

Book Review

Angelica Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. ISBN 9-781-438-47205-8 (hbk). ISBN 9-781-438-47204-1 (pbk). Pp. 454. \$37.95.

Angelica Nuzzo's book, winner of the 2020 HegelPD Prize, stands out as the culmination of decades of work by an esteemed Hegel scholar, providing a remarkably insightful and detailed reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic*—its 'obliqueness' notwithstanding. Despite her notable track record in contemporary Hegel scholarship, in the present book, academic polemics are notable for their absence. Nuzzo explicitly aims to 'circumvent' contemporary debates regarding issues like the metaphysical, ontological and epistemological stakes of Hegel's *Logic*, seeking an approach that can reach a 'more fundamental' aspect, which may be brought to bear on these debates indirectly (33, 394). The first part of the book argues for the affinity between Hegel's *Logic* and an account of 'poetic action' rooted in Aristotle's *Poetics* (7, 1450b), which allows her to suggest a re-reading of Hegel's own text by way of a highly idiosyncratic and non-linear but nevertheless systematic and thoroughly Hegelian approach.

It must be noted right away that this book is not, as its title may misleadingly suggest, a work of literary analysis where Hegel's *Logic* is brought to bear on a handful of literary texts. Nuzzo makes a distinction between first-time linear readings of the *Logic* and the possible reading disclosed by the book's very ending, which leaves aside the matter of the *Realphilosophie* and instead proposes to 'use the absolute method on or to apply it back to the immanent development of the logic itself' (74). The second part of the book therefore amounts to re-reading the *Logic* by way of different 'strategies' by which Being, Essence and Concept try, fail or succeed to begin, advance and end, the examination of which produces 'a "typology" of logical transformations' instantiated in literary cases (46). Nuzzo maintains that the book's literary engagements play a crucial role by illustrating the stakes of these transformations from Hegel's *Logic*, and do not constitute 'an alleged "Hegelian" reading of these texts', but rather 'offer a fresh and utterly unprecedented analysis of Hegel's text, an analysis able to bring to light how concrete, versatile, open to unimagined possibilities, the argument of the logic is' (xv). Nuzzo's must therefore be regarded as a highly ambitious book undertaking a major engagement with Hegel's *Logic* first and foremost.

The first chapter serves as an introduction and contextualization of Hegel's milieu, both historical and philosophical, and argues that Hegelian philosophy can be 'its own present time apprehended in thoughts' because it amounts to a 'logic of transformation' (3–5). Nuzzo finds in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Die Verfassung Deutschlands* a philosophical concern with thinking through the contradictory moments of transition which are the 'sign of historical crises' of Hegel's own post-Revolutionary present (15). She then draws a strong parallel between the ungraspability of such a transformation and the problem of change in Ancient metaphysics, with the corollary that Kantian '*Verstandeslogik*' is unsuitable for the task, because of its avoidance of contradiction in epistemology, metaphysics and logic (18). These philosophical critiques from Hegel's younger years therefore lay the ground for an engagement with the *Logic*'s speculative approach, as well as attest to Nuzzo's long-standing commitment to the social import of Hegel's philosophy and its contemporary actuality.

The second chapter addresses the status of thought and action in the *Logic* by attending to Hegel's own concluding reflections on method. Nuzzo suggests that the *Logic*'s engagement of pure thought must likewise constitute an 'action' 'loosely modelled' on Hegel's 'rendering of Aristotle's *energeia* (*actus*, *Tätigkeit*) and on his correction of Kant's notion of the understanding's activity (*Handlung*) of judgment' (50). The chapter draws heavily from the 'Absolute Idea' and assimilates *mythos* and method, which is said to '[stand] to the logical movement that precedes it and produces it as the unitary completed plot or action stands to the sequence of actions and events that constitutes it' (50). The 'unity of theory and praxis' which makes the *Logic* into a systematic whole is the retrospective comprehension of the action hitherto unfolded into a whole '*mythos* or story—that constitute the logic into a logic of transformative processes, and as the way in which all "true" action and all "true" plot should be constituted' (36). This *mythos* is the narrativizing capacity of action to comprise itself dynamically, to be the 'protagonist' and entirely constitute 'the agent' without any substrate or presupposition (48). This chapter is crucial for Nuzzo's project, and the rest of the book hangs on whether the reader will be convinced that this narrative and retrospective account of poetic action is Hegel's own exhortation to re-read the *Logic*, as Nuzzo suggests.

The third chapter supports the book's own heterodox approach by a highly original argument introducing the pivotal notion of 'figure' (*Gestalt*). Nuzzo's 'synchronic' approach to the *Logic* relies on the 'figure' as the 'agent' of action, shored up by a detailed discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Goethe's philosophy of organics and *Faust II*, and Christian eschatology in Martin Luther and Erich Auerbach. Figures emerge as the intermediary bearers of action between the eternal and the real, the universal and the particular, 'agents, although not subjects' which populate and animate Hegel's 'realm of shadows' (77). Notably, Nuzzo is careful to distinguish these from the 'figures of consciousness' well-known from the

Phenomenology: it is precisely because the ‘opposition of consciousness’ has indeed been left behind at the end of the *Phenomenology* that the ‘figures of the concept’ are allowed to come to the fore and bear the *Logic*’s dynamic logical content (*das Logische*) (87–88). These logical figures precede, account for and may be ‘fulfilled’ by a reality beyond them: ‘in the inverted Platonism common to Goethe and Hegel, *Gestalt* (and the movement of *Gestaltung*) is the dynamic structure of mediation that connects the shadow to the object that casts it’ (104). Nuzzo’s account of the figure as bearer of logical content striving towards realization is highly original and compelling—and though it certainly helps make the previously asserted identity of method and *mythos* plausible, it cannot help the feeling that this identity is still too arbitrary, which raises the question of why Nuzzo’s reading would be ‘more fundamental’ than others (394).

The fourth chapter brings a new perspective to the familiar Hegelian problem of beginning, by considering three differing strategies by which an immediacy first tries and fails to make its way to its own determination (123). The indeterminate vacuousness of the beginning in Being is the vanishing (*Verschwenden*) of being into nothing and in Essence it is the attempt at beginning again, as the abstract oscillating transition (*Übergang*) between the inessential and the essential (125). It is only in the Concept that a first attempt is made to think of a grounded self-relation which can account for differentiation (*Unterscheiden*) where discursivity and intelligibility are possible (134). The problematic nature of these different figures is then illustrated with the violent actions corresponding to the main characters in Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*, taking aim at Hannah Arendt’s classic analysis. Nuzzo’s conclusion is that beginning cannot be an origin, but rather the struggle and drive of intending to act, to which failure is intrinsic.

The fifth chapter takes up the moment of advancement and accounts for the crisis and transformation of finitude with help of Molière’s ‘fanatical’ figures. The problem of advancement appears as the particular problem of finitude caught up in the *Sollen*, where advancement is also its own obstacle—the crisis of a bad infinite (176). This problem is instantiated both when the flux of becoming comes to equilibrium in *Dasein* juxtaposed to others and in the reflective positing (*Gesetz-sein*) of Essence, because ‘self-equality’ is compromised by the confrontation to a constitutive other which they presuppose—this is their impasse. Concept has its own moment of crisis in judgement (*Urteil*), split apart by the need to face finitude once more, but which now ‘advances by staying where it is, splitting itself, and thereby acquiring a more original dimension that is still in itself’ (195). Here, Molière’s *Le Tartuffe* (1664) illustrates the logic of ‘fanaticism’, oscillating between the inextricable extremes of absolutist belief and hypocritical, dissembling pretence, along with a discussion about Hegel’s critique of Kantian morality, conscience and hypocrisy in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Briefly interrupting the systematicity of the book, Nuzzo includes an ‘Appendix’ addressing the ‘crisis-stasis’ of contemporary social politics, where Hegel’s *Logic* is brought to bear on the thought of Antonio Gramsci, Thucydides, Zygmunt Bauman and Nadine Gordimer on the ‘predicament of living in the interregnum’ (238). Nuzzo maintains that the *Logic* has the potential to help us understand both ‘the historical transformations under way in our present time, and on the other hand the connected problem of how we can change and transform the ways in which we think and act in our world’ (239). She pinpoints our predominant ‘historical and social pathology’ (242) as an ahistorical ‘absolutism of the present’ (240); a situation where ‘old institutions [...] no longer display inner validity and recognition but nothing new has yet replaced them’ (172). Her claim is that this interregnum is a necessary moment of crisis never devoid of hope, where instead ‘the possibility of the advancement lies in the “patience”—and indeed the “courage”—that makes us capable of enduring the standstill of the stasis’ (239).

The final chapter accounts for the difficulty and ambivalence in the process of ending and its endeavour to bring forth an altogether new beginning. Being tries to end with measure, whose indifference (*Indifferenz*) cannot ‘decide’ or ‘make’ the end that would hold quantity and quality together (277–78). Essence for its part, ‘refuses’ to ‘yield’ to the agency of the subject by positing the Spinozist substance of infinite blind necessity as its own unending absolute (287–88). For Nuzzo, the Concept’s freedom lies in that it ‘ends twice’ (295)—first, internally in the transition from subjectivity to objectivity, which recollects the previous steps of the logic under the aegis of the syllogism—and then when the idea ends and lets itself go (*Entlassen*) freely ‘beginning a new life and a new action beyond the logic itself’ (296). Each type of conclusion is instantiated in a different literary work: Being is illustrated by Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957) and Essence by Giacomo Leopardi’s ‘Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese’ (1824). The concept overcomes the predicament of ending by way of the creative transformation, as realized in the ‘poetic action’ of Elizabeth Bishop’s late poems, finding poetic action at the core of Hegel’s *Logic* once more.

Certainly, the striking claims about the problematics at stake in the logics of beginning, advancing and ending succeed in delivering, not only Hegel’s *Logic*, but Aristotle’s nearly tautological description of action in the *Poetics*, from being merely an abstractly simple and closed metaphysical system. In this sense, Nuzzo’s account of Hegel’s *Logic* fulfils her goal of showing that ‘the dialectic-speculative method lives on in the spectrum of ever-new examples that it is capable of generating’ (115). It must nevertheless be regrettable that the very ‘estranging’ (112) character of Nuzzo’s approach, foregoing dialogue with contemporaries, as well as the standard features and linearity of Hegel’s own text, ends up giving large sections of the book a somewhat solipsistic character, with exceptionally dense and

abstract prose, as well as frequent repetitions and reformulations, which make it a challenging read. More significantly, the book never quite resolves the tension between merely presenting a possible reading of the *Logic* and claiming that it is a ‘more fundamental’ approach than those others which it refuses to address. Though Nuzzo certainly does enough work to make her reading plausible, the prima facie arbitrariness of the method-*mythos* connection is never completely shaken off—something Nuzzo apparently foresees when she concedes many readers will surely find themselves ‘unconvinced’ and even ‘outraged’ by her highly heterodox approach (xv). Nevertheless, the uniquely ambitious *Approaching Hegel’s Logic Obliquely* is sure to prove insightful to any reader interested in a shift of perspective from which hackneyed debates over Hegel’s *Logic* may be transformed.

Iñigo Baca Bordons
University of Valencia, Spain
iibabor@alumni.uv.es