

HEGEL, HERZOG, HISTORY: RE-CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SELF¹

Devrim KILIÇER*

By philosophy's grey in grey, [a shape of life] cannot be rejuvenated but only understood.

GWF Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 1821

Abstract

This study investigates the ways in which Hegel's concept of inherent change (the dialectical) can be utilized to explain the contingent web of discourses on history, memory, and re-construction of identity with a special focus on Saul Bellow's 1964 novel *Herzog*. Bellow tells the reader the story of Moses Herzog, a college professor, who suffers from a deep intellectual anxiety and attempts to alleviate that anxiety by obsessively writing letters not only to friends and relatives but also to great figures whether they are alive or dead. Bellow constantly digresses from the story to improvise on the meaning of existence and selfhood while offering the reader Herzog's attempts at self-definition which are not only philosophical but also have universal resonances through recounting his past. In his account Hegel occupies a central position in that, according to Herzog, Hegel "understood the essence of human life to be derived from history."

Key words: Saul Bellow, *Herzog*, 20th-Century American Fiction, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, History, Memory, Dialectics, Identity

Özet

HEGEL, HERZOG, TARİH: BENLİĞİN YENİDEN İNŞASI

Bu çalışmada Amerikalı yazar Saul Bellow'un 1964 tarihli *Herzog* romanının Alman düşünür Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel'in için değişim (diyalektik) kavramı çerçevesinde tarih, bellek ve kimliğin yeniden inşasına ilişkin birbiriyle örtüşen söylemlere odaklanarak incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Bellow bu romanda entellektüel bir bunalım yaşayan ve derin endişelerini yalnızca dostlarına ya da akrabalarına değil hayatta olup olmamaları önemli olmaksızın birçok önemli kişiye de mektuplar yazarak hafifletmeye çalışan üniversite hocası Moses Herzog'un hikayesini anlatır. Romanda geleneksel olay örgüsünün pek çok kez dışına çıkılarak varlık ve benliğin anlamları tartışılır.

¹ A shorter version of this study was presented at the 3rd International BAKEA Symposium of Western Cultural and Literary Studies: History. October 9-11, 2013, Gaziantep University, Turkey.

* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Ankara Üniversitesi, Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri Edebiyatları Bölümü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı. kilicer@ankara.edu.tr

Bu tartışma içinde Hegel ve tarih felsefesi önemli bir yer tutmaktadır zira Herzog'a göre Hegel "insan hayatının özünün tarihten türediğini anlamıştır."

Anahtar Kelimeler: Saul Bellow, Herzog, 20. Yüzyıl Amerikan Romanı, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Tarih, Bellek, Diyalektik, Kimlik

Both philosophy and philology are explorations of existence and the universe. They both share the Greek word-forming element "philo-", meaning love. While the former (Gk/L philosophia: philos+sophia) refers to love of wisdom or knowledge, "understood as the study and knowledge of things and their causes" (Williams, 1983), the latter (Gk/L philologia: philos+logos) refers to love of learning and words, or literature. The study of literary texts and written records as the main domain of philology calls for a dialogue between the two for authors probing deeper into the *whys* and *hows* of human existence. The study of knowledge and words, hence ideas, is the study to understand fundamental truths about human existence, the universe they occupy, and the contingent relationships between them. In undertaking such activity one also turns to others who have attempted to answer such complicated questions in the past, thus, making both philology and philosophy a study of history as well. Questions about interpretation, narration, and imagination raised by philology are covered by philosophical inquiry directing us to other indispensable questions about self and identity. This mutual exchange between philosophy and literature is one of the most distinctive features of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) where the critical insight matter blends the protagonist's attempts at self definition and, more significantly, self re-construction.

Herzog has established Bellow's reputation on a permanent basis and describes his great theme with precision: "The need to come to terms with the past without being defined by it" (Newman, 2012). The protagonist of the novel, Moses Elkanah Herzog, is also memory driven, deeply and imaginatively engaged with coming to terms with the past. The narrator tells us that: "[H]e sometimes imagined he was an industry that manufactured personal history, and saw himself from birth to death. He conceded on a piece of paper, *I cannot justify.*" (Bellow, 1970), echoing Hegel in not being able to rejuvenate but to understand existence because he knows that:

Philosophy always comes too late and can only interpret a completed process. [...] From this point of view our thoughts about the world are of no significance for the purpose of practical evaluation, since we cannot judge the future but can only try to understand the past. There is no point in debating whether we should accept the present as simple reality or judge its qualities by the demands of Reason, since philosophers are only concerned

with what is irrevocably past and not with the present world or its purposes
(Kolakowski, 1981).

Herzog is described by the narrator as a man who “[h]ad a strong will and a talent for polemics, a taste for the philosophy of history” (Bellow, 1970). Herzog’s fixation on both his own past and philosophers, who had passed away long ago, has resonances with Hegel’s argument. In his attempt to emancipate himself from the burden of history massively dwarfing him under its sway Herzog writes a series of unsent letters addressed to such philosophers as Hegel and Nietzsche and mentions many others in other letters. These letters constitute the major formal device of this what we might call a semi-epistolary novel where the reader is presented with a portrayal of the agonies of consciousness brought about by historical awareness.

Herzog is well-equipped to suffer from such awareness for he was an academic who earned his Ph.D. with an influential dissertation titled “The State of Nature in the 17th and 18th Century English and French Political Philosophy” that was also translated into French and German. And “His book – *Romanticism and Christianity* is now accepted as a ‘model of the new sort of history’ by the younger generation of historians, ‘history that interests us’—personal, engagée—and looks at the past with an intense need for contemporary relevance” (Bellow, 1970). He becomes an influential figure among academics but it is a German philosopher, Hegel, who seems to have the greatest influence on Herzog. Hegel’s concept of inherent change, or the dialectical, can be utilized to explain the contingent web of discourses on history, memory, and Herzog’s attempts at re-constructing his identity.

Dialectic in its primary sense is “the art of discussion and debate, and then, by derivation, the investigation of truth by discussion” (Williams, 1983). In philosophy, the term ‘dialectics’ originally referred to the argumentative style found in Plato’s dialogues. Socrates, Plato’s main protagonist, would interrogate other philosophers, thinkers and assorted experts, most typically as to what they meant by a particular concept (such as ‘justice’, or the ‘good’). The Socratic method typically worked by exposing the shallow and ultimately incoherent understanding that others had of concepts, but without Socrates necessarily providing an adequate and coherent definition of his own. (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002)

Literature tells us that dialectics as a term took on a related, but distinctive meaning in German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in the works of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Hegel. Fichte proposed the common characterization of the structure of a dialectical argument as thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In other words, one thesis would be proven; an equally good proof would be offered for an alternative and incompatible thesis; the contradiction between the thesis and antithesis would then be resolved typically by a leap to a different way of

looking at the problem, so that the initial contradiction is explained away by recognizing the limits upon one's reasoning and knowledge that taken for granted presuppositions placed upon the original argument. Hegel's dialectic, however, is stated to be rather more complex than this. The three terms of Hegel's dialectic may best be seen as universal, particular and individual. The universal is a stage of naive self-certainty. A single, all-encompassing entity exists. For example, the new-born human being knows nothing of the world except for its own existence. Yet there is no real knowledge in it, for that only occurs when there is differentiation or parting. Very much like Lacanian account of the Mirror Stage, the entity will only come to know itself if it recognizes what it is not (and thus encounters some **other**). The universal is therefore particularized, separated, or broken up. This stage of particularization gives rise to a fruitful period of growth and self-discovery, not merely for the individual human. This is how Hegel characterizes human history as a whole. This period ends when the subject recognizes itself in the object. The universality of the first stage of the dialectic is then restored, but in a new, profoundly self-conscious form. The subject has returned to itself, but has learnt of itself through the journey (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002).

Herzog learns of himself and makes sense of both his personal and intellectual history through his constant manufacturing of his own self by writing letters never meant to reach the addressees. Bellow constantly digresses from the plot to improvise on the meaning of existence and selfhood while offering the reader Herzog's attempts at self-definition. For instance, in a letter to General Eisenhower Herzog appropriately writes:

Tolstoi (1828-1910) said, 'Kings are history's slaves.' The higher one stands in the scale of power, the more his actions are determined. To Tolstoi, freedom is entirely personal. That man is free whose condition is simple, truthful—real. To be free is to be released from historical limitation. On the other hand, GWF Hegel (1770-1831) understood the essence of human life to be derived from history. History, memory—that is what makes us human, that, and our knowledge of death: 'by man came death.' For knowledge of death makes us wish to extend our lives at the expense of others. And this is the root of the struggle for power (162).

Placed just about at the center of the novel, Herzog's recognition of Hegel's concept of history and its relation to human existence also accounts for his quest for self-recognition. Earlier in the novel Herzog had been struggling to come to terms with life which he described as such: "[N]ot that long disease, my life, but that long convalescence, my life. The liberal-bourgeois revision, the illusion of improvement, the poison of hope" (4). His troublesome wrestling with existence at many points meant struggling with Hegel: "Hegel was giving him a great deal of trouble. Ten years earlier he had been

certain he understood his ideas on consensus and civility, but something had gone wrong” (Bellow, 1970). By the end of the novel that struggle comes to an end and Herzog realizes that the acknowledgement of mortality and an acceptance of all the contradictions in human life is liberating. This proves to be a progress on Herzog’s part which can also be seen as giving in but not giving up on life. In his attempts at emancipation Herzog’s continuous letter writing and all his letters are examples of some sort of justification, or at least attempts at that, and he “gropes toward the inclusive pattern of intellectual history; his mind works sequentially; he looks for a narrative that will set the history of developing human consciousness in clear order” (Corner, 2000). Herzog follows Hegel in his view of the world seeing the same historical processes reaching self-awareness in the lives of individuals and in historical events. Thus his primary perception of people is as instances in an argument, as exemplifications of moments in the history of freedom and self-awareness.” (Corner, 2000)

According to Hegel, the meaning of history can be discovered, but it is a meaning that is not indicated by history: rather it uses history as an instrument. Freedom is proper to the Mind, as gravity is to matter; but Mind must first realize its own nature by elevating its freedom to the dignity of freedom-for-itself, self-knowing freedom. This freedom is equivalent to being-within-itself, i.e. the state of being unlimited by any alien objectivity. In the course of human history the Mind becomes that which it was in itself; it does not, however, throw away the riches it has accumulated on the journey, like a ladder that is no longer needed after the ascent, but preserves them all (Kolakowski, 1981). In this view Hegel writes in *The Philosophy of History*:

The life of the ever-present Spirit is a circle of progressive embodiments, which looked at in one aspect still exist beside each other, and only as looked at from another point of view appear as past. The grades which Spirit seems to have left behind it, it still possesses in the depths of its present (79).

Nature does not contain in itself the element of freedom, and consequently there is no progress in it, only changes and endless repetition of the same thing. Nature is an indispensable condition for the operation of the human spirit. But the actual progress of Mind takes place in human history and particularly in the evolution of civilization, in which the human spirit attains to an increasing self-knowledge of freedom. History becomes intelligible as a whole if we regard it as the development of the consciousness of freedom, a development which in its main lines is necessarily determined” (Kolakowski, 1981). “Hegelian freedom is the understanding of necessity” that “the human spirit desires to reconcile itself with reality, but not through humble resignation which eternalizes the opposition between a closed-off self-awareness and the indifferent course of events. The subjective human will has a means of reconciling itself to the world by understanding it and realizing itself in it,

rather than turning away from it in a spurious dignity which is merely a cloak for despair.” (Kolakowski, 1981)

Herzog confronts his despair in Ludeville, in the house he bought with the money he inherited from his father when Madeleine became pregnant: “It seemed the ideal place to work out the problems Herzog had become involved with in *The Phenomenology of Mind*—the importance of the ‘law of heart’ in Western traditions, the origins of moral sentimentalism and related matters, on which he had distinctly different ideas” (Bellow, 1970).

He realized it. He appeared to know how everything ought to go, down to the smallest detail (under the category of ‘Free Concrete Mind,’ misapprehension of a universal by the developing consciousness—reality opposing the ‘law of the heart,’ alien necessity gruesomely crushing individuality, *unsowweiter*). Oh, Herzog granted that he was in the wrong. But all he asked, it seemed to him, was a bit of cooperation in his effort, benefitting everyone, to work toward a meaningful life. Hegel was curiously significant but also utterly cockeyed. Of course. That was the whole point (Bellow, 1970).

The fact that Herzog finds Hegel “curiously significant” but also completely wrong is based on his own struggle to interpret the nature of existence. Everything seems absurd to him on his way to self-recognition and Hegel’s refusal “to regard the thinking subject as abandoned helplessly to the experience of that variety and multiplicity, presented to him endlessly as a datum without reason or meaning” (Kolakowski, 1981) further confuses his already conflicting thoughts. His relentless desire to discover his true self is nevertheless a product of the dialectical working of his own mind, a testament to his struggle with the Hegelian dialectic:

[S]elf-knowledge exists in and for itself only by virtue of the fact that it is recognized as such by another self-knowledge. Every self-knowledge is a medium through which every other is linked with itself. In other words, the self-knowledge of a human individual exists only in the process of communication and mutual understanding among human beings; it is a delusion to imagine a self-knowledge that treats itself as an absolute point of departure. [...] There arises a master-and-slave relationship, and this mutual dependence is the beginning of the process of the development of the spirit by human labor. The master has enslaved the independent object, using the slave as an instrument. [...] [T]he Hegelian dialectic [...] is an account of

the historical process whereby consciousness overcomes its own contingency and finitude by constant self-differentiation (Kolakowski, 1981).

Herzog's self-knowledge is linked with the social through his letters ironically and can only overcome "finitude" by acknowledging mortality an ever-present reality. In a letter to Shapiro on his book and referring to the Holocaust he writes:

I don't pretend that my position, on the other hand, is easy. We are survivors, in this age, so theories of progress ill become us, because we are intimately acquainted with the costs. To realize that you are a survivor is a shock. At the realization of such election, you feel like bursting into tears. As the dead go their way, you want to call to them, but they depart in a black cloud of faces, souls. They flow out in smoke from the extermination chimneys, and leave you in the clear light of historical success—the technical success of the West. Then you know with a crash of the blood that mankind is making it—making it in glory though deafened by the explosions of blood. Unified by the horrible wars, instructed in our brutal stupidity by revolutions, by engineered famines directed by 'ideologists' (heirs of Marx and Hegel and trained in the cunning of reason), perhaps we, modern humankind (can it be!), have done the nearly the impossible, namely, learned something. You know that the decline and doom of civilization refuses to follow the model of antiquity. The old empires are shattered but those same one-time powers are richer than ever. I don't say that the prosperity of Germany is altogether agreeable to contemplate. But there it is, less than twenty years after the demonic nihilism of Hitler destroyed it. And France? England? No, the analogy of the decline and fall of the classical world will not hold for us (75).

Herzog's acceptance of death and coming to terms with the fact that existence leads to mortality triggered by his watching the murder trial of a woman accused of causing the death of a small child and his car accident, comes with his decision to stop writing and accept existence as it is, embracing all its irregularities:

Perhaps he'd stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell really seemed to be passing, really

going. [...] At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word” (Bellow, 1970).

At the beginning of the novel Herzog was portrayed as “*a learned specialist in intellectual history, handicapped by emotional confusion*” (106) who had been “distressed, impatient, angry” (6) and “[k]new his scribbling, letter- writing was ridiculous. It was involuntary. His eccentricities had him in their power” (11). But through the course of the story he seems to achieve an inherent change as he and the narrator tells us: “I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not destroy my remaining years in the same way. Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to begin” (322). As his quest for self-knowledge seems to reach a certain turning point rather than a conclusion he realizes how satisfied he is:

Unbelievable! How different he felt! Confident, even happy in his excitement, stable. The bitter cup would come round again, by and by. This rest and well-being were only a momentary difference in the strange lining or variable silk between life and void (326).

The problem with his concluding statements, however, is that he still maintains the uncertainty of faith and philosophy acknowledging the thin, silken thread between emptiness, and life even though he feels confident, stable, and even happy. His feeling of having a firm grip on life in all its stability sounds like a momentary illusion rather than reality.

References

- Bellow, Saul. *Herzog*. 1964. New York: Viking, 1970.
- Corner, M. 2000, “Moving Outwards: Consciousness, Discourse and Attention in Saul Bellow’s Fiction.” *Studies in the Novel* 32.3 369-385.
- Edgar, A. and Sedgwick P. 2002, Eds. *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge,
- Hegel, GWF. *The Philosophy of History*. 1837. Trans. John Sibree. New York: Dover, 2004.
- Hegel, GWF. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. 1821. Trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Kolakowski, L., 1981 *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders*. Vol. I. 1978. Trans. P. S. Falla. New York: Oxford UP,
- Newman, J., 2012 “Saul Bellow: The Cultural and Historical Context.” In *Critical Insights: Saul Bellow*. Ed. Alan Chavkin. NY: Salem P, pp.53-68.
- Williams, R., 1983 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford UP.