CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

My Past and Thoughts

Alexander Herzen · *1852–1868 · Constance Garnett translation (1924–1928), six volumes*

Herzen began this memoir in London in 1852, at forty, after a decade in which his public hopes and his private happiness had both been broken, and he went on adding to it until the late 1860s. It follows a Russian boyhood, a friendship, a prison and exile, a wife, the revolutions of 1848, and the Russian exiles in London. It is a history of a generation told through one man, and it is long, so teachers usually choose chapters.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a man owe to freedom, to his friends, and to the people he loves, when history breaks his hopes?

The book is not a single story. It is a gallery of portraits, a set of essays on revolution and freedom, and a love story that ends in grief. Herzen's hope for Europe in 1848 is broken by the June days, and in the fourth volume his private life breaks too, with his wife's infatuation with another man, the loss of his mother and son at sea, and her death. He ends in London, publishing Russian writing that cannot be printed at home.

KEY CHARACTERS

Alexander Herzen
The author and narrator.

Nicholas Ogaryov
His friend since boyhood.

Natalie Herzen
His wife.

Georg Herwegh
A German poet, a false friend.

Byelinsky, Bakunin, Granovsky
Russian friends drawn in portraits.

Mazzini and Garibaldi
Italian exiles Herzen meets in London.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Nursery, University, Prison, Exile
VOLUME I

Herzen recalls his childhood in a rich, gloomy Moscow house, his friendship with Ogaryov and their vow on the Sparrow Hills, the university, the cholera of 1831, and his arrest and exile in 1834–1838.

- The nurse's tales of 1812 mark his childhood.
- The vow on the Sparrow Hills ties two friends to a cause.
- Exile to Perm, Vyatka, and Vladimir.

02
Vladimir, Moscow, Petersburg
VOLUME II

He tells of his marriage, his return to Moscow and Petersburg, the circle of Byelinsky and Bakunin, the quarrel of Westerners and Slavophils, and his departure from Russia on 21 January 1847.

- The circle of Byelinsky, Bakunin, and Granovsky.
- Westerners and Slavophils argue about Russia.
- He leaves and does not return.

03
Europe in 1848
VOLUME III

He describes the republic in Paris, the June days of 1848, and the death of his hopes for a European revolution, with a section of portraits of Russian friends.

- The 'honeymoon of the republic' is brief.
- The June days end his hope.
- Portraits of Russian friends close the volume.

04
A Family Drama and London
VOLUME IV

He tells of his wife Natalie's infatuation with the poet Georg Herwegh, the sinking of the steamer in 1851 in which his mother and young son Kolya were traveling, and Natalie's death. He then settles in London and sets up the Free Russian Press.

- This volume is the emotional center of the book.
- It treats loss, grief, and betrayal.
- The Free Russian Press is the new work.

05
London Exiles
VOLUME V

He writes of the exiles in London, Mazzini, Garibaldi's visit, Kelsiev, Bakunin, and the Polish cause, and then turns to Swiss, French, and Russian pieces.

- London is a haven for exiles.
- Garibaldi's visit is a high point.
- The Polish cause divides his readers.

06
Later Writings
VOLUME VI

The last volume opens with extracts from Madame Ogaryov's reminiscences and gives Herzen's letters on the West, on the Russian type and on Bazarov, and his letter to Michelet on the Russian people and socialism.

- Madame Ogaryov's account adds another voice.
- The letters are essays more than memoir.
- The book ends with ideas, not events.

Freedom | Friendship | Exile | Grief | History

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. This book is a memoir in six volumes, not a single plot. Choose a volume or a chapter.
2. Volume IV tells of a family's loss and betrayal. Teachers should prepare for it.
3. Herzen writes portraits of friends. Notice how he shows each one's faults.
4. He watches the revolutions of 1848 fail. Ask how this changes his view of Europe.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Constance Garnett translation (1924–1928), six volumes (Project Gutenberg #76599, #78332, #78336, #78360, #78361, #78377 (Volumes I–VI)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/herzen-my-past-and-thoughts/.