1850, Gercen wrote an effusive letter to Herwegh and celebrated his spiritual brotherhood with him: “I embrace you with all my heart for your letter, dear Georg, I read it and reread it, yes, yes, we will remain what we are, what we will be […] friends, twins – I swear” (XXIII, 239). Gercen’s rhetoric of romantic friendship is mirrored in two acts of personal dedication of literary works. In 1849, Gercen dedicated a pamphlet in French, ‘La Russie’, to “G.H”. A similar intimacy with Herwegh is documented in the first edition of Gercen’s important book, S togo berega, which appeared in its German version in 1850 (the book indicated Hamburg as the place of publication, but, in fact, it came out in Zurich). In a letter to Herwegh that serves as an epilogue to the philosophical dialogues, Gercen spoke to Herwegh as to a kindred soul: “Dear Herwegh, you wanted to see my Russian ponderings on the history of the present in German. Here they are; I offer them to you with all my heart.”16 At the end of the letter, Gercen even considered emigrating to America with Herwegh, if he were to be forced into silence in Europe. In all the later editions, Gercen, of course, deleted this dedication. Gercen’s initial excitement about Herwegh is confirmed by Pavel Annenkov. In his memoirs, he explicitly points out the differences between Gercen’s intimate friendship with Herwegh and his later treatment of it:

Всего печальнее и поучительнее в этой истории то, что Г[ерцен] сам ввел человека подобного закала в свой дом и сам водворил его у себя. Позднее Г[ерцен] говорил, что обращение его с этим человеком было более фамильярное, чем дружественное. Может быть, это и так в смысле психической верности, но мы все видели его непрестанные ухаживания за нашим эмигрантом, его усилия выражаться перед ним блестящими сторонами ума, купить его внимание.17

(The saddest and most instructive point in this history is the fact that Gercen himself introduced such a man to his house and placed him there. Later Gercen kept saying that the contact with that man was rather familiar than friendly. Maybe there is psychological truth to this, but we all saw his relentless courting after our emigrant, his endeavours to present his brilliant mind in front of him, to buy his attention.)

In the account of the family drama drafted for Byloe i dumy, not a trace of this enthusiasm for Herwegh can be found. Already in his long letter to Ernst Haug from March 1852, in which he told the story of the affair in writing for the first time, Gercen stresses his own reservations about Herwegh and characterizes Herwegh’s approach as an intrusion into his family:

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Il s’attacha à moi avec passion; il ne me quittait pas; jamais de ma vie un homme ne m’a tant parlé de son amitié, – il était jaloux de moi, il éloignait mes amis, il m’appelait frère, besson, unique ami et soutien; il m’écrivait que si je voulais l’abandonner, il se cramponnerait à moi, car pour lui il n’y avait pas d’existence sans moi; il me reprochait ma froideur et versait des larmes au souvenir de notre rencontre. (XXIV, 244)

(He attached himself to me with passion; he did not leave me; never in my life has a man spoken so much about his friendship to me – he was jealous of me; he drove away my friends, he called me brother, twin, only friend and support; he wrote to me that he would stitch himself to me if I planned to abandon him because he could not exist without me; he reproached me with coldness and shed tears when he remembered our meetings.)

In *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen makes his version of the events even more radical. He does not mention his former infatuation for Herwegh at all but speaks right away of the alienation which he allegedly felt towards his fellow revolutionary from the very beginning (X, 251). This correction has a succinct function in the composition of the family drama: Gercen constructs Herwegh as his counterpart in every respect. Herwegh is a coward, not a revolutionary; he is a hack, not an author; he is a seducer, not a lover. The “bourgeois epicurean” (X, 244), Herwegh, does not dare to engage in a fight and instead flees in a cowardly manner from the insurrection in Baden (X, 247). Gercen thus establishes a figurative equivalent of his Outside/Inside conception: Herwegh not only steals Gercen’s wife, but also steals the revolution and the revolutionary literature.

It could be argued that Gercen constructs a secularized Manichean structure of world history through his negative double Herwegh. The good and evil principles fight as men do, against each other. The fight permeates all aspects of life: politics, society, love, and art. In the years following 1848, the evil principle seems to prevail but Gercen insists that the battle is not over yet.

In this situation, the interpretive pattern of the family crisis provides a valid clue. Gercen’s family is in severe danger, but the crisis can largely be overcome. Most notable is the place where Gercen reconciles with Natal’ja. He meets his wife in Turin, the capital of Piedmont, a location that represents a historical sense that seems to be present in Gercen’s private destiny as well. Turin stands for a defeat which later turns into a triumph. In 1849, the attempts at creating a national Italian state had failed, but Piedmont became the most important place for the national movement that eventually led to the proclamation of a united Italy in 1861. From 1861 to 1865, Turin was the capital of the newly founded state. Already in the 1850s, all hopes of the
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Italian émigrés were directed towards Piedmont; the positive historical development in the 1860s may have been interpreted by Gercen as proof of his earlier expectations. The choice of Turin for the settlement of his private crisis seems to prefigure the victory even in the moment of deepest despair.

Interestingly enough, Gercen does not limit himself in his presentation of the family drama to a deprecation of Herwegh’s personality. He hides the affair he himself had in 1843 with a housemaid. Gercen drafted this scene for his autobiography but decided not to include it in the published text. The most important reason for this omission, in addition to obvious considerations of propriety, is the fact that Gercen would have had to admit that he had tainted his romantic love for Natal’ja. But, even in the drafted version, Gercen hesitated to explicitly formulate his guilt:

(Once, when I came home late, I had to enter through the back door. Katerina opened the door. I could see that she had just got out of her bed, her cheeks were flushed from sleep – she had a shawl on, her braid, which was barely pinned up, was ready to cascade down in a heavy wave. It was dawn. She said smiling: “How late you are”.)
looked at her and indulged in her beauty. I laid my hand on her shoulder, instinctively, half-consciously, the shawl fell [...] she moaned [...] her breast was disclosed.

“What are you doing,” she whispered, she looked anxiously in my eyes and then turned away, as if she wanted to leave me without a witness [...] My hand touched her body, which was warm from sleep... How beautiful is nature, if man dedicates himself to it, loses himself in it.

In that minute I loved that woman, and in this ecstasy there was something immoral [...] somebody was being humiliated, injured [...] who? The person who was closest to me, whom I loved above all in the world. My passionate arousal had an ephemeral character and could not take control of me – there were no roots (on both sides, she was hardly carried away), and everything would have gone by without a trace, would have left a smile, a heated memory and perhaps once or twice a blush on the cheeks [...] Things evolved differently, other forces came into play, I had carelessly moved a stone who began to roll [...] to stop it, to control it was not in my power anymore.)

The metaphor of the rolling stone releases Gercen from his guilt. His affair with the servant girl is presented as a necessary episode controlled by the forces of nature. This self-justification is precarious because it seems to affirm the possibility of a harmonious unity between man and nature. However, such a conception would run counter to all the historiosophical concepts Gercen had put in the foreground in the first parts of his autobiography. By no means does he want to submit his life to the blind forces of nature that try to take control of history as well.

From a theoretical point of view, Gercen’s presentation of his double crisis is still based on a Hegelian conception, with one important modification. Gercen no longer believed in the necessary movement of history towards freedom as Hegel would have it. History has to be pushed forward in a desired direction. Failures are likely and the responsibility of man consists in fighting the calamities of history. In an unfinished letter to Ogarev from April 3, 1852, Gercen implicitly criticized Hegel’s introjection of rationality into history:

Нравственной связи между поступками и событиями нет, во все формулы, стремящиеся составить уравнения между дел и происшествий, вторгается элемент, совершенно несопоставимый, который мешает, путает последствия и лишает их окончательно той юридической разумности, которую мы ищем, которую насильно вносим. (XXIV, 263)

(There is no moral link between actions and events. A completely immeasurable element intrudes into all formulas which try to equate
actions and events. This element hinders and confuses the consequences and deprives them of the juridical rationality, which we look for, which we forcefully introduce.)

I suggest that Gercen could find philosophical support for this conception in the Polish philosopher August Cieszkowski who published his *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* (*Prolegomena to Historiosophy*) in 1838. Cieszkowski advocated a tripartite conception of world history: the past ages of “feeling” and of “thought” were to be followed by the age of “conscious action”. Cieszkowski’s expectation of a better future, which, however, would not rely solely on the progress of consciousness, but on human action, matched up with Gercen’s disappointment with Hegel’s panlogism.¹⁸ Gercen read Cieszkowski’s book right after its appearance and found that he was “in agreement with the author to a remarkable degree” (XXII, 38). Cieszkowski held that philosophy had reached its culmination in Hegel’s encyclopaedic system of sciences but at the same time maintained that Hegel neglected the notion of the future in his philosophy of history. Facing the deficiencies of the actual situation – most notably the lacking of a Polish state – Cieszkowski called for a “philosophy of action”, which should bring into reality what was already present in the mind: “The discovery of method is in fact the discovery of the stone of the wise; – now we have to create the miracles which lay in the power of this stone.”¹⁹

The idea that history has to be created and pushed forward by man is central to both Cieszkowski and Gercen. Therefore, history is not a Hegelian movement of the Spirit in the first place but an unrelenting fight, which puts human endurance to a severe test. The similarities between Cieszkowski and Gercen go even further. In his essay ‘Budizm v nauke’ (‘Buddhism in Science’; 1843), Gercen adopts Cieszkowski’s partition of history into three epochs. In the first epoch, the life of mankind is dominated by nature’s blind forces. Thanks to science, the natural existence can be endowed with consciousness. Mankind thus enters the epoch of thought. But the perception of the laws of science is impersonal. Only in the third epoch of action are individuals able to improve their lives by putting their theoretical knowledge into practice.

What Gercen presents as a phylogenetic theory of mankind can be transposed to his own biography as an ontogenetic key of interpretation. The epoch of nature would denominate Gercen’s childhood, the epoch of thought would encompass the time from his oath with Ogarev on the Sparrow Hills to his emigration, the epoch of action would be the present. Under these circumstances, “action” means the process of writing and publishing. Gercen thus spreads the consciousness that he himself had already attained in the second phase of his life.
Immediately after his falling out with Herwegh, Gercen tried to calm the waters. But during his travels through Europe in the summer of 1851 he discovered, much to his shock, that Herwegh had made the affair public and spread the rumor throughout the revolutionary community that Gercen had forced his wife to stay with him and that she would soon leave her husband for Herwegh. At this point, Gercen decided to take action in order to counteract what he rightfully saw as Herwegh’s slander.20

Gercen wanted to unmask Herwegh publicly. He denounced Herwegh’s treachery in letters to such prominent persons as Richard Wagner, Jules Michelet, Proudhon, and, through Müller-Strübing, George Sand (XXIV, 295, 307, 324 ff., 350). The adversaries discussed their clash in the newspapers Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Avenir de Nice.21 In September 1853, when the actor M.S. Šèepkin visited London, Gercen encouraged him to spread the details of his marital drama in Russia. In a letter to his friends in Moscow, Gercen wrote: “He shall tell the tragedy which has finished my life” (XXV, 111). Eventually, Gercen tried to establish a jury of honor that was to condemn the German revolutionary.22 Gercen did not just want to take personal revenge. In his eyes, Herwegh represented a harmful principle that had brought the European revolutionary movement to a provisional halt. Gercen probably had a didactic goal in mind – if he could manage to unveil Herwegh’s betrayal publicly, a betrayal that extended to both the political and private realm, he could prevent similar incidents from happening in the future. For Gercen, the future of the revolutionary movement and its moral code were at stake. If he were to fail in this affair, the very core of his own life project would be threatened. It is not by chance that Gercen began to write down his autobiography precisely at this moment of deepest crisis – the whole enterprise of writing down Byloe i dumy can be considered a narrative legitimization of Gercen’s own position in the Herwegh affair.

However, a significant shift in his intentions can be observed as Gercen continued to work on the text of his family drama. In 1853, Gercen began to relate the story of the Herwegh affair, which he planned to make public, as an intimate aspect of a general historical catastrophe. In the late 1850s, Gercen apparently changed his mind and created an aura of secrecy around his private catastrophe. In 1861, Gercen began the third part of Byloe i dumy with a short self-quotatation from “Tjur’ma i ssylka” (“Prison and Banishment”) that expresses this change:

Не ждите от меня длинных повествований о внутренней жизни того времени... [...] Дополните сами, чего недостает, догадайтесь сердцем – а я буду говорить о наружной стороне, об обстановке,
(Do not expect from me a long story about my inner life during that time... [...] Complete what is missing yourselves, guess it in your hearts, but I will write about the external circumstances and rarely, rarely touch with a word or an allusion my strictly guarded secrets.)

Already in the preface to the 1861 book edition of *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen spoke mysteriously about a “series of events, misfortunes and errors” (VIII, 10) and thus hinted at his marital crisis.

The decisive turning point came in the year 1856, when Ogarev arrived with his wife, Natal’ja Tuškova-Ogareva, in London. Soon afterwards, Gercen engaged in a love affair with the wife of his intimate friend. At the end of 1856, he wrote in a letter to Ogarev:

Я заметил в дружбе N[atalie] ко мне более страстности, нежели я бы хотел. Я люблю ее от всей души, глубоко и горячо – но это вовсе не страсть, для меня она ты же, вы оба – моя семья и, прибавив детей, все что у меня есть. Я сначала в Путнее – отдался, она меня не поняла и была так этим огорчена, что я разумеется спешил утешить ее. К тому же я, так давно лишённый всякого теплого женского элемента, не мог не быть глубоко тронут ее братской дружбой. Ты ее хотел; в моей чистой близости с твоей подругой был для меня новый залог нашего trio. Но когда я опять увидел, что она увлекается, я все это считал результатом ее пылкого характера и непривычкой владеть собою – наконец она видит во мне Наташу, защитника ее за гробом, твоего друга, брата и мою симпатию. [...] Сколько я ни ставил пределов – вы оба ломали их, доверие это я заслужил – смело, чисто стоя я пред тобой, Друг моей юности, – но еще шаг, и новая пропасть откроется под ногами. (XXVI, 62-63)

(I have sensed more passion in Natal’ja’s friendship than I would want to. I love her with all my soul, deeply and warmly – but this is not at all a passion, for me she is you; you both are my family and if you add the children, you are all I have. In Putney I kept away from her at first; she did not understand me and was therefore so full of sorrow that I hurried to comfort her. Furthermore, I, who had not been with any warm female element for so long, had to be deeply moved by her sisterly friendship. You wanted it; my mere closeness to her was for me a new pledge to our trio. But as I saw her starting to get carried away, I still considered this as a result of her quick-tempered character and her lack of self-restraint – after all she sees Nataša in me, her protector after death, your friend, your brother, and my sympathy. [...]

редко, редко касаясь намеком или словом заповедных тайн своих. (VIII, 309)
How many borders have I set up that both of you broke through; your trust I have earned – brave and pure I stand in front of you, friend of my youth, but one step further and a new abyss will open underneath my feet.

In this letter, Gercen tried to preserve his romantic identity from the 1840s. On the one hand, he is a widower who is faithful to the memory of his deceased wife. On the other hand, he is Ogarev’s sincere friend who would not hide anything from him. Gercen’s noble warning was in vain. Two years later the abyss was open. In 1858, Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva gave birth to a girl, Liza. In 1861, twins followed, but they died, at the age of three. All the children were registered as Ogarev’s and called him “papa” and Gercen “uncle”, although the children belonged to Gercen.23 At first Ogarev tried “to unite the three into one love”, but eventually failed to do so.24

Gercen almost completely represses this chapter in his life. In Byloe i dumy, he does not mention a single word about his affair with Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva. In his letters, he only drops a hint from time to time, and in his fragmented late diary the new family drama is present only in a hidden form. On June 15, 1860, he notes:

(I am terribly tired – it clearly seems to be age. Every effort leaves a trace. I have no strength to fight against it, I lack the comfort... and what is most important, is that I am not drawn towards a victory but rather just calmness. That I will finally be granted the holy calmness...

I had believed that this time was going to be a time of work, of inner concentration – but it turned out to be a time of longing, of restlessness that was almost painful, often with pangs of consciousness.
And also when one can laugh about this in moments of sober reflection, the question still arises: “It seems to me, that I have not deserved this?”

Did I really not deserve this?

The error lies within the wording itself... one must ask if everything that happens with me has a reason... A reason is almost always at hand. An outer reason, therefore it does not hurt me; another reason harms precisely because I feel guilt.)

Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva is even more radical in making her affair with Gercen taboo in her written documents. In her memoirs, she mentions Liza’s birth only in a subordinate clause and the existence of the twins is completely covered with silence.25 In her diary, only the first pregnancy is mentioned and referred to in connection with thoughts about suicide.26 Tučkova-Ogareva mentions Liza’s extramarital origin in her private letters to Ogarev and Gercen, but she avoids passing the information on to other people. Even her parents and her sister were made to believe that Liza and the twins were Ogarev’s children.27

Gercen’s friends thought that Ogarev had a family of his own. Only in the last months of his life Gercen confessed to his close friend Marija Rejchel’ (his confidante in the Herwegh affair) that Liza was his daughter. In a letter from October 9, 1869, he wrote:

(I never spoke to you about this, but I assume that you know that Liza is my daughter. All this was kept secret by mutual agreement and with respect to the Russian relatives. Ogarev was the first to know, everything was sincere and pure, and our relations even became closer from our mutual confidence, rather than deteriorating. But at the end I felt guilty that you and five, six close friends either do not know or think that I am dissimulating, hiding. This is why I write about this.)

A wall of silence surrounded the difficult relationship between Gercen and Natal’ja Alekseevna Tučkova-Ogareva. Tat’jana Passek, a close relative, relates in her memoirs that she had no idea about the real situation at the time:
(I walked with Natal’ja Alekseevna [Tučkova-Ogareva] along the alley and we talked about a lot of things but we left out the most important topic although she seemed to want to share her thoughts about it with me. I understood this afterwards but at the time I did not know anything. I did not guess and looked at everything as they wanted me to.)

This new family drama influenced the presentation of the Herwegh affair in Byloe i dumy in a decisive way. I will argue that Gercen decided not to publish his account of the Herwegh affair and to keep it in the status of a publicly known secret in order to keep his affair with Tučkova-Ogareva a taboo subject and to cover it up completely. In other words, the old family drama was used to cover the new family drama. Judging from available evidence, it has to be admitted that Gercen succeeded with his strategy. Most of his contemporaries did not know about the marijage à trois, and if they knew, they hesitated to speak about it. Thus, Marija Rejchel’ followed Gercen’s intention: as late as in 1903, having read Tučkova-Ogareva’s memoirs, she wrote conspiringly to E.S. Nekrasova (an early biographer of the Gercens): “There are things that are disturbing, not everything is clear and so to say transparent – you understand what I am talking about and I say this exclusively to you.”

As to the autobiographical text that dealt with the Herwegh affair, Gercen did not publish it during his lifetime, nor did he hide it completely. Gercen printed short extracts, which were not directly related to Natal’ja’s adultery, in his journal Poljarnaja zveza in 1856 and 1859 and in the Kolokol (Bell) in 1862 – i.e., when his affair with Tučkova-Ogareva was in full swing. The Bell publication had the enigmatic subtitle “From an Unpublished Part of My Past and Thoughts”, which signalled to the reader that there was more to the story. A similar device can be observed in the preface to the 1861 edition of Byloe i dumy, where Gercen deliberately obscures his narrative: “My work proceeded slowly – a lot of time was needed in order to transform another pain into clear reflection” (VIII, 11). Thus, Gercen hinted carefully at the drama without telling the story itself. Moreover, the text of “Inside” was made available, but only to a very narrow circle. One copy of Gercen’s manuscript lists the persons who read the text: in 1856-1860, Ogarev and Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva; in, 1860, N.M. Satin; in 1862, Gercen’s son Aleksandr (X, 449). In 1860, he wrote to Marko Vovčok that he planned to acquaint her with the text privately and added: “I very rarely want to read to anybody what I will read to you.”
It can be argued that Gercen created an aura of secrecy around the first family drama and concealed the new family drama which would have turned Gercen’s romantic ideal of friendship (with Ogarev) and love (for his deceased wife Natal’ja) into a lie. In other words, Gercen distracted the readers’ attention from the current scandal (his affair with Ogarev’s wife Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva) by directing the public’s curiosity towards the first family drama. Through a series of hints and allusions, he created a distinct aura of secrecy around the Herwegh affair and kept the new family drama a complete taboo.

Lidija Ginzburg explains Gercen’s omission of the Tučkova affair in his autobiography as follows: “From Gercen’s point of view, that situation lacked general significance and interest.” However, such a point of view is apologetic and follows the main patterns of Gercen’s self-presentation uncritically. It is much more probable that Gercen withholds the information about his affair with Tučkova-Ogareva from his audience because it is in no way compatible with the axiology of his autobiography.

While Gercen had no illusions about his precarious situation in the late 1850s and 1860s, he tried to preserve his initial autobiographical conception in Byloe i dumy. Eventually, Gercen succeeded in doing so, but he had to replace his hero with someone else. Not Gercen himself any more, but other untainted romantic heroes like Giuseppe Garibaldi, Stanisław Worcell or John Stuart Mill embody the anthropological ideal of the political revolutionary in the last chapters of Byloe i dumy.

Gercen stuck to the main plot of his biography which no longer corresponded to reality. Apart from moving other protagonists to the foreground, Gercen hid what was most taboo – namely, the collapse of his self-perception as a romantic hero who fights by the side of his best friend against czarist tyranny. Gercen withholds this scandal from the reader by pointing mysteriously to another scandal that was not current. As Gercen’s elaborated but unpublished version of the family drama proves, the story about Herwegh could, in principle, be told. This was not the case with the Tučkova-Ogareva affair – there was no discourse available that would be able to appropriately place Gercen’s own transgression into the general axiology of Byloe i dumy.

It was impossible for Gercen to cope with this crisis as he had coped with his marital crisis: the public and private catastrophes of 1848-1852 could be explained by the influence of a single person, Herwegh, who stood for an evil principle, namely the petite bourgeoisie. Gercen now faced a situation in which his self-image was by no means compatible with his life experience. Neither Hegel nor Cieszkowski were applicable to Gercen’s awkward position. It is not by chance that Gercen turned to a thinker who took a stance of “radical irony” towards every philosophy with clear-cut logical consistency. As I would argue, this new reference point was the socialist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon whose publishing ventures Gercen also supported financially.
Proudhon measured the quality of his thinking always against its practical value and applicability to social reality. The same holds true for Gercen. In *Byloe i dumy*, he poked fun at the pyramids of philosophical terms built up by Russian followers of Hegel and appreciated Proudhon’s engagement in the turmoil of the revolution (IX, 19; X, 185). In 1851, Gercen wrote in a letter to Proudhon: “I am obliged to you more than you think. You and Hegel are responsible for half my philosophical education” (XXIV, 217). Gercen shared with Proudhon his utter contempt for the bourgeoisie and his sensitivity towards historical inconsistency. The affinities between Gercen and Proudhon are, to a considerable degree, stylistic. Proudhon’s *Les Confessions d’un Révolutionnaire* (*Confessions of a Revolutionary*) written in prison in 1849 seem to prefigure the pragmatic approach to history in Gercen’s *Byloe i dumy*. Proudhon recommends learning from the past in order to confront the future in a rational way. But such precaution is by no means a guarantee of success:

Le passé et l’avenir, voilà les deux pôles du courant humanitaire: le premier, générateur du second; le second, complément logique et nécessaire du premier. Embrassons par la pensée, dans une même contemplation, les deux dimensions de l’histoire; le tout ensemble formera le *Système social*, complet sans solution de continuité, identique à lui-même dans toutes les parties, et dans lequel les anomalies et les accidents serviront à faire mieux ressortir la pensée historique, l’ordre. Ainsi le système social, dans sa vérité et son intégralité, ne peut exister à tel jour et dans telle partie du globe: il ne peut nous être révélé qu’à la fin des temps, il ne sera connu que du dernier mortel. Pour nous, qui tenons le milieu des générations, nous ne pouvons nous le représenter que sur des conjectures de plus en plus approximatives; la seule chose qui nous ait été dévolue, dans cette philosophie de l’humanité progressive, c’est d’après la saine intelligence de notre passé, de préparer sans cesse notre avenir.

(Past and Future are the two poles of the stream of mankind: the first generates the second, the second is a logical and necessary complement of the first. Let us embrace in one single act of thought these two dimensions of history; the whole will form the complete social system which is identical with itself in all parts and in which all anomalies and accidents will help to make clear historical thinking and its order. The social system in its truth and wholeness cannot claim reality in a certain place or time, it can manifest itself only at the end of time; it will be perceived only by the last mortal. We who are standing in the middle of the generations can imagine this system only by approximate assumptions. The only thing that is clear in this philosophy of progressive mankind is that we relentlessly prepare our future having formed a rational perception of the past.)
There is nothing stable in Proudhon’s philosophy save his insistence on mankind striving towards social justice. Like Gercen, Proudhon abhors all historiosophical dogmas. For both authors, history is a process with failures, incidents, and chances. Therefore, they reject the idea of a God who would endow the course of history with a specific theological sense. History is not a godly product to which man should submit, but rather an object of scientific study. But science also has to make sure that it does not fall into theology. To prevent science from doing so, Proudhon recommends the use of irony. The end of Proudhon’s *Les Confessions d’un Révolutionnaire* could as well have come from Gercen’s pen:

La Liberté, comme la Raison, n’existe et ne se manifeste que par le dédain incessant de ses propres œuvres; elle périit dès qu’elle s’adore. C’est pourquoi l’ironie fut de tout temps le caractère du génie philosop-phique et libéral, le sceau de l’esprit humain, l’instrument irrésistible du progrès.34

(Liberty, like reason, manifests itself only through its constant disdain of its own creations; it perishes as soon as it begins to adore itself. This is why in all ages irony has been the mark of philosophical and liberal genius, the *sceau* of the human spirit, the irresistible instrument of progress.)

However, Gercen’s attitude towards Proudhon was by no means uncritical. He was deeply disappointed by Proudhon’s large work, *About Justice in the Revolution and the Church* (1858), because Proudhon had sacrificed Liberty at the altar of the “icy God of Justice”.35 In *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen acknowledges Proudhon’s “living truth” which is not stable and rather adapts itself to the demands of reality, but at the same time he presents Proudhon as a lonely, even tragic figure who “rather frightens than convinces with his power” (X, 185, 187).

Putting these words to paper, Gercen wrote also *pro domo*. He understood his own isolation very well. His admiration for the lack of consequence and the absence of a system in Proudhon’s philosophy may reflect his own discursive dilemma: he was not able to bring his ideals and his life into a coherent narration any more. Proudhon’s complete demystification of and disenchantment with the world matched Gercen’s disillusion with his own aspirations.36 Thus, Proudhon’s ironic affirmation of the possible simultaneousness of contradicting positions provided a clue for Gercen’s own discursive dilemma.
The Last Disillusion: Gercen’s Family – Unfit for Survival

The last decade of Gercen’s life was overshadowed by a process that cannot be labelled other than the decay of his family. It has to be noted that for Gercen the notion “family” went far beyond a biological relationship. He always imagined the community of revolutionaries as a “family”. Ogarev also declared after his arrival in London that he wanted to be one family with Gercen and his children. On January 1, 1859, Gercen admonished his son: “In the whole world there is no person closer to us than Ogarev. You have to see in him a link, a family, a second father.” The metaphor of “brother”, which he used for his friend Ogarev, persisted even after his affair with Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva.

In reality, the concept of a huge family composed of the Gercens and Ogarevs proved to be an illusion. Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva was never really accepted by Gercen’s older children. In a letter to Ogarev from 1860, she complained that Gercen loved her only “superficially”. After the death of the twins on December 4 and 11, 1864, the tensions between Gercen and Tučkova-Ogareva became even worse. In 1867, Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva wanted to return to Russia with her daughter Liza. Gercen decisively opposed this plan. One year later, she demanded that he officially acknowledge Liza as his daughter. Gercen hesitated and thus infuriated Natal’ja even more. It was not until 1869 that the secret was revealed – Tučkova-Ogareva took Gercen’s name and kept it until her return to Russia in 1876.

From a literary point of view, the most interesting point of this problematic period is Gercen’s inability to reconstruct the sense of his life in an autobiographical text. In December 1868, he noted in his diary:

Опять приближается страшная годовщина – смерти детей. Сколько раз хотел я записать для себя – для детей – эти дни, эти ночи, страшное 4 декабря – нет, не могу. (XX, 611)

Again the horrible anniversary – of the death of the children [the twins – U.S.] draws near. How many times did I want to write down for myself, for the children, those days, those nights, the horrible 4th of December; for the time being I am not able to do so.

Gercen tried to escape from this situation by travelling relentlessly through Europe. The 1860s were not only complicated by Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva but also brought alienation from his children. Gercen was very much troubled by his son’s negligence towards the fate of Russia. In a letter to Ogarev from August 19, 1859, he wrote:

Саша очень хорошо и благородно себя ведет, я вообще им доволен, – но он заметно перестает быть русским, и если б не само-
(Saša behaves very well, and I am actually very happy with him – but he is ceasing to be Russian, and if he did not boast of being my son, he would soon turn away from everything Russian. The living tradition is fading. The same will be true of Tata... How can I accept that my children will be Swiss Germans? This would mean to take my naturalization au sérieux.)

Gercen also disapproved of his son’s marriage in 1868 to an Italian working girl, arguing that she would not be an appropriate intellectual partner for him. But the actual problem lay deeper: Gercen feared that, as a married man, his son would not be able to continue his own revolutionary project. Moreover, marrying an Italian woman would considerably diminish the chances of his returning to a liberated Russia in the future. Gercen considered his son’s marriage an immediate threat to his own political engagement. On January 22, 1860, Gercen wrote to Saša:

Везде ты иностранец, в России ты один из богатейших наследников. Ты наследник всей моей и огаревской деятельности – и, следственно, разом поставлен в лучший и самый симпатичный круг. (XXVII-1, 10; italics in the original)

(You are a foreigner everywhere, but in Russia you are one of the richest heirs. You are the heir of my and Ogarev’s activity – and consequently you are at once a member of the best and most friendly circle.)

Even worse was the situation with Gercen’s daughter Ol’ga. She became more and more influenced by the eccentric Malwida von Meysenbug who had joined the household of the widower Gercen in 1853, taking charge of his children’s upbringing. Meysenbug eventually took Ol’ga to Italy and thus separated her from Gercen’s family for good. Malwida von Meysenbug became an ardent adept of Richard Wagner (and later Nietzsche) and believed in a syncretistic religion of art, Buddhism, and Christianity. In her correspondence with Ol’ga, Malwida von Meysenbug congratulates herself for making Gercen’s daughter “from early on a follower of Schopenhauer” and regrets the five years during which the “calamitous” Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva took Ol’ga’s education in her hands. In her memoirs, Meysenbug always refers to Tučkova-Ogareva as the “Russian lady” and complains about the “awkward something” which she felt in her presence.
herself sees the reason for their conflict in the opposition of the Russian mind and her own. Even in Gercen, whom she deeply admired, she observed a “Russian illness” similar to Natal’ja Tuškova-Ogareva’s. In a letter from spring 1854, she wrote to Gercen:

Mein “Genuss” wäre es gewesen, wenn ich Ihrem Hause Einheit und Poesie hätte zurückgeben können. Leider aber wird dieses Ziel wohl nie ganz erreicht werden, weil Sie krank bleiben wollen, weil Sie sich nicht so befreien wollen, wie es Ihrer Natur allein würdig wäre, und das ist das Übel Ihres Russentums. Ja, da finde ich allerdings etwas, was uns zu Antipoden macht.46

(My “delight” would have been if I could have brought back to your house unity and poetry. Alas, probably this goal cannot be reached, because you want to remain sick, because you do not want to free yourself as your nature would deserve, and herein lies the evil of your Russianness. Yes, I definitely find here something that makes us into antipodes.)

Malwida von Meysenbug extended her Buddhist visions even after Gercen’s death when she believed he was in “Nirvana” or at least leading a new existence as the “Polar Star” in heaven.47 Over time, Gercen’s own relations with Malwida von Meysenbug deteriorated considerably. Towards the end of his life, Gercen characterized her in harsh words: “I am very angry about Meysenbug, she hides a dumb egoism under the veil of a beautiful soul. She does not want Ol’ga to be closer to us, neither with Tata nor with Saša – and she is not close” (XXX, 264). In a letter to Ogarev from December 27, 1869, he deplored Ol’ga’s complete alienation:

Ольга (ей стукнуло 18 лет) – не имеет ничего общего с нами, в ней сложился немецко-artistisch, аристократический взгляд. Без каких бы то ни было égards и пошад. [...] Тихо и кратко опуская пухлые глаза, Мейзенбух мягко ненавидит все наши самые дорогие возрения и спасает от них Ольгу... (XXX, 288-289)

(Ol’ga [she turned 18] has nothing in common with us, she developed a German artistic, aristocratic attitude, without any égards and considerations. [...] Meysenbug lowers her swollen eyes in silence and tenderness, she hates all our dearest ideals and rescues Ol’ga from them…)

Gercen laid all his hopes on his favorite daughter, Tata. In a letter from July 31, 1869, he wrote to his son Saša: “I have a mission that has to be continued after my death. I laid my strongest hope on Tata; she has our sympathies, notre génie…” (XXX, 40). But even Tata was of little help in these years. In 1869, she had a nervous breakdown. A blind Italian musician had fallen in
love with Tata but she rejected him. The musician started to harass Tata and threatened to kill her brother, then to commit suicide. Tata herself fell into a psychosis and began to suffer from hallucinations. On December 2, 1869, Gercen wrote to Ogarev, “My last faith was in Tata, it was based on her sympathy, on her similarity with the deceased [Natal’ja – U.S.] (psychologically). [...] This faith is broken” (XXX, 271).

Once again Gercen faced a severe family crisis. Since the early 1850s, he had cherished the idea that his family would guarantee the continuation of his revolutionary project. To Gercen, a family could never be created based merely on private considerations. In his view, the family had to serve as an interface between public and private life. This concept broke into pieces as Gercen came to the conclusion that the spiritual development of his children had failed: Aleksandr did not show the slightest interest in politics, Ol’ga was immersed more and more deeply in mysticism, and Tata’s psyche was too weak to endure pressure from outside. Gercen’s judgment about his children was merciless: “The main punishment is in the children – and it is a punishment which falls equally on them as on me” (XXX, 271).

In the 1860s, Gercen’s life concept was seriously threatened from the political side as well. The rise of Alexander II, the “Czar of liberation”, meant that Gercen was confronted with a severe problem. All of a sudden, he had lost his main enemy. His own identity as a fighter against the Russian regime seemed to be useless given the positive impression that the new czar’s legal reforms made in Russia and abroad. History itself seemed to work against Gercen. After the Polish insurrection of 1863, Gercen sided with the Poles and eventually lost all the influence on the educated Russian public he had had through the Poljarnaja zvezda and Kolokol. The print run of Kolokol fell from 2500 to 500 copies – and Gercen’s concept of a renovation of Russian society through the revolutionary word was reduced to mere wishful thinking.

As I would argue, Gercen’s life conception in the 1860s bears a striking resemblance to the main thoughts of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, which was published in 1859 in London and caused a succès de scandale. Gercen welcomed Darwin’s treatise and sent a copy to his son Saša in 1860. For Gercen, the complete renunciation of teleology was a most attractive feature in Darwin’s thought. Gercen warmly welcomed Darwin’s unmasking of “the pious rhetoric” of natural scientists who “talk tenderly of the goodness of a Providence that has equipped birds with wings, without which the poor things would fall down and be smashed to pieces” (IX, 224). After Darwin, history could not be conceptualized as a goal-directed process any more, but had to be understood as the by-product of adaptive responses to changes in local environments. Along with this sober and pragmatic view, every idea about a rational directedness of history had to be dropped. History marked the field where Darwin’s “struggle for existence” took place.
Gercen was convinced that his revolutionary ideas possessed the power to survive. What Darwin said about biological procreation could also be said about the development of ideas:

I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny.\(^5\)

Such statements could be applied to Gercen’s political project as well: revolutionary activity and its success or failure is not confined to one individual life. It was not even confined to a family in the biological sense. Leaving progeny meant for Gercen inspiring followers to come to his ideas. In this respect, Darwin could even serve as a source of consolation. Gercen was deeply convinced that he adhered to the “good” side in history. Darwin’s theory of evolution precisely gave “good” the best chances of survival in the long run:

Why, if man can by patience select variations most useful to himself, should nature fail in selecting variations useful, under changing conditions of life, to her living products? What limit can be put to this power, acting during long ages and rigidly scrutinising the whole constitution, structure, and habits of each creature, – favouring the good and rejecting the bad? I can see no limit to this power, in slowly and beautifully adapting each form to the most complex relations of life.\(^5\)

Thus, Darwin marked the final point in Gercen’s growing disillusion with the notion of historical teleology. Already in the chapter on Proudhon in *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen had left no doubt about his unwillingness to believe in a rational development of history: “Teleology is also theology. [...] What difference is there between a predetermined expediency and Providence?” (X, 199-200).

Even after the dismissal of his own family as a possible continuator of his revolutionary project, Gercen remained a cautious optimist. At the end of his essay ‘Robert Owen’, which he included in *Byloe i dumy*, Gercen found a convincing metaphor for man’s situation after the end of historical teleology:

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, не назначенье, не заданный урок, а последствие той сложной круговой поруки, которая связывает все сущее концами и началами, причинами и действиями.
(We must be proud of not being needles and threads in the hands of fate as it sews the multicolored cloth of history... We know that this cloth is not sewn without us, but this is not our goal, not our purpose, not the lesson set for us to learn, but the consequence of the complex mutual guarantee that links all existing things by their ends and beginnings, causes and effects.

And that is not all; we can change the pattern of the carpet. There is no master craftsman, no design, only a foundation, and we are alone, quite alone.)

Conclusion

The family drama proves to be a recurrent interpretive pattern in Gercen’s *Byloe i dumy*. Basically, four different modes can be discerned. First, Gercen explains his own revolutionary engagement with the metaphor of the conflict of generations. The fight against the “father”, Nicholas I, conceals the problem of Gercen’s illegitimate birth. Gercen locates his revolutionary mission not in a private but in a public context. By no means does he want his political endeavors to appear to be the rebellious actions of an underprivileged outsider in Russian aristocratic society. Theoretically, this mode is based on Hegel’s assumption of rational progress in history. It has to be kept in mind that Gercen advocated a very progressive interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy as the “algebra of revolution” (IX, 23). Hegel’s apotheosis of the state, which was criticized by many Russian intellectuals in the 1840s, is very much downplayed in Gercen’s understanding.53

The second application of the family drama concerns the Hegelian parallel between individual biography and history, which Gercen originally planned to establish explicitly in *Byloe i dumy* as a double narration with an inside/outside plot. The failed revolutions of 1848 were to be mirrored in Gercen’s own marital crisis, which ended tragically in 1852 with the death of his wife and his newborn son. In order to represent this double-sidedness, Gercen did not have to make fundamental changes in his original conception from the “Russian chapters”. The only change consisted of the new tragic tone, which the interpretive pattern of the family drama acquired. On the theoretical level, the second mode may be linked to August Cieszkowski’s “philosophy of action”, which provided a valid explication for the tragic failure of public and private aspirations. However, the inside/outside conception did not materialize in the published version of *Byloe i dumy* because it was
overridden by a new compositional imperative, which ultimately demanded
the removal of the inside plot.

In a third application of the interpretive pattern, Gercen had to reject his
initial plans and he established an aura of secrecy around the Herwegh affair.
The new family drama, his affair with Natal’ja Tučkova-Ogareva, could by
no means be integrated into the axiology of Byloe i dumy, for Gercen did not
find a discourse that would allow the story of his intrusion into Ogarev’s
marriage to be told. Gercen tried, by various means, to distract his readers’
attention from the Tučkova affair and pointed instead, mysteriously, to the
Herwegh affair. Many allusions, hints, and hidden references mark the pre-
sence of a catastrophe in Gercen’s private life but the veil is never lifted. The
very compositional structure of Byloe i dumy was indirectly but decisively
affected by Gercen’s strategy of hiding a taboo subject behind a partly known
secret.

It has been commonly noted that Gercen’s Byloe i dumy has no ending.
This is not only due to the fact that Gercen died before he finished his
memoir. The missing end follows the inner logic of Gercen’s autobiography.
Beginning with Part Six, the focus of Byloe i dumy shifts away from Gercen’s
own life and his connection to Russia. Gercen is not the hero of his own
autobiographical plot any more. He passes this role on to fellow revolu-
tionaries from other European countries. The axiological inconsistency of
ideal and narration seems to mirror Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s general dis-
missal of philosophical systems and his plea for an ironic stance towards life,
which changes without respecting rational or moral continuities.

The fourth mode of the family drama in Byloe i dumy concerns the
decay of Gercen’s own family in the 1860s. The lives of his children did not
develop in the direction Gercen had wished. His own myth of a revolutionary
family fighting collectively against Czarist Russia proved to be illusionary.
Moreover, the fight itself lost its clear battle lines. On the one hand, Alex-
ander II did not fit the evil stereotype of the Russian Czar that Nicholas I
embodied. On the other hand, Russian society itself displayed reactionary
traits as the bloody suppression of the Polish uprising in 1863 met with broad
approval. History itself seemed to confirm Charles Darwin’s theory of evo-
lution, which definitively did away with the notion of rational teleology in
history. The realization that his own family was incapable of continuing his
revolutionary project was especially difficult for Gercen.

Most interestingly, Gercen included a philosophical chapter on family
and love in Byloe i dumy. “Razdum’e po povodu zatronutych voprosov”
(“Deliberation on the Above-Mentioned Questions”) was probably written in
1866 (X, 205); it is inserted in the autobiographical narration (in Section One
of Part Five) exactly where the story about the Herwegh affair should have
followed. In this chapter, Gercen criticizes both the Christian institution of
Ulrich Schmid

marriage and the romantic concept of passionate love. To his mind, both con-
cepts limit human freedom in an inadmissible way:

Гражданский брак – мера государственного хозяйства, освобож-
дение государства от воспитания детей и явное прикрепление людь
ей к собственности. [...] Вчерашние рабы брака идут в рабство
любви. [...] Я отрицаю то царственное место, которое дают любви в
жизни, я отрицаю ее самодержавную власть и протестую против
слабодушного оправдания увлечения. (X, 208-209; italics in the
original)

(Civil marriage is an economic measure of the state which frees the
state from the education of children and attaches people even more
strongly to their property. [...] The former slaves of marriage go into
the slavery of love. [...] I reject the monarchic position that is attributed to
love in life, I reject its autocratic power and protest against its pusilla-
nimous legitimization through passion.)

Gercen combines his position with a harsh critique of Hegel and Proudhon.
By no means is Gercen ready to resolve the antinomy between marriage and
passion with a Hegelian “Aufhebung”. For him, such a solution would be
nothing but “religious fraud” – the reconciliation is not real, but has to be
believed in (X, 204). Neither is Proudhon’s approach acceptable to Gercen.
Proudhon tried to apply the idea of justice to the problem of marriage but
forgot that love itself does not bother about justice; in fact, it is in its extreme
one-sidedness very unjust. Gercen formulated his critique most clearly in his
own French translation of the essay: “The absolute is a philosophical dogma,
justice may rage and condemn – but it is not really able to get hold of
passion” (X, 391).

The “Razdum’e po povodu zatronutych voprosov” is a very important
document for Gercen’s use of the family crisis as an interpretive pattern in
Byloe i dumy. It proves that, by the mid 1860s, Gercen had abandoned his
former philosophical positions, which were oriented towards Hegel and
Proudhon. Witnessing the decay of his own family, Gercen radicalized his
views on marriage and love. Thus he devaluated the institution of marriage in
which he could see little more than an instrument of oppression. Moreover,
he completely depreciated the notion of passionate love, which he hitherto
had held sacred, and replaced it with the highest value of freedom. Gercen
did not even hesitate to call love an “all-devouring Moloch” that especially
suppressed women (X, 209).

The “Razdum’e po povodu zatronutych voprosov” thus runs into the
same discursive dead-end that is representative of the whole text of Byloe i
dumy. Gercen’s philosophical conceptions and his life experience did not
match any more. The only notion he could resort to at the end of his life was
absolute freedom – and Gercen was even willing to sacrifice the autobiographical coherence and continuity of *Byloe i dumy* on the altar of his meta-historical aspirations.

### NOTES

1. A.I. Gercen, *Sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach*, Moskva, 1954-1965, X, 9. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text. All translations are mine. I am very much indebted to Irina Paperno for her most valuable comments on this essay.


7. For a similar discussion of the pragmatic purpose of *My Past and Thoughts*, see Kelly, *Views*, 163.


12. ‘Pis’ma N.A. Mel’gunova – Gercenu’, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, 62, 1955, 326-327. Gercen’s own letter, to which Mel’gunov responds, was lost. Irina Paperno drew my attention to this source.


Alexander Herzen, Vom anderen Ufer, Hamburg, 1850, 141.

P.V. Annenkov, Literaturnye vospominanija, Moskva, 1960, 328. Italics in the original.


For an account of the adultery from Herwegh’s perspective, see Barbara Rettenmund, Emma Herwegh: Die grösste und beste Heldin der Liebe, Zürich, 2000, 137 ff.

This episode is discussed in detail by Zimmerman, Midpassage, 205-208.

The common view on the two families is reflected in Valerian Panaev’s memoirs: “At the time [1858, U.S.] Gercen had two daughters, his son was in Italy. The Ogarev family consisted of his wife and a girl”. Valerian M. Panaev, ‘Vospominanija’, Russkaja starina, 5, 1902, 324.


N.A. Tuškova-Ogareva, Vospominanija, Moskva, 1959, 141, 214.


Ibid., 267, 272.


“Byloe i dumy”. Avtograf rasskaza o semejnoj drame (“Inside”), 59-66, especially 62. This interpretation can be corroborated by the publication history of Byloe i dumy. In 1854 and 1858, Gercen published the first and second editions of “Tjur’ma i ssylka”. In 1861, Gercen published the first 33 chapters of Byloe i dumy in two volumes. In 1862, a third volume followed, which, however, did not continue the autobiographical narration but rather,
included essays from the 1830s and 1840s. In other words, around 1862 Gercen interrupted the red thread of events in the book edition of *Byloe i dumy* and, at the same time, hinted in the *Kolokol* publication at an intimate scandal, which prevented him from continuing his autobiography. Only in 1866 did he publish the fourth volume of *Byloe i dumy* but without the already-written chapters on the Herwegh affair.


32 This letter exists in two drafts; the quoted sentence appears only in the first draft.


36 For a general discussion of the philosophical relation between Gercen and Proudhon, see Kelly, *Views*, 107 ff.


38 Aucourtier, ‘Correspondance’, 291.

39 For the most recent documented account of the frictions in Gercen’s second family, see I.A. Želvakova, ‘Novye pis’ma iz zarubežnych semejnych sobranij potomkov Aleksandra Ivanoviča Gercena’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 49, 2001, 197-204.


49 Kelly, *Views*, 156. There might have even been a short contact between Gercen and Darwin. In 1860, Gercen was mentioned to Darwin by a Frenchman living in London, who wanted to translate *The Origin of Species*. See *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 8, 1860, Cambridge, 1993, 37.

50 The connection between Gercen and Darwin has been noted by Kelly, *Views*, 140.

52 *Ibid.,* 469.