



# verifiche

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# HEGEL'S DISCURSIVE LOGIC: THE RE-ENACTMENT OF METHOD

by Giulia Bernard\*

In her insightful Introduction to the volume *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*, titled *Thinking Transformation*, Angelica Nuzzo argues for the overall significance of the transformation processes with which Hegel's logic is concerned, descriptively and normatively:

At stake is the dialectical puzzle of how we can provide the story of the present – a present of deep, unsettling, critical transformation – while living immersed in it. How can or should transformation be thought? Moreover, since our thinking is immanent in the very transformation it aims at comprehending, thinking itself must be able to change with the actuality it describes. Hence the previous question goes hand in hand with a second one: How can or should thinking transform itself? [...] Hegel's logic is concerned with the transformation of pure thinking's most proper action. The question then is, How can transformation be assessed and performed at the same time? This I take to be the central problem Hegel addresses in the last chapter of the *Logic* dedicated to the method. But this is also the problem that we all face in living in our times of deep historical transformation<sup>1</sup>.

At first, the quotation seems to advance afresh the well-known thesis of the immanence of the exposition of logical thinking. According to this thesis, thought in logic proceeds without presupposing anything from the outside: it is entirely internal to

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<sup>1</sup> A. Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2018, p. XIII.

the dynamics through which its content necessarily develops. However, on closer examination, what Nuzzo states in these introductory lines discloses the coordinates of a decidedly original interpretative proposal. Not only does Nuzzo express the task of logic in terms of a «logic of transformation»<sup>2</sup>, concerning our experience of living in times of crisis – an *interregnum* where the old is dying (but is not dead yet) and the new cannot be born yet. The volume's proposal is original for an all-encompassing understanding of the gradually more and more determined and complex ways in which the *Science of Logic* stages transformative processes<sup>3</sup> in themselves, that is without reference to external substrates. Logic acts discursively, whereas this process is the most proper action and nature of thought (it is what thought itself is).

In this contribution, I would like to discuss the question at the core of the volume, namely how it is possible for thought to examine and *at the same time* perform transformation: i.e., to change along with the actuality it describes, in order not to remain external to the transformation.

As the volume shows, it is clear that such a question regards the transformative dynamics grasped in the logic, if it is true that «the presentation of no subject matter can be in and for itself as strictly and immanently plastic as is that of thought in its necessary development» (as Hegel says in the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Science of Logic*)<sup>4</sup>. If this is the case, it is the end of the *Science of Logic* that undoubtedly poses urgent questions on which the volume seems to prompt discussion. In fact, according to Nuzzo, «the logic is not only the action successively *performed* by pure thinking but also the action conclusively and retrospectively *re-collected* in the unitary plot that is the method»<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> One would be tempted to say, albeit with due distinctions, that this refers to Hegelian philosophy as such.

<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. and transl. by G. di Giovanni, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 19 (GW 21, p. 18). Henceforth referred to as *SL*.

<sup>5</sup> Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*, p. 46.

The method is, above all, the movement followed by the logical content itself<sup>6</sup>. More precisely, though, method is not just *the form* of the content but rather the «consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content of logic»<sup>7</sup>. It is precisely such a consciousness that comes to the fore strongly in the logical section at the end of *Science of Logic*, titled *The absolute idea*. The absolute idea is the result to which the whole logical movement has led, once the content, as living content, through its internal negativity, has followed and has given its own inner method by moving on to further determinations. Absolute method brings with this something further. The self-determination of the absolute idea at the end of the logical path is fully transparent to itself but does not yet possess a discursiveness capable of giving subsistence to the process followed by pure thinking. On the contrary, the method has the merit of translating «the impermanence of the original word into the discursive structure of the logical narrative»<sup>8</sup>; i.e., it offers a systematic narrative for the logical path.

Considered this way, the method narrates in a unified plot the logical action hitherto «(only) performed in the ongoing succession of the different actions that constitute it»<sup>9</sup>. By *performing again* the action that has led to it as a result, the method allows the absolute idea to become the subject of the whole process. In the «performative reenactment (the true unity between theory and praxis)»<sup>10</sup> requested by the method, the structures of beginning, advancing, and ending come to the fore for the first time as specific, yet determinate, ways of acting. On this basis it is possible, thirdly, to proceed and articulate the logical determinations as determinate figures of acting in a manner that is no longer merely *diachronic* but *synchronic*. What Nuzzo suggests is then the

<sup>6</sup> See the following textual passage: «The method that I follow in this system of logic, or rather the method that this system itself follows within» (*SL*, p. 33; *GW* 21, p. 38).

<sup>7</sup> *SL*, p. 33 (*GW* 21, p. 37).

<sup>8</sup> Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

possibility of rereading the *Logic* by putting *out of sequence* what in the immanent development counted as a series of stages, each of them being in connection to the previous ones but lacking in topological awareness of the occupied place within the entire development. Such a move makes it possible, finally, to assess the transformative potential that the moments of the narrative – beginning, advancing, ending – are capable of exhibiting in correspondence with the determinations of being, essence, and concept.

Such an original interpretative position finds a productive embodiment in the *General Appendix* of the volume. In that section, thought determinations are set out almost synoptically as specific figures of action. I want to focus on that to raise and discuss a few issues.

The first aspect that should be noted is that *Logic does not discursively articulate* the rereading requested by the method. To put this point in perhaps somewhat more intuitive terms: at the end of the *Logic*, we do not find a section in which the cross-references are clarified once and for all – as though at the end of a detective story, once we have discovered the murderer, we found an appendix where we are told what elements we might have paid attention to, had we known from the beginning that we would sooner or later find ourselves at the scene of a crime and we would then find the culprit. I wonder whether one may recognize, in this absence, a philosophical point by Hegel.

In the logical text, there are other attempts to re-determine the unitary plot of the text, albeit in a not fully articulated way. The main ones seem to be a) the concept (where the relation between concept, on the one hand, and being and essence, on the other hand, is put in terms of genesis and truth)<sup>11</sup>, and b) the particular

<sup>11</sup> *SL*, p. 509 (GW 12, pp. 11-12): «Hence the *objective logic*, which treats of *being* and *essence*, constitutes in truth the *genetic exposition of the concept*. [...] The *dialectical movement of substance* through causality and reciprocal affection is thus the immediate *genesis of the concept* by virtue of which its *becoming* is displayed. But the meaning of its *becoming*, like that of all becoming, that it is the reflection of something which passes over into its *ground* [...]. Thus the concept is the *truth* of substance».

concept (where it is stated that all previous determinations could be read as concepts)<sup>12</sup>. These are thought determinations that somehow exceed the immanent movement precisely where the process is consistently interpreted from its own perspective – out of itself, as it were. Even without going into detail, the impression is that on Hegel's part such a hesitation to resolve everything at the immanent level – even when the time seems ripe for such an operation – is, to put it strongly, almost structural: it is in the thing. As an action, the *re-enactment itself* is not assured once and for all.

This seems true also for how the *Encyclopaedia* ends in its 1817 and 1830 versions. In the last, dense paragraphs of the Philosophy section, one encounters three expositions of philosophical knowledge in the form of syllogisms. The only true syllogism is for Hegel the third, as a syllogism of syllogisms. Instead, the first and second represent appearances that just from the final perspective of the third syllogism can be considered manifestations of truth. It is not difficult to see a strong correspondence between the *Encyclopaedia's* exposition, as it has come to be, and the first syllogism (logic – nature – spirit), i.e., one that for Hegel is the apparent and not yet the true idea of philosophy. And yet no Hegelian exposition of the latter is given in any printed work, nor in the lectures. This can hardly be attributed, it seems to me, to contingent reasons. Rather, the reason appears to be structural, since it concerns precisely what philosophy is for Hegel.

The fact that we do not start with the truth, or with the consciousness of the form, right away can be explained by a structural reason for the Hegelian proposal: for Hegel the system does not work as a grand deduction from a principle given once and for all. Then truth is «the process of its own discursive acquisition and

<sup>12</sup> «The preceding logical determinations, the determinations of being and essence, are (of course) not mere thought-determinations; in the dialectical moment of their passing-over, and in their return into themselves and in their totality, they prove themselves to be *concepts*» (*Encyclopaedia Logic*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, p. 238, § 162 A). See *SL*, p. 543 (GW 12, p. 46) where Hegel adds: «If the task of a treatise on the concept were to give all the *determinate* concepts that there are».

articulation»<sup>13</sup>. If the view of the totality is only possible at the end, it would be just as interesting to ask why even *in the end* this discursive unitary narration is not given once and for all, alongside the immanent process, as it were. My impression is that this relates to what Hegel means by speculative thinking and by its unavoidable discursive execution.

Based on this consideration, I will try to articulate a second one. In the interpretation proposed in the volume, as I understand it, the method seems to be an issue that puts us in a position *to do* something: it allows us to re-enact a text that has led to it as to its result, pausing on certain moments that – in the light of the methodological awareness now acquired – can be evaluated as specific figures of action, determinate ways of beginning, advancing and ending. The question is then, what kind of action is *this re-enactment* itself, considered as a whole: not only concerning the transformative potential of certain figures of action in the light of the moments of the method but as a performative re-enactment, for the second time, of a text in the light of its final perspective. In other words, can we recognize a transformative potential proper to the *re-enactment* required by the method, beyond the individual moments it synchronously correlates, and beyond even what the idea does as a specific way of beginning-advancing-ending? I will try to clarify the point.

When rereading the logic, there are many issues at stake: we pause on some moments and not on others (often along the Hegelian suggestion of a kind of synchronicity at stake); we realize, secondly, that the very exposition of the immanent perspective is constitutively implanted on methodological issues that to the *unbefangen* reading of logic appear anticipations or products of external reflection. As an *immanent-cum-methodological* perspective (to refer to an earlier contribution of the author)<sup>14</sup>, the *re-enactment* itself seems a particular kind of beginning for the logic as a whole: it

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> A similar argument is advanced in A. Nuzzo, *Thinking Being: Method in Hegel's Logic of Being*, in M. Bauer, S. Houlgate (eds.), *A Companion to Hegel*, Chichester, Blackwell, 2011, pp. 111-139.

establishes the genesis of certain moments not simply based on the only thing that must be taken into account for progress, that is, determinate negation, since a much more substantial memory, also made up of anticipations, is put into motion. Furthermore, the *re-enactment* is also, it seems to me, a peculiar form of advancing: it is pausing on the determinations without wanting anything else, but it is perhaps of a different kind than what is required of us at the beginning, namely the *reines Zusehen*. Finally, the re-enactment is perhaps also (but here it is a bit of a guess) a peculiar ending. In this regard, it becomes perhaps interesting to ask: does it make any difference for the idea that «*freely discharges itself*»<sup>15</sup> if the logical journey as such is performed a second time, having «consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content of logic»<sup>16</sup>? In short: is it possible, and to what extent (if at all), to discuss the *re-enactment* of the method as a whole? Not to do something punctual (i.e., recognizing a specific figure of acting or even evaluating the transformative potential of a series) but to understand what we are doing *while we are doing it*.

Such questions relate to the core of the challenging and thought-provoking interpretative proposal of the volume, concerning the decisive task of philosophy of «letting go» of our world, thereby showing the openness to new possibilities and allowing us to be part of the process that is the actualization of a truly new one. Both the project of a *logic* of transformation and the modality of actualizing it as a whole are pivotal, in this respect. The possible indication of a direction seems therefore to be enclosed in the adverb «*obliquely*» in the title of the volume – as the reference, perhaps, to a posture to assume in the execution of a task.

<sup>15</sup> *SL*, p. 753 (GW 12, p. 253). In this regard, one may also ask: what does it mean to end the *Science of Logic* for the second time, again, as it were, by encountering the method for the second time, if what has been done is to proceed *from the beginning* to make the idea the subject of its journey? Does the method become superfluous? Does it continue to mobilize further forms of *re-enactment*?

<sup>16</sup> *SL*, p. 33 (GW 21, p. 37). Something equally interesting concerns the discursive exposition of the logical text itself: what happens to the *Anmerkungen*? Is it possible to think of them as part of a determinate methodological perspective?