

**THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY, THE SEARCH FOR THE
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE REFLECTIONS OF
HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY ON RAZUMOV
IN CONRAD'S UNDER WESTERN EYES**

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to display the problem of identity and the search for self-consciousness, in Hegelian terms, intensively experienced by Razumov in *Under Western Eyes* by the famous Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad. In the novel, written in the light of Conrad's own experiences in the past, the process of identity acquisition is examined in terms of Hegel's theories of self-consciousness, dialectics and master-slave relationship. This process begins with Razumov Sidorovitch's, an ordinary, reserved and passive university student in autocratic Russia, opening up to the external world and the occurrence of changes in his personality.

Razumov's relationships first with his friend Victor Haldin, later with the government officers and lastly with the revolutionary circle and Victor's family members in Geneva shape his identity and lead him to self-consciousness. The constant struggle between two opposite ideas or groups generates a dialectical process of development in the society, especially in the personality of Razumov.

Key Words: Razumov, identity, personality, self-consciousness, dialectic, autocracy, revolution.

**Conrad'ın *Under Western Eyes (Batılı Gözler Altında)* Adlı Eserindeki
Razumov Karakterinde Görülen Kimlik Problemi, Özbilinç Arayışı ve
Hegel Felsefesinin Yansımaları**

Özet:Bu yazının amacı ünlü Polonya asıllı İngiliz yazar Joseph Conrad'ın *Under Western Eyes (Batılı Gözler Altında)* adlı romanındaki başkarakteri Razumov'un yoğun olarak yaşadığı kimlik problemi ve ünlü Alman filozof Hegel'in deyiimiyle özbilinç arayışını gözler önüne sermektir. Conrad'ın kendi

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geçmişindeki tecrübelerinden etkilenerak yazmış olduğu bu romanda, Rus otokratik hükümeti döneminde sıradan, içine kapanık ve pasif bir üniversite öğrencisi olan Razumov Sidorovitch'in dış dünyaya açılması ile başlayan kimlik edinme süreci, bu sürecin getirdiği kişilik değişiklikleri Hegel'in özbilinç, diyalektik ve efendi-köle ilişkisi bağlamlarında değerlendirilebilir.

Razumov'un önce arkadaşı Victor Haldin, daha sonra hükümet yetkilileri, son olarak da Cenevre'de bulunan devrimci kesim yandaşları ve Victor'un ailesi ile girdiği ikili ilişkiler onun kimliğinin şekillenmesi ve özbilince ulaşmasını sağlamıştır. Birbirine zıt görüşler ya da kişilerin sürekli olarak çatışması toplumda, özellikle de Razumov'un kişiliğinde diyalektik bir gelişme süreci meydana getirmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Razumov, kimlik, kişilik, özbilinç, diyalektik, otokrasi, devrim.

The Problem of Identity, the Search for the Self-Consciousness and the Reflections of Hegelian Philosophy on Razumov in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*

Born in Russian-occupied Ukraine to Polish parents in 1857, Joseph Conrad lived an active life swaying from side to side and travelled a lot until he settled down and began writing in English in the last decade of the 19th century after long years of labour as a seaman. His collection of experiences during his voyages all around the world led to the production of his major novels and stories such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo* and *Typhoon*, and his prolific career as a writer placed him among the prominent figures of Modernist English literature. Characteristically, an air of anti-heroism, the search for the individual moral fulfilment and the personal struggle of the characters with the macrocosm are the dominant themes and shaping motives in Conrad's literary career.

Throughout his writing career, Conrad based his major writings largely on his personal experiences and observations he made in the voyages at sea all around the world, but Conrad never broke his connection with his past and attachment to his Polish origin due to the troublesome past years under the despotic Russian regime and political activities or beliefs of his father and uncle, torn between revolutionary and conservative ideals. Obviously, Conrad still felt the responsibility in his heart to write something critical of his past and the Russian regime; and towards the end of his writing career, he came up with his famous novel, *Under Western Eyes*, to pay his debt to his origin. The necessity or rather the obligation of such a production was expressed by Conrad in one of his letters to J.B. Pinker in 1908:

Here is given the very essence of things Russian. Not the mere outward manners and customs but the Russian feeling and thought. You may safely say that. And, I think, the story is effective. It is also characteristic of the present time. Nothing of the sort had been done in English. The subject has long haunted me. Now it must come out (Conrad, 1990:14).

Thus, in one of his latest novels, Conrad touches upon the autocratic regime in Russia, with a closer look at St. Petersburg society, and the revolutionary movement against this regime with the eyes of an English citizen, himself, like the English narrator of the story. *Under Western Eyes* tells the story of Kirylo Razumov Sidorovitch, a philosophy student at St. Petersburg University, who lives in total isolation and detachment from both the social and political circles of the city with no parents alive to shape his identity and no ambitions than winning “the silver medal” in a writing contest (Conrad, 2008:11). However, the plain life of Razumov is challenged by the appearance of Victor Haldin, one of his friends from the university and a revolutionary activist who has just assassinated the minister-president of the autocratic government in a bomb attack. Haldin asks for some help from Razumov whom he defines as “a man of few words” with a “generosity of ... sentiments”, thus trustable (Conrad, 2008:12). After a conflict in his mind between moral responsibilities as a Russian citizen and fidelity for his friend, Razumov decides to turn Haldin in and gets him arrested. After Haldin’s execution as a warning to the other revolutionary people, Razumov gets engaged with the government officials who send him to Geneva as a spy on the affairs of the revolutionary circle there. Razumov’s meeting with Haldin’s sister and mother in Geneva and his gradual questioning of his own values and principles lead him to the reassessment of his identity.

Razumov’s constant struggle between opposing forces, like self and society or revolution and autocracy, leaves his identity and self-consciousness in question. In such a “world of mutually exclusive binaries, of either-or choices that allow for no third way, that insist that he take sides”, Razumov moves towards a catastrophic end, but fully self-conscious eventually (Hawthorne, 2008). The struggle for defining his own identity and placing himself under the title of an ideal manifests itself in terms of a battle with the others’ identities in the case of Razumov. In Hegelian terms, identity must bear the opposites or the contradictions in itself to be definable and to progress. In his *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel elaborates on the formation process of the self-consciousness and identity as the coming together of two opposite beings to form a more unified and definable outcome. Human

beings, in order to define themselves as an independent 'I', need the presence of a non-I which they have to enter in as a dependent consciousness and they have to get their difference from. In Hegel's own words:

Consciousness does not stand for a particular excluding self, nor does the substance mean for it an existence shut out from it, with which it would have to establish its identity only through estranging itself, and yet at the same time have to produce that estrangement. But that mind, whose self is absolutely insular, absolutely discrete, finds its content over against itself in the form of a reality that is just as impenetrable as itself, and the world here gets the characteristic of being something external, negative to self-consciousness (1910:488).

In Razumov's case, the problem of defining his self-consciousness and identity lies in the centre of all his actions. From the very beginning of the novel to the end, Razumov is always seen in a struggle between two poles looking for a way out, searching for his own self in his interactions with the others like Victor Haldin, the government officers or Natalia Haldin. Thus, in this paper, it will be argued that Razumov's quest for the self-knowledge and consciousness can be traced in his shuttling between contradictory circles and the structure of the whole novel can be analysed in terms of dialectical method.

At this point, it seems necessary to take a more detailed view of Hegel's description of the creation of self-consciousness. According to him, the subject can only obtain its actual reality in a paradoxical process of negation of contradictions. The subject needs to come out of itself and get into the consciousness of another subject in order to trace the similarities and differences the latter has and thus to define itself. The desire for the establishment of an independent self-consciousness indicates the necessity of a dependence on the recognition of the other self-consciousness for full self-recognition. "The two consciousnesses know they need the other's desire and recognition but believe that they can forgo or force it through the exclusion, marginalization or subjugation of the other" (Douzinas, 2002:384). Such a struggle between two consciousnesses is resembled to the relationship between a master and a slave by Hegel and their interdependence on each other functions according to the principle of dominance. The presence of two opposites is always required for Hegel for the creation of a unified third.

In the light of this theory, Razumov's character and his environment can be analyzed more clearly. In the very beginning of the novel, Razumov appears only as a neutral character whose mere instinct in life

is the protection of his presence with no further struggle to shoulder. Very much like the slave figure in Hegel's dialectics, he accepts the present situation with all the burdens and impositions from the outside with no questioning in order to protect its being from possible threats. Such a dependent consciousness is always involuntarily and easily dispersed like Razumov by the external forces.

The main struggle that shapes the whole structure of the novel is the political turmoil in Russia during the clash between the autocratic rule and the revolutionary movement. The progress in the society, whether for better or worse, stems from the reciprocal movements by these two opposing wings and this chaotic atmosphere leads to the first spark of change in Razumov's identity. His character "easily swayed by argument and authority" undergoes a change with the unexpected appearance of Victor Haldin in his apartment and his middle-of-the-road existence is disturbed for the first time (Conrad, 2008:4). The moment of dilemma between betrayal and help forces Razumov into "irreversible political and moral choice" (Hawthorne, 2008). His instability of mind in this business can easily be observed in that he first decides to help him and goes to find Ziemianitch, the drunken revolutionary activist, but after an unsatisfactory meeting with the old man, he suddenly changes his mind and puts his friend at risk by sharing the news with Prince K. With this betrayal, Razumov begins to move from the midway to the margins of ideologically operative minds. With the death of Haldin, an intense feeling of guilty-conscience begins to dominate Razumov's consciousness and the road to the fulfilment of self-definition seems to be blocked, because according to Hegel the process of recognition and identification ends in the event that one of the consciousnesses vanishes. "Once the conscious decision to betray takes place, all action in the novel is subordinated to the main condition...the punishing power of conscience and its effects on its victim." (Panichas, 1998:360) The dialectical process of contradictions between the two political groups leads to the death of Haldin and activation of Razumov's consciousness through his conscience, thus to progression.

In Hegel's dialectics, the spirit represents the thesis, and when this spirit wants to manifest itself in nature, it comes across with material anti-thesis leading to a completeness of identity. In other words, the abstract spirit demonstrates itself in the concrete nature in order to be defined and recognized. The final product coming out of this contradiction is the self-sufficient and self-knowledgeable consciousness as Hegel mentions in his *Phenomenology*:

The substance appears in the shape of a universal inner nature and purpose standing in contrast to itself qua particularised reality. The middle or mediating term, infinite in character, is self-consciousness, which, being implicitly the unity of itself and that substance, becomes so, now, explicitly, unites the universal inner nature and its particular realisation, raises the latter to the former and becomes ethical action: and, on the other hand, brings the former down to the latter and carries out the purpose, the substance presented merely in thought. In this way it brings to light the unity of its self and the substance, and produces this unity in the form of a "work" done, and thus as actual concrete fact (1910:436).

Hence, Razumov's self-enclosed individuality begins to gain an identity through its first contact with the external nature, that is to say Haldin and the autocratic government. Once the submissive slave gets into interaction with the external forces, he begins to create self-awareness and eventually gains its independence.

The second trial for the fixation of Razumov's identity occurs in his involvement with the autocratic government's business against the revolutionary activism, especially with the interference of General T and Councillor Mikulin to use Razumov as a spy against the revolutionary circle in Geneva. Here, Razumov gets involved in various other master-slave relationships for the sake of defining his identity with Peter Ivanovitch, Sophia Antonovna, Tekla and even the old teacher of languages. Razumov's acceptance of the duty as a spy may be associated with his nationalistic view, which is his only leg to stand on and with the false image in his mind that he is serving his country in this way. It is obvious that "so acute is his lack of identity that he must identify with Mother Russia even though he abhors the essence of that national psychology" (Johnson, 1971:150). His disillusionment with the present situation he experiences, especially his being praised as a respected revolutionist and the news that Ziemianitch has killed himself and is accused of the negligence behind Haldin's arrest, makes him question his own position between the binaries. The readers see that upon taking the news about him, Razumov "felt pity for Ziemianitch, a large neutral pity, such as one may feel for an unconscious multitude...like a community of crawling ants working out its destiny" (Conrad, 2008:209). The squirms in his conscience seem to be taking Razumov to a deeper understanding of his identity.

Furthermore, the most effective and radical change in Razumov's character takes place after his meeting with Natalia Victorovna Haldin,

Victor's sister, who shakes the foundations of his being with her purity, dignity and idealism. Natalia is the one who makes Razumov dig deeper into his conscience and take out the core of morality in his heart. Razumov's former personality which is defined earlier as "unstained, lofty and solitary" by Natalia is put on trial step by step due to his guilty-conscience (Conrad, 2008:100). In this self-trial, he begins to ask himself if he really has a "conventional conscience" that leads him to "shrink" (Conrad, 2008:212). The last sentences of the third part of the novel throw light on the fact that Razumov's brand-new identity is now ready, fully-shaped and waiting for an opportunity for expression.

This was Mr. Razumov's feeling, the soul, of course, being his own, and the word being used not in the theological sense, but standing, as far as I can understand it, for that part of Mr. Razumov which was not his body, and more specially in danger from the fires of this earth (2008:215).

Having no more power for posing as the man who he is actually not, Razumov now develops a self-awareness that leads to his confession of his identity to the revolutionists, Mrs. Haldin and Natalia. In a way, with this move, Razumov stands up for what Hegel asserted earlier concerning the slave's self-awareness process, because Hegel propounds that the first step in the creation of self-consciousness is the acceptance of the responsibility of what has been done:

This self-consciousness, again, taking now the form of Morality (the inner moral life) apprehends itself as the essential truth, and the real essence as its actual self: no longer puts its world and its ground and basis away outside itself, but lets everything fade into itself, and in the form of Conscience (Gewissen) is spirit sure and certain (gewiss) of itself (1910:434).

Razumov's confession, then, may be interpreted as his realization and expression of what he really is to himself and to his environment. The moral choice of coming out as in his true personality shows that Razumov is fully conscious of himself at the end of the novel. "His confession not only brings him inner peace and relief, but also restores his personal identity. He is free from falsehood and suspicion. He can feel his moral rebirth" (Skolik, 2011:21). Morality is the ultimate completeness of the spirit and its certainty of itself for Hegel, and thus Razumov seems to have reached that point in his definition of his own identity. At this point, Razumov himself expresses the dramatic change in his character in the letter he writes to Natalia Haldin besides confessing his love for her:

In giving Victor Haldin up, it was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed most basely. You must believe what I say now; you can't refuse to believe this. Most basely. It is through you that I came to feel this so deeply. After all, it is they and not I who have the right on their side!-theirs is the strength of invisible powers. So be it. Only don't be deceived, Natalia Victorovna, I am not converted. Have I then the soul of a slave? No! I am independent- and therefore perdition is my lot (Conrad, 2008:265).

The word independence uttered by Razumov himself obviously refers to his tearing down all the borders that limited him to define himself, and just like in Hegel's metaphor, he likens this change to a passage from slavery to mastership of his own identity and consciousness.

In conclusion, *Under Western Eyes* presents the reader with a character whose mere struggle is to "position himself along the conservative axis of this set of polarized alternatives" (Hawthorne, 2008). Razumov's moral development is achieved through his opening to interaction with the external world and his questioning of the rightfulness of his actions in the eye of other people around him. The novel analyses Razumov's transition from a man of few words into a man "washed clean" after his confession and creation of a conscious self (Conrad, 2008:262). Although his freedom of action has been taken from his hands by physical force, Razumov stands dignified in the end in terms of personal moral development. At the end of the novel, one thread that Conrad weaves, "that of Razumov's progress from anti-heroic to heroic stature: his triumphant assertion of conscience, and his refusal to submit to a situation-ultimately a political one-which threatens to reduce him to a cypher" emerges (Joubert, 1969:470). Hegel's assessment of acquisition of self-consciousness is described in terms of moral certainty of the spirit in his *Phenomenology*, thus, it can be argued that Conrad's Razumov reaches moral fulfilment through getting self-consciousness.

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