

Alexander Herzen and empirical liberty

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April, 2017

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Total length of dissertation: 10,479 words

Introduction

‘Out of breath and red-faced, we stood mouths open wide. The sun was setting, the domes glistening, the city unfolding below the hill, a fresh wind blowing in our face. We stood there, leaning on one another, embraced, and took an oath in front of all of Moscow to sacrifice our lives for the battle we had chosen’.¹

On the Sparrow Hills in 1827, overlooking Moscow two years after the Decembrist revolt, the revolutionary cause of two young men began. Although many a fifteen-year-old might swear to sacrifice their life for mankind and for the future of their country, few actualise it. For Alexander Ivanovich Herzen and Nikolay Platonovich Ogarev however, their lives would be dedicated to fulfilling this promise; an actualisation of revolutionary thought and literature, and a constant striving to subvert authority and reform Russia, following in the footsteps of their childhood heroes, the Decembrists. Throughout their lives, they remembered this oath as when first ‘the story of our lives unfolded’,² as Ogarev himself put it, and identified themselves as revolutionaries dedicating their lives for Russia. Such oaths necessarily remind one of other almost mythical ones, not least Simon Bolivar’s twenty years prior in the Italian mountains, where he swore to liberate his own Colombia. Alexander Herzen, too, wished to liberate his country. However, for him the country was Russia and the liberation from itself and its highly unjust social structure. This essay will explore Herzen’s conception of liberty as one necessarily rooted in empirical understanding.

It would be helpful here to say a few words about Herzen and the reputation of his thought, as his works are not particularly well-known beyond Russia. This despite being of interest in the study of Western political thought due to his close philosophical and personal

¹ A. I. Herzen, *Byloe i dumy [My Past and Thought]* (Moscow, 2007), 70. All of Herzen’s works used in this essay have been studied in Russian, with citations translated by myself.

² Herzen’s citation of a letter from Ogarev, many years later, regarding this moment. Ibid.

interaction with many contemporary thinkers in Europe. Herzen's take on Hegel's dialectic, his interpretation of Proudhon, and his response to the revolution of 1848 forced him to redefine his revolutionary role and abandon his former ideals. Writing in a time of visionary utopias and unshattered belief in intelligible natural laws, he was a prime example of the Russian radical intelligentsia's iconoclasm. This was his most important contribution to Western thought: the attack on grand historical narratives and systematisers of thought, wherein lies his idea of 'liberating' thought from any utopias, ideologies or systems. This has led some scholars to compare Herzen with the existentialists and with Nietzsche,³ although more accurately with the latter's predecessor Schopenhauer, and an interpretation of him as the precursor of 'modern pessimism'.⁴ However, despite his cynical and ever-critical attacks, Herzen remained faithful to his love of humanity and turned his critique into a positive force, creating thereby a philosophy of empirical liberty.

Throughout his numerous publications, Herzen strived to actualise this philosophy of empirical liberty, which runs as a thread through all of his writings. In combination with the memoir *My Past and Thoughts*, whose literary rigour is often equalled to the great Russian writers, the bulk of Herzen's works are articles, essays and shorter novels. These were first published in various Russian journals, and then later, after his exile to Europe, in the two periodicals he established: *The Bell* and *The Polar Star*. These constituted the only free Russian printing press of the nineteenth century, and in fact the only non-censored information channel available in the country. By 1855, they had acquired an enormous influence, and almost single-handedly created a pressure of public opinion which contributed largely to Alexander II's decision to emancipate the serfs in 1861.⁵ By

³ Aileen Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint": Herzen, Proudhon, and the Role of the Intellectual Revolutionary', *Modern Intellectual History*, 2:2 (2005), 179-204.

⁴ William C. Weidemaier, 'Herzen and Nietzsche: A Link in the Rise of Modern Pessimism', *Russian Review*, 36:4 (1977), 477-88.

⁵ Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint".

publishing anything written ‘in the spirit of freedom’,⁶ including criticisms of his own work, Herzen spread literature, memoirs, facts and opinions on prevailing life conditions — yet did not preach for the socialist solution that he himself would have preferred.

This journalistic role that Herzen acquired can be partly explained by his precarious social position within the Russian elite. The illegitimate son of one of the richest men in Russia, he was simultaneously at the very height of the elite and humbled by his personal position. This also granted him a comparatively thorough aristocratic home-schooling in his childhood and the means to write freely in his adult life. Having studied at Moscow university at a time when it was an oasis of free thinking and of at least some transgression of the strict social hierarchy, he came in touch with French political thought and German philosophy. There, a circle of friends was created around him and Ogarev, many of whom within a decade became the intellectual giants of the time. Due to their political radicalism, most of the circle ended up in exile shortly after graduation, alongside Herzen. He was first exiled to Perm’, on the Western front of the Ural Mountains, and then a few years later to Novgorod. The exile was not of the harshest kind, although it forced him to work within the bureaucracy and was in piercing contrast to the free-thinking environment of Moscow, placing him face-to-face with the consequences and inequalities of the governmental structure. This was formative in his own development, especially after he left Russia for good in 1847 and witnessed first-hand the revolution of 1848 in Paris and in Italy.⁷ Witnessing the ease with which the revolution was suppressed, Herzen abandoned his former beliefs: ideals based on Western Europe’s revolutionary thought and with the possibility of the West’s progression towards liberty and egalitarianism. Instead, he turned to the experience of the Russian social reality during his exile and in his

⁶ Herzen, ‘Free Russian Printing in London: To the Brothers on Russian soil’, in Herzen, *Sobranie sochinenij v vosm’i tomah [Collection of works in eight volumes]*, vol. 8 (Moscow, 1975), 6.

⁷ Herzen, *My Past and Thought*, parts 1-5.

earlier years, seeking a sociological solution to Russia's problems based on the particularities of the nation. Homegrown solutions and close research of reality, as well as understanding of man in all social strata and their desires, became for Herzen the only path for a reformation of the oppressive structure of society. This turn of thought led him to redefine his role as a revolutionary intellectual. His efforts were now directed towards a liberation of Russian thought from viewing the European path as the only one to liberty and indeed from all idealist structures. Fundamentally, it formed Herzen's need for empirical understanding, rather than ideology, as the path towards liberty.

Analysis of Herzen has seldom, if ever, taken this view. Rather, layers of myths have veiled Herzen's thought. He has been described as a realist, a socialist and an idealist — these restricted frameworks led scholars to ignore the wider consistencies in his work. One of these myths can be summed up in a sentence I have heard repeated since childhood: 'Herzen rang *The Bell*, and awakened the Populists'. The 'Populists' refer here to *Narodnaja Volya*, a movement of the late nineteenth century whose ideas of a Russian agrarian socialist structure were partly based on Herzen's commentary on the Russian village's *obshchina* (commune)⁸. The Populist movement culminated in a successful assassination of Alexander II, and is widely considered to have been a predecessor for the Socialist Revolutionary Party and the Russian Revolution. This link established between Herzen's thought and the revolution of 1917 has fed into the understanding of Herzen as part of the birth of Russian socialism, by Soviet and Western historians alike.⁹ Such analysis necessitates that one ignore Herzen's so-called 'liberal waverings'¹⁰ and

⁸ Vladimir V. Zenkovsky, 'A. I. Herzen', *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London, 1953), 278.

⁹ Thereof the title of Martin Malia's work on Herzen being *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*, as one example. Another is seen in Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint".

¹⁰ According to Malia, by Soviet historians. Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism 1812-1855* (London, 1961), 415.

individualist philosophy, as it fails to take into account that no consistent socialist thread can be found in his thought. In fact, the very purpose of introducing the Russian agrarian socialist structures into political thought was for Herzen rather an assessment of Russia's chances relative to those of Europe in reaching the nineteenth-century socialist utopia. Primarily, this is a call for Russian thinkers to turn to Russia herself, instead of seeking answers in Europe. A call to view society empirically and base reforms on social structures that already exist. Although this necessarily is an idea made to a socialist background, he was not making the case for socialism *per se*.

Herzen's work has not only been seen through the lens of socialism, but also in the tradition of realism. Herein the research undertaken by Isaiah Berlin and his former student Aileen Kelly are important examples.¹¹ There are reasons to see Herzen primarily as a realist, because in contrast to many of his contemporaries (and predecessors) he is uniquely self-critical and not concerned with building a philosophical structure upon which the world could be explained, but rather describing it as he sees it – journalistically, rather than metaphysically. However tempting it may be to concentrate upon this aspect of his work, as Kelly and Berlin have done, it remains inadequate if one is to understand Herzen's life and work holistically. Viewing Herzen as a journalist underestimates the revolutionary nature of his thought. Considering philosophy as incomplete without politics, Herzen always saw himself primarily as a political actor, and his works never adopt either an ideal or an 'objective' point of view – instead, it is consciously placed within a political framework, serving a political purpose. Despite refusing to become the leader of a revolution when implored to, or even to define ultimate political goals, Herzen remained a political force working through public pressure.¹² Ever-criticising rather than preaching, his

¹¹ Kelly, 'Destruction of Idols: Alexander Herzen and Francis Bacon', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41:4 (Oct-Dec, 1980), 635-662.

¹² Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint".

works are a consistent protest against any oppressiveness of the regime, whilst aiming for social and economic equality and, ultimately, liberty. Having chosen to strive towards concrete political goals rather than ideals, Herzen's later works constitute an effort for an emancipation of serfs which granted them land, an end to the censorship of the tsarist regime, a reformation of the empire's corrupt bureaucracy and the independence of Poland. Although the reality of the oppression renders it possible to view this protest as objective rather than political, in a country where the majority of intellectuals chose to follow a reformist path working through the regime, Herzen's critique has to be considered a radically political one.

In fact, none of these views characterises what Herzen was striving to achieve. Although he ought not to be seen as a stepping-stone in Russia's path towards the Revolution of 1917, the revolutionary side in his thought is crucial. However, this ought to be seen not in the Bolshevik or Populist sense, but rather, the Decembrist — the martyrs for the liberation of Russia from an oppressive tsarist regime. The latter's writings being based on empirical understanding, suggesting concrete reforms. The balance between the socialist, utopian and realist analyses lies with Herzen's own identification, namely in the understanding of himself as a cynic, a rebel, and a revolutionary liberator of thought whose love for humanity and liberty prevailed through the cynicism. His preference lies in a solution of agrarian socialism, but only as a means towards greater liberty of man. Recognising the shortcomings of socialism, he would refuse to give himself wholeheartedly to this solution, making way for something closer, namely a strive for greater empirical understanding. More directly, Herzen's underlying agenda was to liberate Russian thought from a European understanding of progress and civilisation, and to steer it to an actualisation of what Russia could be based upon its own reality and the particularities of its people. His

work in its totality is an argument for an empirical understanding of a society to be the only possible way to reach liberty of any form.

This essay will propose a unique interpretation of Herzen's philosophy, namely as one of empirical liberty. If we want to understand his political thought holistically, it is necessary to acknowledge that this is the project he is striving for. Empirical in the understanding that liberty has to be based on research, observation or experience, rather than ideological beliefs and systems. According to Herzen, the only way there can ever be liberty is through this empirical, sociological understanding. In part one, we will explore Herzen's understanding of empirical liberty by seeking to define this philosophy in *From the Other Shore*, the work in which this idea is first formulated. Here, Herzen's disenchantment with Europe and the idols of his youth transformed into a strive for empirical understanding. In the second part the most direct application of empirical liberty will be explored, namely as a tool to overcome Russia's 'inferiority complex' in relation to Europe. By equating Slavic culture with European civilisation in *The Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia*, and *The Russian People and Socialism. An Open Letter to Jules Michelet*, Herzen sought to show the subjective nature of historical perception and the impossibility of importing non-Russian solutions and applying them to Russian problems. The second part will thereby prove how the concept of empirical liberty was actualised in the liberation of Russian thought. Finally, in the third section, we will explore the embodiment of the philosophy in Herzen's political campaign within his later journalistic works. The effects of empirical liberty on his most important concrete political goal, the emancipation of the serfs, and on his protest against the violence of the Russian empire, illuminates the definition and centrality of this idea in his work. By tracing the concept of empirical liberty through its definition, its birth and its direct applications, a comprehensive understanding of Herzen's philosophy will emerge.

Disenchantment with Europe — Towards an Empirical Philosophy

‘Half our hopes, half our convictions had been killed, thoughts of negation and despair stirred in the minds, took root.’¹³ In these words, Alexander Herzen summarised the disenchantment that followed in the wake of the failed revolution of 1848. All over the continent, intellectuals were haunted by a disillusionment in their former ideals. Hopes for the revolution had been high, making the downfall after its failure even greater. Present in Paris and then in Italy during the course of events, Herzen wrote the essays that would become his most famous work in the West, *From the Other Shore*, in which the moral torment of the disenchantment is recorded — and overcome. Herzen was unique in turning it into a positive force of empirical liberty: a contrast both to the nihilistic and the nationalist radicalisation of contemporary Russian thinkers. In these essays he concluded that first of all, the mind has to be liberated from all dogmas and ideals; ‘French Revolution and German science [philosophy] — the Herculean pillars of the European world’ have to be cast off before any revolutionary struggle for the latter to be successful.¹⁴ By studying reality a solution to the problems of society can appear, but former beliefs must be thrown overboard and minds liberated. If people would be free of the empty ideals that they have been taught to believe in and regard reality fearless of the conclusions they might draw, concrete decisions would be taken rationally for the improvement of the *real* society, rather than an *a priori* imagined one. In this essay, *From the Other Shore* will be employed in order to understand Herzen’s view of liberty as the ultimate goal achievable only through an empirical understanding of society, human nature and people’s desires. It will be argued that the concept of empirical liberty was Herzen’s positive solution to the problem of the disenchantment of ideals that he faced in 1848-9.

¹³ Herzen, ‘From the Other Shore’, *Collection of works*, vol. 3, 258.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

However, Herzen was not alone: the year 1848 has often been identified as a turning-point in European political thought. The failure of the revolutions in continental Europe led to a total disillusionment in revolutionary action and in the possibility of actualising the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.¹⁵ It came at a time when thought had been dominated by visionary political utopias,¹⁶ and rendered radical political thinkers immobile in the following decades. Whilst in the West the revolutionary fervour vanished in what Herzen called a middle-class inaction; in Russia, the passion for reform did not weaken but changed course towards practical solutions, eventually shaping the ‘uncompromising character of the later revolutionary movement’.¹⁷ Although most of the Russian intelligentsia was silenced by Nicholas I’s paranoid rigorous censorship of the following seven years, a radical intellectual movement took form in which different political circles, previously united against the regime despite their disagreements, became enemies.¹⁸ The radical intelligentsia, having been disenchanted by Europe’s path, turned against the very idea of progress and any Western-imported ideas, becoming increasingly introspective and practical.¹⁹ In many aspects, Herzen’s thought can be located here. However, where others would become idealist and uncompromising, Herzen took advantage of these winds of doubt to conceive the subjective nature of his own political goals’. His iconoclasm goes further, for in the end it was turned to his advantage: ‘instead of despair, instead of the desire to perish, I now want to live²⁰ — even if his opinions may not ultimately the superior, and his goals never to be actualised in the future. The conclusion of ultimate subjectivity was further cemented by his studies of the latest evolutionary theories in

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, ‘Russia and 1848’, *Russian Thinkers* (London, 2013), 1-23.

¹⁶ Kelly, ‘View From the Other Shore’, *The Discovery of Chance: The Life and Thought of Alexander Herzen* (London, 2016), 340-362.

¹⁷ Berlin, ‘1848’, 23.

¹⁸ Gary Saul Morson, ‘Tradition and Counter-tradition: The Radical Intelligentsia and Classical Russian Literature’, in William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (eds.), *A History of Russian Thought* (Cambridge, 2010), 141-168.

¹⁹ Berlin, ‘1848’.

²⁰ Herzen, ‘Shore’, 326.

1846-8. The latest findings in biology were approaching the concept of natural selection, pointing at chance and probability theory, rather than a higher power or progress, as defining the course of the universe.²¹ An integration of these concepts with a philosophical conception of history, pointed at the universe having no objective goal, making any beliefs and values relative and subjective, thus ultimately unreliable to achieving political aims.²²

Having placed Herzen in his intellectual context, let us now turn to the text of *From the Other Shore*. This collection of essays consists of three dialogues, which serve a self-critical literary purpose, and five monologues reflecting on the disasters of the revolution, the reasons for its failure, and what is left for an intellectual to do in such a climate. The two most important essays to our question are the dialogues between the romantic nihilist, identified by Kelly as being based on Ivan Turgenev,²³ and the naturalist doctor (from *Who is to blame?*²⁴), in which cracks in Herzen's beliefs caused by 1848 appears. Here, the disenchantment with Europe is revealed in all its colours, with the two characters representing the possible responses to its problem. The first has become disappointed with life, the other has learned to accept it; 'I refuse not to be angry, not to suffer, ... my indignation is my protest, I do not want to make peace'²⁵ says the former and plunges into a nihilism of Schopenhauer, giving up on life. The other believes that if people would regard each other empirically, as they do nature, 'they would cease being beside themselves with anger because life does not obey their prideful commands, their private whims.' It is a mistake to expect from life what it cannot give you 'instead of appreciating

²¹ Kelly, 'The Discovery of Chance', *Chance*, 160-186.

²² Berlin, 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', *Russian Thinkers*, 98 (93-129).

²³ Kelly, 'The nihilism of Ivan Turgenev', *Toward Another Shore: Russian Thinkers Between Necessity and Chance* (London, 1998), 91-118.

²⁴ Herzen, *Kto vinovat? [Who is to blame?]* (Saint Petersburg, 2014).

²⁵ Herzen, 'Shore', 236.

what it has given'.²⁶ Within the dialogue of these two forces, one of humanitarian idealism, the other of naturalism and (what can be perceived as) cold rationality, it is clear where Herzen himself stands. 'I choose knowledge, and let it deprive me of my last consolations ... — the childish hopes, the youthful dreams must be torn out by the roots!²⁷ However, he does not despise the other, and refuses to discard his point of view, both in an act of self-censorship and in order not to create a new ideal, a banner of rationality; 'it is for you to choose,²⁸ he writes. 'After such convulsion the human being cannot remain what he was, either his soul ... clings with desperate stubbornness to its convictions and finds comfort in the very absence of hope, ... — or else he ... surrenders his last hopes, grows soberer still. ... One leads to the bliss of lunacy. The other to the unhappiness of knowledge.'²⁹ Despite declaring that he chooses knowledge over clinging to his older beliefs, Herzen rejects despair and lets the answer be born between the two choices. An answer of empirical reality without succumbing to the nihilism of despair, a positive solution to disenchantment.

'These are the contributions of reaction [i.e. the general disenchantment]: doubts stir, forcing minds to think — it was not easy to reach these doubts.'³⁰ It is in these very doubts that Herzen found the answer, having come to the conclusion that first of all, the mind has to be liberated from all dogmas and ideals. Solutions can then not lie in new made-up idealist concepts, but rather have to be doubtful in their nature. Scholars that have regarded Herzen as the precursor of political pessimism base this partly on the rejection of both optimism and pessimism and partly on the disillusionment he lets himself air in the

²⁶ Herzen, 'Shore', 237.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

monologues, despite arguing against it. However, although the goal of Herzen was to make men doubt, it should not be mistaken for a will of inaction or 'nihilism'. In contrast to Schopenhauer, for Herzen nihilism is 'logic without structure, it is science without dogma, unconditional submission to experience and resigned acceptance of all consequences'. The nihilism of Schopenhauer is for Herzen 'the turning of facts and thoughts into nothing, into barren scepticism, ... into the despair which leads to inaction'.³¹ In other words, Herzen's particular nihilism was embodied in a strive for empirical understanding. The structures of thought and grand narratives ought to be thrown overboard, he argues, and replaced by studies of the reality of society, by a naturalist's understanding, and then as the old world dies a new might take place — and even if it does not, 'it would be more honourable' to make room for the possibility by destroying the old beliefs.³² In the end, the empirical route is the only possible, as 'life realises only that aspect of thought, which falls on favourable soil'.³³ Without an anthropological, empirical understanding of the world, thought cannot have the effect it intends.

Having outlined the basic concepts of empirical liberty, let us now turn to Herzen's argumentation behind it. The root of it is a conception of subjectivity and a cause-consequence logic of historical understanding. As Zenkovsky has pointed out, for Herzen there is no 'pure knowledge', everything is subjective, and neither does history function in accordance with Hegel's historicism.³⁴ Rather, '[h]istory is improvised',³⁵ 'it has no libretto'³⁶ — 'everything is *ex tempore*'³⁷. When in a dialogue his opponent claims progress

³¹ Herzen, 'Bazarov once again', *Collection of works*, vol. 8, 318-19.

³² Herzen, 'Shore', 344.

³³ *Ibid.*, 292

³⁴ Zenkovsky, 'Herzen', 280.

³⁵ Herzen, 'Shore', 247.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

to be the aim of history, the doctor replies that 'Progress is a quality of the developing conscious; it is retentive memory and physiological evolvment of people with common life. ... I see here a consequence' rather than a goal.³⁸ It would be better 'to see life, and thereby history, as a reached goal, rather than a means to an end.'³⁹ The only reason we see history as a progress, as a movement, and trust our personal understanding so deeply, is because of the character of human memory and a serious flaw in logic. The logical flaw comes from looking 'at the end, and not at the act itself' which Herzen considers to be 'the biggest mistake.'⁴⁰ 'We often see goals in the consequential phases of one single evolution' instead of viewing it naturalistically and rationally as a process of cause and consequence. This logic of cause-consequence relations in understanding history and society is in fact both a sociological and an empirical one. However, society conceives of itself through a path of progress, following relative memories as if they were objectively true. It is because we are used to it, Herzen argues, that 'we think, that the goal of the child is to become an adult, because he becomes one, although the goal, the purpose, of a child is rather to play, to be happy, to be a child. If we are to look at the end limit, the goal of all living would be death.'⁴¹ Moreover, if even our understanding of history and of the process of life is flawed, if society has taught us incorrectly, how are men to be sure of their own conclusions to be the best possible solutions? Perhaps, the dialogues suggest, our goals are mere 'private whims'.⁴² Why ought we expect the world and society to follow these? Would it not be better to conceive of personal desires as personal, subjective, and to regard the world as it is in its present reality rather than in relation to a future goal?

³⁸ Herzen, 'Shore', 249.

³⁹ Ibid., 249.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 246.

⁴¹ Ibid., 307.

⁴² Ibid., 237.

By regarding the world 'pathologically', rather than through the logic we have been taught through tradition, possible reforms for society can be found. However, this can reveal uncomfortable truths, and herein lies the danger that makes men retreat from empirical understanding. For one, a pathological regard of society would show 'that to this day slavery has been the constant requirement for development, thus either it is necessary or there is no such rejection of it as we believe'.⁴³ Though striving for liberty, fraternity and equality himself, Herzen nonetheless perceives the absurd in seeing men as destined to be free as nothing in history indicates this. Perhaps all men do not naturally strive to be free, Herzen suggests, and it is therefore absurd that his contemporaries seem to believe 'that it is sufficient to print an illustrated copy of *les droits de l'homme*, for man to become free.'⁴⁴ However, this logic does not necessitate that liberty as such is impossible.⁴⁵ 'Man is more free, than is usually thought. He depends a great deal on his environment, but not as much as he surrenders to it. A large part of our destiny lies in our hands, it is only to catch it and not to let it go.'⁴⁶ A man's dependence on the environment fluctuates with his awareness, his consciousness. The greater it is, 'the greater independence; the weaker the awareness, the stronger are the ties with the environment, the more it absorbs the individual.'⁴⁷ For Herzen, the liberation of the individual from their environment is aligned with the liberation of society. Inner, individual liberation lies at the foundation of liberty in any form. The 'divorce between society and the individual ... the fictitious hostility between them' is nothing short of a 'religion of slavery'.⁴⁸ In fact, '[i]f only people would save

⁴³ Herzen, 'Shore', 309.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

themselves instead of saving the world, to liberate themselves instead of humanity, how much they would do for the liberation of humanity!⁴⁹

However, individual liberty was not Herzen's main goal, contrary to the arguments of Zenkovsky and to some extent Berlin.⁵⁰ Neither does individual liberty merely act as a pathway to collective liberty, the relationship between the two being somewhat more complex. As Gustav Shpet argues, the *human* is at the basis of Herzen's worldview, and therefore the sacrifice of the individual becomes for him not only a violation of the subjectivity of one's opinion making a sacrifice impossible, but also contrary to his morals. It is a deep belief that not only can any sacrifice of lives never be worth, but it can also never bring any greater good due to the affinity of one man and society. The connection between the liberation of one individual and of society is also for Herzen the unreasonable distinction between liberation of thought and in the practical. Liberty, just as man, is for Herzen a holistic concept. The liberty of man has to come from all sides at once, in the individual mind simultaneously as in society.⁵¹ Just as if people would liberate themselves *as individuals* they would act for the liberation of society, the liberation of minds from dogmas — with doubt and subjective understanding in place of rigid ideals — would act towards a socio-economical liberation. The concept of empirical liberty brings the socio-economic together with that of the mind's reasoning.

For Herzen, the very act of conceiving values and ideals as subjective and relative to the situation is a liberating force. Why, he asks his opponent, 'do you think that the people

⁴⁹ Herzen, 'Shore', 332.

⁵⁰ Zenkovsky, 'Herzen', 271-2. Berlin, 'Individual Liberty'.

⁵¹ Gustav Shpet, *Filosofskoe Mirovozzrenie Gerzena [Herzen's Philosophical Worldview]* (St Petersburg, 1921).

should actualise your thought, and not its own, why now and not at another time? are you sure that the path that you have conceived of does not have its downsides; ... are you sure that there are no other means, that there are no broader goals?'⁵² Moreover, '[i]deals and theoretical constructions never materialise in the shape in which they fly in our minds.'⁵³ Through doubting, man ceases to see his own point of view as superior or ultimate. Conceiving of his opinion as a relative, he can dedicate himself to empirical studies of society, striving to liberate it in the concrete rather than in the general. 'Instead of convincing peoples that they greatly wish for something, that we wish for, it would be better to think whether they at the moment wish for something, and, if what they wish for is something entirely different, ... to leave them with peace, without making force either on others or on oneself.'⁵⁴ Not only with peace however, but also with understanding, for there cannot be any reason to be infuriated with peoples: 'they are right, because they are always acting in accordance to the circumstances of their everyday life; ... they are facts'⁵⁵. Reconciling himself with the people, and having decided on the path towards liberty to be through awareness in order to break free from one's environment, and a turn to an empirical understanding, Herzen ultimately concludes: 'The world will never see liberty until all religious and political becomes human, simple and attainable to criticism and rejection.'⁵⁶ This is the empirical, humanising iconoclasm for the sake of liberty that is put forward as a philosophical understanding in *From the Other Shore*.

Having defined Herzen's conception of liberty as empirical, the difference between Herzen and contemporary thinkers (possibly with the exclusion of Proudhon), stands clear. He

⁵² Herzen, 'Shore', 281.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

found a path for humanity to reach liberty, without necessarily subscribing to his own beliefs *inter alia* in socialism, that was open to interpretation and would change organically with circumstance. It was a path of empirical understanding, which could steer any action or reaction in relation to a current political situation towards the ultimate goal of liberty. In contrast to contemporary Russian thinkers, he focuses not only on the need for attention to Russia's particular problems, but proposes a general understanding for how political thought is to function. Thought is for Herzen the basis of all liberty, and even though his passive role of an intellectual was not chosen by himself but rather by circumstance, he saw its need in any future revolutionary or reformist action. Seeing a necessity for political thought and political agendas to be grounded in a perception of the reality, and in the understanding of one's own subjectivity, Herzen reconciled himself with the disenchantment of prior goals and saw the positive force in the doubts that the revolutionary failure had brought. Men that are made to doubt are more likely to discover new solutions, ones that are based on a pathological understanding of society and of people. There can never be liberty to mankind if it fights for an unattainable goal, if it does not study its circumstance and if it fears to trust itself, its reason and ultimately dares not liberate itself. All has to become human, all has to become criticisable — no dogmas, ideas or securities are higher than the human being and its potential of liberty, and this can only be reached if political ideals are seen as subjective and the reality studied empirically. The foundation of liberty of any kind — of the mind, of the individual, of society, of the social and economical — is empirical understanding.

Overcoming the Inferiority Complex: Slavic Culture and European Civilisation

The theme of Russia's particularity coupled with an equality with Europe is one which Alexander Herzen referred to throughout his work, both due to his dual affinity to Russia and Europe as an exile, and to the importance of the question to his political agenda. If, as he saw it, Russia saw itself as inferior to Europe, suffering from what today would be called an inferiority complex, the empirical understanding of Russia would inevitably be clouded. Having come to the conclusion that the first step towards any liberty whatsoever was a rational, empirical understanding free of all dogmas, the idea of a psychological complex based on a historical misconception would undermine Herzen's core beliefs. This strive to liberate Russian thought from a self-conception of inferiority, remained central to Herzen's work as one of his main political agendas. It is in fact an actualisation of the philosophy of empirical liberty, and serves in this essay to illuminate how Herzen applied his philosophy to the political. In other words, this chapter is concerned with how the idea of empirical liberty corresponds with and is applied to one of the biggest questions for Herzen's political agenda: the equating of slavic culture with European civilisation.

Let us first examine this so-called inferiority complex: does it really exist? Although much has been written about this idea in postcolonial studies, it is not clear why a country such as Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, the vast empire that defeated Napoleon, saw itself as inferior to anyone. Nonetheless, Herzen identifies the case as such, and this sense of inferiority would inevitably cloud a man's perception of reality and act as a hindrance to empirical liberty. In fact, the inferiority complex was very much present then, just as it is to this day. This tendency of feeling inferior to Europe was felt world-wide, although in Russia it was distinctly self-imposed. Since Peter the Great's forced reforms, the educated nobility, often more fluent in French and German than in Russian, explicitly disparaged 'Russian' traditions, spent seasons abroad, dressed in European fashion, and

left only the Russian peasant to follow traditions. To them, all that was not European was unquestionably not as good: with the exception of the Orthodox faith, naturally.⁵⁷ Yet Russia was not Europe, and that was clear to all: even the aristocracy's and the government's Westernisation was nothing but a thin layer of gloss, hiding its ultimate difference. 'We still regard Europeans and Europe in the way that provincials look on townsfolk,' Herzen writes, '— with a feeling of inferiority and guilt, seeing each difference as a personal shortcoming on our part, ashamed of our particularities, hiding them, acting servile and imitative.'⁵⁸

Due to Herzen's empirical ideal, for this common conception to be proven wrong it had to be judged 'by the tribune of incorruptible reason' as he put it in *From the Other Shore*.⁵⁹ Therefore, both sides of the question ought to be assessed, as they are in his main work on the topic: *On the Development of the Revolutionary Idea in Russia*. 'There is something feminine in the character of slavic culture', he admits, and this is the reasoning which supported the subconscious inferiority of the slavs — the counterargument. 'It is as if slavic culture would lack something to awaken, as if she awaits a push from without.'⁶⁰ Having posed this problem in the opening chapters, Herzen goes into a detailed historical analysis of Russia, through which he shows what has made slavic culture consider itself subordinate to the West, 'feminine' in comparison, as she seemed to be. The history of Russia prior to 1812, the 'prologue' of Russia's history as he calls it,⁶¹ is shown to have been nothing less than a constant violation and forced subordination of the slavic culture. Similar to other theories of social inferiority, Herzen shows that the latter has become

⁵⁷ Yuri M. Lotman, *Besedy o Russkoj kul'ture: Byt i tradicii russkogo dvorjanstva [Conversations on Russian culture]* (Saint Petersburg, 2014), 311-40.

⁵⁸ Herzen, *My Past and Thought*, 110.

⁵⁹ Herzen, 'Shore', 259.

⁶⁰ Herzen, 'On the Development of the Revolutionary Idea in Russia', in *Collection of works*, vol. 3, 373.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 372.

internalised due to memories of forced subordination. From the rule of the Normans, the imposed Byzantine faith, and the rule of the Mongols, to Peter I's forceful importation of European culture as unquestionably superior, the history of Russia is written as a constant struggle between 'foreign' cultures of the superiors and the slavic culture of the people, with the latter tragically overpowered.⁶²

Following this line of thought, if the incorruptible tribune of reason is to judge slavic culture equal to Europe's and the inferiority complex to be discarded, Herzen had to show that despite the slavic culture's 'femininity' and 'immaturity', it constantly stood (if so passively) against the westernising governing system. In a microcosm, through the anecdotes that pepper Herzen's writings, the Russian hatred of Germans is shown, and it is claimed that the 'preference that the government would give the Germans after Peter I, was of a kind that made peace between them and the Russians impossible.'⁶³ Speaking more generally, he writes that the Russian people would constantly step aside, evade, but not give in; when 'they lacked the energy to rise to their feet ... rather left the field of battle, than were defeated; having lost the rights in the cities, they would save them in the depth of the agrarian commune.'⁶⁴ It is then from this logic, from having found the peasant commune to possess something integral to slavic culture which has withstood all blows,⁶⁵ that Herzen would write the theory of agrarian socialism. More importantly however, is the evidence of the culture being kept safe, hidden, and the refusal of the people to give up their culture although temporarily forced to sacrifice their practical liberties. Moreover, as is repeated throughout the *Revolutionary Idea*, the slavic civilisation is 'very young' and 'Russia is an

⁶² Herzen, 'Revolutionary Idea'.

⁶³ Ibid., 397.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 381.

⁶⁵ Herzen, 'The Russian People and Socialism. An Open Letter to Jules Michelet', *From the Other Shore and The Russian People And Socialism* (London, 1956), 186.

Empire still in its youth ... where everything is experimental', so the retreat means nothing.⁶⁶

Herzen's second argument for the slavic culture's equality to the West is that of literary culture, and not just of its very existence but of its uniqueness as specifically *Russian*. By proving that Pushkin is not a 'rip-off' of Byron, as is so often claimed, Herzen shows that it is not in imitation that slavic culture has achieved, but in actualising itself. Further, the very existence of a poet such as Pushkin shows that other actualisations of culture are possible, including ones of a more revolutionary nature; Russia's femininity seems to be waning, she is coming of age.⁶⁷ This fact is important not only to Russians, but to Europe too, because it is only with the help of each other that the two could reach a better future. Complete rejection of everything European from now on, the way the Slavophiles wanted it, was not Herzen line of thought.⁶⁸ Neither ought the failing Europe disregard Russia, for the socialism that is possible on the basis of Russia's agrarian structure could help bring about a liberation not only of Russia but also of Europe. Herzen wishes to reconcile the two by grounding his theory in what he believes to be empirical fact, and through this seeks the path to liberty. Still, the overcoming of the false inferiority is key: 'What a shame to recognise 'tsarism'⁶⁹ only at the 59th degree of the northern hemisphere⁷⁰, and not see that the situation is no better in Europe. Yes, the Russian government did suppress the Polish uprisings in the most devilish matter, Herzen complies. Yet why is everyone else quiet, why did the European countries not to anything, if they truly are superior, not even liberal England? Perhaps Poland 'reminded her [England] of her own actions in regards to

⁶⁶ Herzen, 'Letter to Michelet', 179.

⁶⁷ Herzen, 'Revolutionary Idea', 419-426.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 450.

⁶⁹ Here, tsarism is used as a metaphor for an oppressive regime.

⁷⁰ Herzen, 'Revolutionary Idea', 370.

Ireland?⁷¹ Despotism is rising, the problem is common. There is no longer time for complexes of inferiority or superiority — the situation has to be seen clearly if Western and Eastern Europe alike are not to succumb to despotism but rather have a chance to achieve liberty.

In the time that Herzen wrote — a few years after the revolutionary failure in 1848 — something else was clear, namely that European civilisation itself is not as great as it had been considered to be. It was thereby acute that Russia not to see itself as inferior, but to break free from this complex. The rise of the people in the war against Napoleon in 1812, and the Decembrist revolt of 1825, shows that ‘the *actual* history of Russia’ has begun.⁷² ‘Russia has reached maturity, whilst Europe has grown old’;⁷³ European influences were no longer liberating, and Russia herself was no longer in need of Western stimuli — the slavic culture may have been very young, but now it was young and full of potential, mature enough to actualise it. The defence of slavic culture, the overcoming of the Russian inferiority complex in relation to Europe, has turned into nothing less than a revolutionary agenda. Further, this agenda is quite particular as it identifies the agricultural commune as the root in which the potentials of slavic culture lie dormant. In fact, Herzen has thereby applied the philosophy of empirical liberty, letting the theory function just as it was supposed to: through a rational, ‘pathological’, empirical discourse of reality, concrete pathways towards liberty and social equality have become illuminated.

⁷¹ Herzen, ‘Revolutionary Idea’, 370.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 372.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 377.

The embodiment of empirical liberty in Herzen's political campaign

In 1853, after the disastrous failure of the revolution of 1848 and many personal hardships including the death of his wife, mother and son, Herzen found himself in London. Isolated and mentally broken, he gathered his strength to contribute with what he could for the advance of Russia towards a more equal and liberal society. For this purpose he established the free Russian printing press, publishing two journals — *The Bell* and the *Polar Star* — which constitute the political side of his thought, and strived to change society by the means of a public opinion. The journals were unique both in being the only non-censored Russian forum of the time, and in the wide span of political opinions that were published, in agreement and disagreement with his own alike, from the right and from the left. The very nature of the publications were thereby formed by the notion of empirical understanding as the pathway to liberty in any form. Herzen's own writings published in the journals constitute in effect a political campaign for concrete reforms, and are an embodiment of empirical liberty. Although the suggested reforms included innumerable political goals, it is possible to identify the central ones as the following: a halt to censorship and creation of freedom of speech and thought; a disbandment of the tsarist imperial actions such as the violent suppression of the Polish uprising in 1861; a call for an economical revolution, whose 'sober foundations' make it more effectively grounded in reality than any religious or political revolutions are;⁷⁴ and, most importantly, the emancipation of the serfs, granting them land. For the purpose of this essay, we will only explore some ways in which the philosophy of empirical liberty shaped Herzen's political agenda. This section will show the philosophy's formative role in Herzen's greatest and most well-known political ambition, the emancipation of the serfs.

⁷⁴ Herzen, 'To an old comrade', *Collected works*, vol. 8, 327.

Let us first turn to Herzen's first act for the emancipation of the serfs: the publication of 'Yuriev Den'! Yuriev Den'!', which translates as St George's Day! St George's Day! and is an open letter to the Russian aristocracy urging them to free their serfs themselves.⁷⁵ The title comes from St George's Day traditionally having been the one day of the year two weeks around which serfs were allowed to leave their landlords and settle elsewhere, be it with another landlord or on the outskirts of cultivated land establishing free village communes. The tradition lasted for a century, until Boris Godunov forbade the two weeks of re-settlement, cementing the bond between the serfs and the land. In the article, Herzen appealed not so much to feeling, as to the illogic nature of the aristocracy's desire for liberty whilst remaining owners of serfs: 'We are serfs — because we hold our brothers in unfreedom, who are equal to us in birth, in blood, in tongue.'⁷⁶ Claiming the lack of logic in the actions of the aristocracy, whose plans for emancipation were silenced after 1848, Herzen tied the freedom of an individual with social freedom. It is impossible to oppose the tsarist regime and wish for liberty whilst using the tsar's power for the unfreedom of the serfs that labour for oneself. 'You cannot be a free person and own serfs, bought like goods, sold like cattle. ... There can be no talk of the rights of man, if one owns human lives.'⁷⁷ The logical gap comes from the conception of human rights, of one's own understanding not being in accord with one's action. Similar to the Hegelian slave-master dialectic, Herzen's concept of empirical liberty necessitates that if the master knows he cannot own the serf, the legitimacy of serfdom falls.

How does this differ from the logic of any political argument, from the ideas of Hegel and of Enlightenment thinkers? The answer lies in the form of the arguments that follow. Grounding his understanding of the inevitability of the emancipation on historical facts,

⁷⁵ Herzen, 'Yuriev Den'! Yuriev Den'!', *Collected works*, vol. 8, 7-14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Herzen followed the cause-consequence logic already discussed in this essay. The serfs *will* be emancipated not because of historical progress, but because of the direction that people are taking. If the aristocracy does not act, the liberty will be ‘by the mercy of the tsar or that of *pugachevianism*’ — the latter being a reference to the peasant revolt led by Pugachev in the late 18th century, indicating a brewing revolutionary spirit amongst the peasantry.⁷⁸ The thoughts of the tsar on the emancipation were well-known, and if emancipation would be granted by the tsar it would be the end of the aristocracy’s liberty; all their efforts for knowledge and independence would be destroyed. Indebted to the regime, the people would grant the tsar even more power.⁷⁹ It would therefore be ‘wiser, *more calculated*’ for the aristocracy to give in and begin the emancipation themselves ‘than to await an explosion and fight it.’⁸⁰ The threat from a peasant uprising, destructive to the aristocracy in that it would destroy it by violence, was seen by Herzen in the recently increasing violence of serfs towards their landlords across the empire. He pointed to recent news, including a landlord and his family burned down by the serfs, another being murdered with chains and pitchforks.⁸¹ Moreover, ideas of socialism that engulfed Europe were bound to reach Russia sooner or later. Socialism having been analysed by Herzen to be close in meaning ‘to the soul of the Russian man, ... in the village commune and in the factories’, he saw it affecting the Russian people to a greater extent than any prior European revolutionary thought could. ‘In socialism Russia will meet the revolution’,⁸² bringing tragic bloodshed for the peasants, the proletariat and the aristocracy alike.

⁷⁸ Herzen, ‘Yuriev’, 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 13.

In 1861, Alexander II emancipated the serfs, a fact attributed in part to Herzen's efforts, although many, including the tsar, saw the inevitability of the emancipation.⁸³ Despite being seen as the most important liberal reform of the time, granting over 20 million people their freedom, the emancipation was not nearly in accordance to what Herzen called for in that it in effect granted most serfs freedom without land, i.e. without any means of survival. This led to violent protest amongst the peasantry and many stayed with their masters, out of a lack of other possibilities — which was interpreted in terms of the serfs' unwillingness to be emancipated. For Herzen, there was also another problem with 1861, namely that the violent suppression of the uprising in Warsaw coincided with the emancipation, shedding light on the continued oppression of the tsarist regime and its 'false' liberal mask. Since the partition of Poland in the late eighteenth century, roughly half of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was part of the Russian Empire. In 1861 demonstrations and riots erupted all over the country as a protest against conscription into the Imperial Russian Army — riots that in two years time would form a full-scale (failed) uprising for independence. The event of 1861 that re-fuelled Herzen's distrust of any good coming out of regime-led reforms, was a confrontation of the Russian Imperial Army with a Polish patriotic demonstration. The confrontation ended in a massacre of civilians, with more than a hundred people dead by the hands of the Russian military.⁸⁴ As a result, Herzen's distrust in the tsar's regime and in the liberal act of emancipating the serfs would bring little actual liberty for the society as a whole was confirmed to be right. Other problems within the bureaucratic system and of the despotic regime that had been confronted in *The Bell*, re-surfaced after emancipation in this act of brutality and as peasant protests shook the empire. Having seen the actualisation of his greatest goal, the emancipation of the serfs, Herzen's critical efforts did not wane as he saw the oppression continue. His grounding in

⁸³ Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint", 197. Franco Venturi, 'The Kolokol', *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago, 1960), 90-128.

⁸⁴ Stefan Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry* (London, 1969).

empirical understanding allowed him to see the continuities of the problems in Russian society, and freed him to use this fluidity of thought and opinion to strive for other concrete goals, equally important. However, his influence declined and by 1863, the readership of *The Bell* was very limited forcing the journal out of print a few years later.⁸⁵

The foundation of empirical facts for Herzen's argumentation in his political campaigns, his sympathy for people of all classes and the ease with which he changed his political position without thereby retreating from his ultimate position of striving for liberation shows the importance of empirical liberty in his political actions. The very nature of his establishing a printing press to disseminate empirical knowledge, and his striving for concrete goals and particular subversion of power should be understood as an embodiment of empirical liberty. The appeal of 'Yuriev Den'! could only be conceived holding the belief that it is up to individuals to act, to change the course of history. It was up to the individuals to determine the outcome of emancipation, avoiding an increase of the tsar's power and a bloody christening of freedom. Using his analysis of the historical reality, Herzen sought to influence inevitable consequences of the present situation. The year of 1861 saw the emancipation of the serfs 'by the mercy of the tsar' simultaneously witnessing the Russian domination of Poland, exposing the illiberal character of the regime. His determination to liberate Russia did not end, but his later protests fell on deaf ears.

⁸⁵ Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint", 200.

Conclusion

Beginning with Herzen's transformation of thought in 1848, this essay has charted Herzen's conception of empirical liberty from its definition and formation to its first actualisation in equating Russia's possibilities of liberty to Europe's. For Herzen, liberty had to be empirical in order to be successful, a conclusion that lies at the heart of all his political thought and reasoning. Having here both defined the concept and placed it in the context of its conception and in relation to contemporary radical thinkers, Herzen's political agenda of liberating thought is seen as the first step towards any practical liberation. Having sworn to reform Russia, circumstances granted him unable to do more than strive to liberate thought from all dogmas, political as well as philosophical, in order to make it possible for future generations who, if free in their mind, could actualise the potential of societies to be free. By grounding his conclusion of empirical liberty in his analysis of the revolution's failure and in contemporary evolutionary science, it becomes clear that it was a decision made out of an intellectual necessity. Moreover, the journalistic role he acquired in his later years is explained by this need for greater empirical understanding amongst the intellectuals — a lack of which meant for Herzen not only a failure of any liberating revolution, but also a violation of the nature of history and of thought which can in no way be objective. Herzen's precarious ever-oppositional political position becomes clear when seen that any rigid political association would for him be a rejection of the ultimate subjectivity of thought. His love for humanity, and the oath to continue fighting, resolved him to a role of intellectual liberation; one that for him was necessary as a stepping stone towards liberation of mankind. For Russia, this meant an overcoming of its inferiority complex in relation to Europe, and a focus on its agrarian social structure. Herzen's empirical research of Russian society led him to conclude that within the village lay a liberating potential: the village commune. It is then not surprising, that he dedicated his life

to the emancipation of serfs, and to the idea of agrarian socialism as a path towards liberty.

In this essay, Herzen's characterisation of empirical liberty was meant to be made clear by regarding his own definition, the logic behind it, and its most direct application in the study of Russia's possibilities of reaching liberty and its prior inability to do so. Nonetheless, the purposefully unsystematic nature of his thought poses a problem when identifying the content of his revolutionary programme. Herzen strived for liberty and equality, of the individual as well as of the society as a whole. A liberty of the mind as well as the liberty to do as one pleases, as well as economic equality. Having rejected higher goals due to their inescapable subjective nature however, his political agenda lay much nearer, in the emancipation of serfs and the liberation of Russian (and by proxy Western) thought from dogmatic thinking. Unable to act outright politically and to reach anyone except the intellectuals, Herzen's focus was on the liberation of the mind of the intellectuals. This was as much, if not more, shaped by circumstance — illiteracy, censorship and the rigid system of the tsarist regime — as by personal inclination towards philosophical and political writing. This intellectual affinity just as much as his conclusions in 1848 led Herzen to adopt as his only dogma the one of empirical understanding, to view societies pathologically and search for solutions therein. No clear political goal is needed, rather the revolutionary is to react to circumstance with as much understanding as possible.

It might be inferred that such general ideas give uncertain results: on which side of politics would empirical and undogmatic reasoning bring one to stand? The very concept of empirical liberty and subjectivity, leaves the question unsolved. On the one hand side, this led to Herzen's 'uncertain' political standing after 1850 — between the Slavophiles and the

Westernisers, and between the liberals and the socialists. Similar to Proudhon's isolation in the French radical movement, Herzen's writings strove to destroy the political agenda of most of his contemporaries.⁸⁶ On the other hand, herein lies also the beauty and the depth of his philosophy. Knowing that everyone's knowledge is finite, that there is no 'true' reasoning, no ultimately correct pathway, creates not only a rejection of all political paths, but also a possibility of understanding where they stem from and what they would bring. If one would perceive the political world the way Herzen does, this would be the only way that could lead men to act in relation to the sociopolitical realities. Political agendas based on ideals and misconceptions would, for one, be blatantly destroyed. More realistic ones, whose goals are set closer, would develop organically in relation to changing circumstances as well as fluid thought. A fluidity of political affinities, grounded in an empirical understanding and with the higher goal being liberty and equality, allows for concrete decisions to be made fairly, organically, and in direct relation to the circumstance. Any agenda that would even temporarily decrease people's liberty, or that of one individual, would automatically be disregarded, as neither the present nor the subjectivity of opinion would be discarded for the future and for the superiority of one's own thought.

Herzen had the possibility to employ the idea of empirical liberty in contemporary politics first when he established the free Russian printing press in London. His publications of *The Bell* and the *Polar Star*, with his refusal to preach his own point of view and the range of publications of first-hand accounts and opinions on the social conditions in the Russian empire, prove better than anything the sincerity of his belief in empirical knowledge. Herzen would print works by liberals and socialist alike, whether in agreement with himself or critiquing his own articles — the publications spanning across the political spectrum,

⁸⁶ Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint", 189-90.

although always at least partly opposing the tsarist regime.⁸⁷ Herzen's most important political campaign for the emancipation of serfs is in its very argument, shaped by his analysis of the present social condition and focused on the way that emancipation is achieved, was an embodiment of empirical liberty. Likewise, his redirection of critical efforts towards the independence of Poland instantly after the emancipation in 1861, shows the strength of his desire to attack oppression in all forms wherever he saw it. It certainly seems as if the philosophy we have here given the name of empirical liberty would guide all of Herzen's future political actions, however, the degree to which he was able (and wished to) actualise it in the totality of his works remains to be studied. Likewise, further study is needed into his conception of subjectivity and the concrete political arguments this would lead to.

In the late 1850s, a decade after the works we have explored here were written, Herzen became completely absorbed in the idea of agrarian socialism — the idea of the common ownership of land brought about by his own empirical reasoning of the Russian social structure. Almost to an idealist degree, he saw socialism as the 'lightning rod' that was to save Russia from suffering from the same irrevocable fall as Europe; the solution of agrarian socialism would be the salvation from the storm.⁸⁸ Even then, however, he refused to position himself a leader of a revolutionary movement, remaining to the end an *intellectual* revolutionary rather than a political. The role of the intellectual is, above all, the one who has to acquire and disseminate empirical knowledge and the strive for it. His reasons for refusing to lead an opposition remains a mystery to us. Perhaps Isaiah Berlin was right, when he wrote that Herzen never fully recovered from the moral blow of the failure of 1848, and could no longer trust his own opinion in full, knowing its ultimately

⁸⁷ Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint", 197-8.

⁸⁸ Herzen, 'Letters from France and Italy', introduction to 1858 edition, 12.

subjective nature.⁸⁹ Then again, his earlier predictions of what socialism would grow into could likewise be the reason for his refusal. Let us end this essay with this prophecy of Herzen's that became little short of the reality of the twentieth century, and is one of the reasons that Leo Tolstoy was right when he wrote that 'Herzen awaits his readers in the future. And far above the heads of the present crowd he transmits his thoughts to those who will be able to understand him.'⁹⁰

'The proletariat will measure his blows against the degree with which he has been beaten. Communism will sweep across the world in a violent tempest — dreadful, bloody, unjust, swift; in thunder and lightning, amid the fire of the burning palaces, upon the ruin of factories and public buildings the New Commandments will be enunciated, [...] the New Symbols of the Faith.'⁹¹

'Socialism will develop in all its phases until it reaches its own extremes and absurdities. Then there will again burst forth from the titanic breast of the revolting minority a cry of denial. Once more a mortal battle will be joined in which socialism will occupy the place of today's conservatism, and will be defeated by the coming revolution as yet invisible to us...'⁹²

⁸⁹ Berlin, '1848', 21.

⁹⁰ Quoted from Kelly, "A Glowing Footprint", 204.

⁹¹ Herzen, 'Letters', fourteenth letter, 211.

⁹² Herzen, 'Shore', 323.

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