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OBLIQUITY IN QUESTION: METHOD, TRANSFORMATION, AND METAPHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

by Giovanna Miolli*

One word in the title of Angelica Nuzzo's book *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett* stands out: the adverb 'obliquely'. This word raises expectations concerning the path that will be taken. It refers to a *method* of *philosophical inquiry* that is simultaneously a method of conceptual narrative for generating alternative possibilities.

It is precisely on the basis of the term 'obliquely' that I would like to discuss the intersection between two aspects of Angelica Nuzzo's text. The first regards the methodology of the oblique approach and its metaphilosophical implications. The second concerns the topic of transformation and, more specifically, the author's interpretation of Hegel's logic as «a 'logic of transformation' or a 'logic of transformative processes'»¹.

1. *The Methodological Relation between Obliquity and Transformation*

The methodological indication of obliquity appears in the title, providing a key to the text. Obliquity, however, is not explicitly thematized; rather, it 'emerges' from the operations carried out by the author. I see two main features of the oblique approach as

* Università di Padova/Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina in Buenos Aires

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

developed in the book. (1) To interpret a text such as the *Science of Logic*, Nuzzo (also) employs literary categories², texts, and authors³. Moreover, she attempts to conceive of logical determinations as *figures* (of action of pure thinking), thus relocating the terminology of ‘figures’ from a context in which we are familiar with it (the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) to a sphere in which it has quite different implications (the ‘realm of shadows’ of the *Science of Logic*). As I understand it, part of the approach’s obliquity lies precisely in the use of all this material and its generative re-signification through unconventional interactions between concepts, thinkers, and narrative forms. (2) However, obliquity is also determined by another factor, which Nuzzo identifies as operating within Hegel’s text. This factor is the complex interaction – both narrative and conceptual – between linear and synchronic logical processes. The author intends to show the potential and implications of a *synchronic* reading of the *Science of Logic* that (retro)acts on its diachronic-linear reading (I will return to this shortly).

The integration of aspects 1 and 2 helps to *describe* the obliquity of Nuzzo’s approach but does not *explain* the reason for it. Why turn specifically to the *Science of Logic*, and why do it through an oblique approach? Interestingly, the author’s choice is motivated by a specific urgency: the need to understand and act in the *transformative* processes of a thick present in which we are *simultaneously* immersed⁴.

According to Nuzzo, Hegel’s logic helps untangle this problem because it shows how thought acts as thought – that is, it

² Take, for example, the interpretation of Hegel’s logic as a *mythos method*, articulated in the forms of beginning, advancement, and end.

³ In particular, Herman Melville, Molière, Samuel Beckett, Giacomo Leopardi, and Elizabeth Bishop.

⁴ In the author’s words, «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?» (ivi, p. XIII).

shows the transformative processes of thought and the mode of self-understanding immanent in them. But how can we grasp such transformative processes? Precisely through a synchronic reading of the Logic, which ‘complexifies’, and intersects with, the ‘linear’ reading that follows the course of thought determinations in the succession in which they are presented. According to the author, the synchronic reading of the Logic is a tool that Hegel himself offers us in his treatment of the speculative method at the end of the *Science of Logic*. This reading allows us to explore the transformation of different ‘logical modes’, particularly of beginning, advancing, and ending. In this context, logical determinations are interpreted as the ‘figures of action’ of thought or as ‘logical ‘agents’, namely, the nonsubjective functions that differentially enact the plot or that perform the logical action in a distinct modality or in a specific determinateness»⁵.

This focus on the speculative method (understood as a tool for a synchronic reading of the transformation of logical thought) allows us to grasp the transformative processes *within thought’s progressive achievement of self-knowledge as well*. Knowing a certain content transforms this very content – for example, it gives it a unity as a meaningful conceptual story. Nuzzo interprets the method precisely in these terms⁶. Indeed, while a linear reading of the Logic provides a view of thought in action that determines itself, the treatment of the method is presented as the act in which thought ‘collects’ its own self-development under a unity, a unitary plot, which gives it retrospective and normative meaning. The method is described as a ‘mythos method’, as the exposition of a (conceptual) story which has meaning – the story of how thought acts, how it produces itself. Specifically, the method encompasses the pure figures of action of beginning, developing, and ending.

To say that we also grasp the transformative processes of thought in the self-knowledge that thought matures in the explicit

⁵ Ivi, p. 110.

⁶ On this, see especially the second chapter of the book; ivi, pp. 35-72.

exposition of its own method is to say that the transformative processes of thought are at work not only in its self-development but *also when it seeks to understand, to know, its own transformation*. Nuzzo thus allows us to enter this complexification of the transformative processes of thought that involve its development and self-knowledge. Such processes cannot but occur in this complexity because *thought is immanent in its own transformative unfolding even when it seeks to understand this transformation*. That is to say, there is a mutual immanence and simultaneity of performing the transformation and understanding it. In Nuzzo's words, «our thinking is immanent in the very transformation it aims at comprehending»⁷. This is, according to the author, Hegel's problem with the elaboration of the method, but it is also the problem of our dense, complex times: thinking and acting in the transformative processes in which we are immersed.

Let us return, then, to the questions raised above: why turn to the *Science of Logic*, and why do so through an oblique approach? On the one hand, as previously mentioned, the *Science of Logic* helps to understand the transformative processes of reality and thought, showing the «significance» and «the *real* import» of the logical forms «for human action»⁸. On the other hand, the oblique approach (according to aspects 1 and 2 set forth above) allows us «to offer [...] an analysis able to bring to light how concrete, [...] open to unimagined possibilities, the argument of the logic is»⁹.

Two points seem decisive to me: (a) The methodology of the oblique approach (especially with reference to the interweaving of diachronic and synchronic readings of the relations between logical determinations) *is conducive to the analysis of complex, non-linear (or not only linear) transformative processes*. (b) The oblique methodology (especially in its unconventional combination of concepts, authors, and texts) *is conducive to the opening of 'unimagined possibilities'*.

⁷ Ivi, p. XIII.

⁸ Ivi, p. XV.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

I view both of these points as having metaphilosophical implications in that they have to do with the why, how, and when of a certain philosophical operation. The (meta)philosophical implication of the first aspect regards the *potentialities* and *appropriateness* (which, of course, must be justified) of one method compared to others. The *choice* of a methodology is not indifferent to the problem being addressed or to the results produced through it. Adopting an oblique approach that weaves, stratifies, and relates synchronic processes seems to be a more suitable method than others for understanding complex transformative processes and understanding the immanence of thought in these same processes. Hegel's Logic, Nuzzo comments, «is a 'logic of transformative processes' – the aptest philosophical tool for the understanding of times of real historical changes and transitions»¹⁰. The second aspect raises another metaphilosophical question, which is more about the *broader goals* for which we choose a certain methodology: what do we want it to generate and why? In the specific case of Nuzzo's text, the obliquity of the approach helps to produce alternatives of thought and action, showing the potential of Hegel's Logic (also) for non-Hegelian contemporary contexts.

Overall, picking an oblique approach turns out to be one of the *generative* ways to understand the transformative complexity of the present, making use of the Hegelian text to get out of it and at the same time using other authors and concepts to (re)enter Hegel's text. Keeping these issues in the background, I would like to further problematize the topic of the oblique approach as a methodological (and metaphilosophical, having to do with how we decide to do philosophy and for what reasons) choice prompted by a practical-conceptual urgency.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 109.

2. *Is There a Method for Approaching Hegel?*

What does an oblique approach consist in? It is probably a term that does not correspond to a single definition and may include several modalities. However, some observations can be made in this regard. Obliquity eschews a ‘direct linearity’, an ‘orthodox’ path. The problem of *how* to read a ‘classical’ author or text is itself difficult to solve (and one that I will not dwell upon here). The choice of an oblique approach can intervene decisively in this complexity; indeed, such an approach can be used with a meta-critical intent. For example, it may aim to question a sort of foundational origin myth regarding works and authors¹¹ (a myth associated with the ‘virtue’ of the interpreter’s faithfulness to the text). That is, the oblique approach may serve to displace a reading that claims to faithfully adhere to the text (viewed as a ‘positive fact’) and to be the true and only admissible one.

¹¹ I am thinking, for example, of the elaboration of a specific *oblique reading* by Julieta Kirkwood, a political scientist, sociologist, and socialist militant who played an important role in feminist movements in Chile in the 1980s. Kirkwood claims an «inverse and oblique» reading for a «possible history of women’s politics from feminist knowledge [sabiduría feminista]» (A. Castillo, *De la revuelta feminista, la historia y Julieta Kirkwood*, «Verifich», L. (2), 2021, pp. 51-65, here p. 58; my translation). This oblique reading (and the history that it generates) has the present as its starting point. It excludes a narrative of return to the origin, «to the positive fact that is affirmed in every text (whether historical or theoretical)» (ivi, p. 60; my translation). It also identifies the languages of origin and identity as languages of domination and opposes «the metahistorical deployment of ideal meanings» (ivi, p. 61; my translation), proceeding instead via genealogical and historiographical paths. The latter are theoretical-political tools for creating alternative kinds of relationality between texts and authors to propose a feminist history that, in Alejandra Castillo’s words, makes use of transmission, organization, and invention (see ivi, p. 62). See also J. Kirkwood, *Feminarios*, Santiago de Chile, Documentas, 1987; J. Kirkwood, *Preguntas que hicieron movimiento: Escritos feministas, 1979-1985*, selection by P. Ferretti and L. Follegati, foreword by C. Rinsky, Santiago de Chile, Banda Propia Editoras, 2021; J. Kirkwood, *Ser política en Chile: Nudos de la sabiduría feminista*, Santiago de Chile, Cuarto Propio, 1990.

The same question can also be evaluated with reference to readings of Hegel and carries metaphilosophical implications. For instance, in her article ‘On the Use and Abuse of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel’, Rachel Falkenstern makes an interesting observation. In her view, both interpretations of Hegel emerged within the so-called Hegel Renaissance (which developed «following prevailing norms of Anglophone philosophy»¹²), and the interpretations that, defending a more philological approach, have challenged the excessive ‘freedom’ of these readings¹³, are based on a metaphilosophical assumption:

Regardless of which side one takes in this debate, reading Hegel as having one fixed meaning or arguing that there is one proper way of interpreting Hegel remains dominant in Anglophone Hegel scholarship¹⁴.

According to Falkenstern, the (more or less professed) assumption that there is only one correct way to interpret Hegel’s philosophy comes to determine the *norm* by which to approach his texts. In such an attitude persists a certain origin myth: the idea that there is *one* right version, *one* interpretive way that is more correct than others. An oblique approach can provide a critique of this model, breaking down this norm of relation to the text and exposing it as a metaphilosophical presupposition liable to discussion.

We can, however, raise the stakes. An oblique methodology presents additional challenges when its critical intent is accompanied by ambivalence or even contradiction. I am referring to cases in which, on the one hand, we would like to ‘discard’ a work (or an author) and, on the other hand, we somehow need that work or author. This is the problem, for instance, with studies or

¹² R. Falkenstern, *On the Use and Abuse of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel*, «Verifiche», L (2), 2021, pp. 111-132, here p. 123.

¹³ Falkenstern mentions, for example, F.C. Beiser.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 123.

philosophical positions that are conducted for anti-oppressive purposes¹⁵ yet resort to conceptual tools, theories, or parts of texts of authors in whose writings various discriminatory and oppressive forms can be identified: sexism, racism, ableism, classism, speciesism, etc. In these cases, the oblique approach may even be necessary; here, obliquity is incorporated into critique – that is, it becomes a critical tool itself to enable the use of this baggage of ideas and concepts by redefining them within theories and practices that have liberating and anti-oppressive purposes.

Hegel is one of the problematic cases¹⁶. The power of his conceptual apparatus and the spatio-temporal extension of his legacy multiply the complexity of how to approach Hegel and *which* parts or themes of his thought to engage with or discard, for what purposes, and with what methods.

Obliquity can serve as a methodology for dealing with contradiction, allowing readings that I would call ‘critical-generative’. The latter, in the case of Hegel, for example, can attempt an operation: to use and further develop Hegelian

¹⁵ Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins, we could define these studies as *resistant knowledge projects* that include, among others, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-colonial, decolonial, and anti-speciesist studies; P. Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 87-120.

¹⁶ For example, the question arises of how to use Hegel for feminist purposes or how to interpret and use Hegel’s thought in relation to issues of colonialism and racism. Rachel Falkenstern, for instance, reflects on «the complex and often contradictory nature of doing feminist-Hegelian philosophy», considering, among other critical aspects, the «negative descriptions of women in Hegel’s work» and «ideas in his philosophy that are problematic for feminist purposes, open to feminist criticisms, or even rejected completely by feminist philosophies» (Falkenstern, *On the Use and Abuse of Doing Feminist Philosophy with Hegel*, p. 113). For other emblematic articles, see A. Stone, *Feminist Criticism and Reinterpretations of Hegel*, «Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain», XXIII (1-2), 2002, pp. 93-109; S. Benhabib, *On Hegel, Women, and Irony*, in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. by P. J. Mills, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, pp. 25-43.

conceptual apparatuses that turn their own critical potential towards certain positionings of Hegelian thought itself. To put it in a slogan: Hegel against Hegel beyond Hegel.

This critical-generative obliquity can, in turn, come under criticism. To put it somewhat simplistically, how oblique can we be towards an author or text before we reach a point where we are no longer talking about that author or text? Under the pretext of obliquity, can we go so far as to say everything and the opposite of everything? These questions may actually be ill-posed from the start because they re-present an origin myth: the text and the author as positive facts. Moreover, they are 'quantitative/measurative' questions that may completely miss the mark. The problem is multifaceted, and there is not enough space to explore it in depth here. However, it seems to me that the point is not so much to open the way for any opinion but to clear the way from the claim that there is a single foundational reading that functions as a norm or criterion of value against which to judge other interpretations.

One might also ask how much these spatial metaphors (approaching, moving away, oblique, direct) help us clarify the problem. I think that these expressions are, more concretely, names indicating methodological tracks of the use we want to make of a text or author, the goal we want to achieve by reflecting on them, and the kind of comparison with other methodologies that we want to establish. These expressions cannot be defined on an absolute level but take on meaning and content once they are clarified in the context in which they are used. Nuzzo provides us with her coordinates, linking an 'unconventional' approach to the opening of possibilities and at the same time marking the perimeter within which her oblique operation makes sense and is worthwhile.

Against the backdrop of what I have proposed thus far, I would like to engage in a dialogue with the author on the points raised. Specifically, I would like to ask her how she understands the positioning of her oblique methodology in her work *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely* and what she considers to be its

metaphilosophical implications. I shall structure this request into more specific questions:

- 1) What does the author think is the more general meaning and purpose of an oblique approach in philosophy?
- 2) What does she think is the significance of the particular application of an oblique approach to Hegel?

With reference to this last point, I would also ask the following questions:

- 3) How does the author situate her oblique approach in the debate on how to read Hegel (today)? What position does she take in relation to readings that claim to be more philological? How is her oblique approach related to a possible 'origin myth' concerning Hegel's texts?