

**New Nonfiction from
Antoinette Constable: “A
Hundred Roses for Olga
Herzen”**



Still Life with Roses of Dijon, 1882,
Ignace-Henri-Jean-Théodore Fantin-Latour (French, 1836–1904)

To some people outside our circle, Charles Rist was seen as a saintly hero. Charles Rist, our grandfather, was a famous economist, and vice-governor at La Banque de France. He was among the first to sign Zola's "J'Accuse," in a public letter defending Alfred Dreyfus. It was a courageous act for a man of the establishment. For this gesture, he was condemned by some as a nefarious sinner.

My most vivid memory of my paternal grandfather is that he ran away from the Villa Amiel in Versailles—where he lived with his wife and mother-in-law, Olga Herzen—early on January 1, 1950. The Rist home had been designed and built for Olga Herzen at the time of her marriage.

Grand-Papa's chauffeur-driven Hotchkiss rushed him to Paris, while at the same time, the Russian Embassy delegation sped away from the capital toward his home, to honor our great-grandmother, the surviving daughter of Alexander Herzen. Her aristocratic father had written eloquently at the turn of the century, being the first to advocate the abolishment of serfdom and the distribution of land to peasants. In exile, he published his famous newspaper *The Bell* outside Russia. His writings had sparked the Russian Revolution. If Karl Marx was the Revolution's father, Herzen could be credited with being its grandfather.

The Soviets manning the Russian embassy in 1950 demonstrated their undying admiration for Herzen by delivering to Herzen's only surviving child, Olga, the gift of one hundred roses on New Year's Day. She became a hundred years old that year.

Each magnificent rose was an intense, brash red, trumpeting a total allegiance to Stalin. By contrast, the White Russian Community sent Olga a magnificent white azalea that stood at a place of honor in her salon. Delighted to speak Russian that day with native speakers, Olga sat in the sitting room, thanked the men, and nodded during the usual speeches, though she held her brass hearing horn well away from her ear. Then

she spoke of her famous father, wished everyone a happy New Year, and told a few jokes. We children had been sent upstairs, but at least one of us managed to creep to the landing, to eavesdrop and peer through the railing.

Olga at a hundred was much prettier, more expressive and shapely than Queen Victoria in her widowhood. Like her, Olga wore black dresses down to her feet and high-laced boots. Her sparse white hair was parted in the middle, pinned over her head in a tiny bun. She had a pronounced Bourbon nose. Her forehead was as wide as Herzen's, above blue eyes clouded by inoperable cataracts.

That day, we heard Olga speak a few sentences in a language we didn't understand, followed by the exuberant laughter of several men. Our grandmother, Olga's daughter, came out of her bedroom several times, wringing her hands, terrified that neighbors might have guessed who was visiting her solidly bourgeois French home, weighed down by the anticipated burden of disposing of a profusion of bloodred roses.

Our urbane, conservative grand-papa felt forced to spend the day at the Banque de France, since he refused any contact with the despised Communists. Grand-Papa had been born old, which meant he was unchanging in our eyes. He was about five feet ten, with a square face and rich gray mustache. The chain and fob resting on his vest added to his dignity. He wore immaculate, stiff-collared white shirts of fine linen, and three-piece suits made by his tailor, with discreet ties imported from England. A semicircle of gray hair ran from one ear to the other. To us, told biblical stories by our Jewish mother, he was a bald Moses dressed up as a judge.

He came home from Paris that evening well after dark. Before walking in, he checked that no black Volga cars with opaque windows and well-armed drivers had parked by the gate. Once inside his home, as a further precaution, he hid in the darkened hall, to make sure no foreign conversations were

taking place in the sitting room. Silence confirmed that the enemy was again ensconced inside its fortified Russian embassy, since no fur-lined overcoats hung on the rack. At last he could take off his coat, hat, and gloves.

Grand-Papa's birthday, coincidentally, happened to take place on New Year's Day and was, by necessity, celebrated a few days later with many relatives. He never mentioned the crimson roses flooding his home on his special day. Twelve of the loveliest had found their way into Olga's room, where he never set foot. The rest were apologetically given away, many to service people, so that within days, all trace of the embarrassing visit had vanished.

Germaine Monod, our grandmother, and her husband, Charles Rist, came to live at the Villa Amiel in Versailles in 1912, when Olga became a widow. It was in Olga's welcoming home that my grandparents raised their five sons. Perhaps because he looked like a slender, younger version of Alexander Herzen, my father, with his wit and generosity, was Olga's favorite grandchild.

My two sisters, and myself the middle child, started visiting the Villa Amiel as toddlers. In 1936, when we were in grade school, my older sister and I began to spend weekends and vacations there.

At the Villa Amiel, the day started for me when Rousseli, the spaniel, scratched at my bedroom door. I dressed and hurried to breakfast in the dining room, where my grandmother presided over a solid silver tea tray, teapot, and cream pitcher—gifts from a grateful Alfred Dreyfus and his wife to Grand-Papa on the occasion of his marriage.

Sometimes Olga, our great-grandmother, was talkative. I loved hearing stories about her devoted German governess Malwida, who'd swept her away from the Herzen household when she was twelve to live with her in Italy, or stories about her cruel

stepmother, or the man with the strange look in his eyes who'd offered marriage when she was only sixteen, a man named Friedrich Nietzsche.

We children were too young to fully understand, but we'd heard whispers and had guessed there were secrets and scandals in the family. Only as adults, when biographers wrote about Herzen's life, did we learn about our great-great-grandfather's reluctant acceptance, twice, of a ménage à trois, as recently depicted in Tom Stoppard's brilliant play trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*.

It must have been in 1938, when Hitler marched into Austria and extreme persecutions of Jews started in Germany, that the adults began talking about pogroms and held alarming discussions about insufficient war preparations and my mother being Jewish.

"France will fall, that's inevitable, considering..." I imagined a lady looking like our mother falling headfirst down a long flight of stairs. It was terrifying. Better to sneak upstairs and visit Olga in her room.

Having lost most of her sight, Olga managed well by feel. When she pulled out family albums filled with postcards and brown photos, she knew which page showed my father in a sailor suit, or my father and his older brother on wooden bicycles without pedals; where to turn for the photo Dostoevsky had send of himself to her father, Alexander Herzen, whom he met several times in London.

Constance Garnett, translator of Russian novels, stated in a footnote to *The Brothers Karamazov* that the father in that novel was modeled on Herzen's own father, Ivan Yakovlev.

During my visits, Olga spoke not of our nebulously grim future, as did the family downstairs, but of the past, so vivid to her. Olga had shaken Garibaldi's hand and enjoyed Wagner's operas in his loge at Bayreuth as a friend and guest

of Cosima Wagner. She knew Turgenev and had read his letters to her father and to her sister, Tata. She had met Kossuth, the Hungarian writer, and many others. All these people with ringing, mysterious names were fascinating characters in an endless story to me. I never tired of hearing about them.

Near blindness didn't keep Olga from her favorite occupation: attending to her vast correspondence. Over her writing pad she placed a metal frame of horizontal bars enabling her to write line after even line down the page. She wrote in a slanting script in the five languages she spoke equally well: Russian, German, Italian, English, French, and Russian, to send out her own invitations.

Afternoon tea was a grand event, and the best meal of the day at the Villa Amiel. Our grandmother's Russian grandfather Herzen and her mother Olga's home had swarmed with guests. Olga, like her father, would have been ashamed had not two extra place settings been included daily for unexpected, last-minute guests. At tea, the adults talked among themselves and ignored the children. We kicked each other under the table. I took advantage of the situation by eating more than my share of quince paste squares and wolf-teeth anise seed cookies with impunity.

At the time, I had no idea what an illustrious group of people sat around the table. They'd come in response to invitations, jumping at the chance to talk to Olga, daughter of the famous Alexander Herzen. There was Baron Eugene de Vogue, author of a study of Russian novels, and grandmother's nephew Wilfried De Glehn and his wife, Jane, both artists and friends of Sargent, among others. At age five, in 1936, I posed for Jane. That portrait hangs on my wall.

On our grandmother's side, Germaine née Monod, Philippe Monod was a government minister. His brother was Jacques Lucien Monod, whose DNA studies won him a Nobel Prize. Another cousin, Jacques Louis Monod, became a well-known composer.

Trocmé cousins also came to call, as well as Grand-Papa's brother Edouard, a tuberculosis specialist. My father and his brothers were frequent visitors, with wives and children. Scientists, engineers, educators, and politicians were also drawn to the Villa Amiel because of Grand-Papa. The lawyer Alexandre Parodi broke bread with us. It was Parodi, right-hand man to De Gaulle, who, at the end of the war, influenced Von Choltitz's decision not to destroy Paris. Several guests were intimates of Charles Rist, our grandfather. Some guests belonged to both the Olga and the Charles Rist coteries: Marguerite Bonnet, founder of the first *La Maison des Etudiantes* in Paris; my father's friend Jean Milhaud, a nephew of Darius Milhaud; and a promising young novelist, friend of our uncle Noel, who recuperated from TB at my grandparents' house in the Alps. This was Albert Camus.

Often on Saturdays before the war, Grand-Papa whistled for Rousseli, and took us with the retriever for a walk to the nearby woods of Glatigny, where we roamed beneath European oaks, beeches, and leafy ashes. On Sundays, we sometimes took a favorite morning walk on the grounds of the palace, to the delightful *Hameau du Le Petit Trianon*, a protected, idyllic enclave of thatched cottages with a tiny pond, a dairy, a lighthouse, and a mill, set among lilacs, tulips, and forget-me-nots. It had been created for fourteen-year-old Marie-Antoinette, whom we believed played hide-and-seek around the corner with her ladies in period costumes.

One warm afternoon, shortly before the exodus of May 1940, Grand-Papa, frowning, strode along with us for a change in the geometric gardens of the *Palais de Versailles*. He gave talks to elevate our minds. Yet it seems to me now that as much as he wanted to teach us French history, our grandfather was in serious need of a respite from the worries of the fast-approaching catastrophe. It was years before I understood his talk, and learned that he'd just returned from Washington, where he was received by President Roosevelt before the US

entered the war. Charles Rist had gone to Washington to ask the United States and Canada to stop exporting their nickel and molybdenum to Germany, essential to the manufacture of weapons. The meeting was successful.

Rousseli yapped an accompanying chorus as Grand-Papa poked his cane straight ahead of him as in a fencing move. "Louis XIV was a wiser ruler than he's given credit for. Look at his choice of admirable ministers, devoted to king and country, indefatigable." He stopped in his tracks. "You've heard of Colbert and Vauban, haven't you?" We nodded, afraid to interrupt. "Vauban was an exceptional architect responsible for splendid fortifications on France's borders. Remember, to fortify means to make strong, or stronger." After a pause, he added, "As war minister, the king chose Louvois, who introduced the musket, uniforms, regular pay, and the use of barracks for the army. Great innovations. These ministers' work greatly increased the influence and prestige of France. Thanks to them, France was a great nation. France had power."

Grand-Papa poked the ground with the tip of his cane, before leading us back to the Villa Amiel, and repeated with conviction, "France was a great nation. France had power," like a spell that could keep us, and all the beauty around us, forever safe.

Killing is Easy



Killing is the easiest thing in the world, easier than sex. Easier than raising a family or bringing a child into the world, or building a house. Easier than painting or writing or music. Killing is easier than sleeping.

Before November 13th I couldn't have told you how 9-11-2001 felt. Watching the attacks in Paris, the killing, I remembered helplessness and a physical desire for vengeance, like fourteen years were gone. As I texted, instant-messaged, and emailed friends in the affected zone, desperate for news of their safety, I felt alternately overwhelmed by great sadness and murderous rage. It was clear then, as it is now, who was responsible for the injustice. And I wanted payback.

For those who have not felt the call to kill in the name of humanity and justice, it is a godly thing. Reading through the initial reports, I choked back tears, heading—where else?—to the gym, hoping to direct this urgent compulsion toward the noble desire for blood somewhere, *anywhere* else. On the

stationary bicycle and then at the weight machines watching the President express solidarity for France, I fantasized about my phone buzzing with news from a friend in the military calling me back into service. In the interests of honesty, I must admit that this fantasy involved him telling me that the time had come to clean the Middle East once and for all. From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and then the vast Atlantic Ocean off North Africa, we would impose the final, drastic justice this situation demanded. That's what I *felt*.

That's what the ISIS terrorists in Paris must have felt reading news of defeat after emasculating defeat for their movement in Sinjar, in Syria, and in Iraq. *We have to do something, and the time has come to martyr ourselves.* They must have believed that they were correct to act, and enjoyed the doing of the deed. Killing is the easiest thing in the world.

That seems to be what Francois Hollande was feeling when he implicitly committed France to military action against ISIS, [saying, among other similar things: "It is an act of war that was committed by a terrorist army, a jihadist army, Daesh, against France,"](#) and "we will lead the fight and it will be merciless." As the attacks in Paris unfolded, I felt the same way.

And that's the end of civilization. It's popular to joke about France and Europe being weak, now, being militarily incompetent in the aftermath of WWII, but things are stable in Europe and mostly safe as a result of progress, the horror our grandfathers felt when they saw the red gurgling aftermath of their deeds stain their hands, uniforms, and relationship with the natural world. Until 1945, Europe and Eurasia had been by orders of magnitude the most violent place in the world. Mechanisms for killing on an industrial scale never imagined anywhere else were [pioneered in the USA and perfected in Europe.](#) When it comes to violence, Europeans are not just masters—historically, they transcended mastery, elevating it

first to the realm of [art](#), then, later, incorporating it. It took us *seventy years* to suppress the natural European inclination toward violence on a level that would make even a hardened ISIS fighter's stomach turn and head spin—seventy years, which, in the balance, doesn't seem like enough by half.

The end of civilization is when one acts based on feeling, and especially that low, barbaric feeling to hurt or murder. I know, because I felt it last night—can still feel it in waves. In Afghanistan, over 26 months, the two infantry units I was with killed hundreds of Taliban, Haqqani and Al Qaeda operatives (over 1,000?), taking 15 deaths in return—killing is easy. But what gives me and people like me our reason for being in the liberal West—the evolution of liberal arts education, pioneering human and then civil rights, the components that make us superior to ISIS terrorists, dogs, spiders, and lizards, is that we aspire to be *reasonable*—we are capable of thinking out the logical conclusion of our actions, and acting differently given different stimuli, acting generously and altruistically although our bodies may tell us that killing or hurting would be more satisfying. This was the lesson the West drew in the aftermath of World War II, on the bodies of so many Germans, Russians, Japanese Ukrainians, Polish, French and more—enough bodies to make Syria again three times over. This is the lesson I drew from war, as well. Killing is easy, but it only leads to more killing. And there's always more blood than you know. Blood that's sticky, and gets everywhere.

No, people who believe that France and Europe are weak because they do not act sufficiently violently for their tastes (a) don't [know the region's extraordinarily bloody history](#), and (b) don't believe in [biology](#). Civilization and modern western society—cultural constructs that encourage cooperation and altruistic behavior—are fragile things, to be nurtured and protected at all costs. They're the product of peace—in times

of war, people become callous, cease caring about others, wantonly indulge in the brief satisfaction of vendetta. Small acts of humanity and grace become acts of heroism.

After finishing my time at the gym and hearing from most of my friends, I returned home, showered, and headed out to dinner with a photojournalist friend to discuss the night's events, process what I was feeling. Fielding phone calls on the drive into the city, drinking beers over Turkish kabab, then calling other friends on the way back home, I was able to stabilize the urge to hurt and hate, to ameliorate it with that greatest benefit of living in a developed, safe, modern country—generosity.

Even though it feels now like hurting the people responsible will provide satisfaction, will solve the hurt, logic as well as a brilliant, counterintuitive moral imperative unearthed by Christianity instruct us that the answer in this situation is to open our arms wider, to “turn the other cheek” to the despicable insult, rather than to deliver injustice for injustice, which other cultural traditions and tribal societies would demand. The parasites that are ISIS feed on blood and violence. Let us, by our actions, demonstrate our moral and intellectual superiority. History instructs that we can go down a very different path—we could, if we desired, exterminate them—but then, wouldn't we just be descending to their primitive, animalistic level?

Some reactionaries in European and Western society would have us do precisely that—would turn Europe back into the brutes they were 70 years ago, or would indulge America's more recent penchant for “shock and awe.” This is a popular anti-intellectual idea on the right: we should do what feels good, and to hell with civilization. To beat the thugs we must become thugs ourselves. Here's [one such confused hot-take](#). Suffice it to say, if someone is advocating for violence, that person is not civilized, nor do they support humanistic values like charity, magnanimity, and (ultimately) the precious

elements that separate humans from apes or lower forms of animals. They are the enemy.

On the other side are people who over-intellectualize the problem, and would stifle any action—those of the extreme left, who have already begun stating their belief that one should experience a similar emotional reaction to the bombing of Baghdad as one does to the terrorist attack on Paris. As a humanist, I am more sympathetic to a call for widespread empathy than I am to kill (empathy is harder than killing), but it is unsympathetic at best (and inhuman at worst) to claim before the bodies are cold that one must feel for all humans or for none at all. It is a truism among this group that Westerners don't react to tragedy outside their community (this type of reaction is already common on Facebook and Twitter), as though feeling for anyone besides oneself were a bad thing if one does not immediately think to feel for everyone. Insisting that others should have to always feel empathy for everyone all the time (that they should behave like bodhisattvas or saints) or never at all (that they should behave like sociopaths) exhibits an interesting symmetry, but doesn't seem like a useful or productive philosophical or human stance, although I suppose it must make the claimer feel satisfied on some level or they wouldn't do it.

For the 95% of Westerners affected by the tragedy who aren't on the extreme left or right, it is okay to feel something about this tragedy without needing to take on the problems of the world. If you have a personal connection to Paris, as many do, rage or grief is perfectly natural. If you don't have a personal connection to Paris but do to the event, rage or grief is perfectly natural. And in either case, regardless of how one's natural and appropriate feelings on the subject (I certainly felt like exerting violent vengeance on behalf of a city in which I have lived, visited often, and to which I have longstanding and deep cultural ties), the next step is to divorce thought from feeling, and to act in keeping with our

cultural, humanist heritage: reasonably.

This means collectively and individually helping other humans (the refugees of war, the migrants, the aspirational and the cursed), because it's within our power to do so. We of the developed world are not infected with that ideological disease one finds so often among the mad, the disaffected, and those living in chronic poverty—the cultural *imperative* to kill—as are these ISIS psychopaths. No—let us this once demonstrate our laudable willpower and the unquestionable superiority of our civilization by letting the sword fall from our hand—let us show our strength by not doing what is easy, and easier for Americans and Europeans than anything else (for we are the best at that easy task of killing)—let us show the world mercy. Otherwise we risk losing what was bought with an ocean of our own blood.