

Review of

Nancy, Jean-Luc; **The Speculative Remark (one of Hegel's bons mots)**, trans. Celine Surprenant, Stanford University Press 2001; ISBN 0-8047-371-2; 196pp.

First published in 1973 and carefully translated by Celine Surprenant as part of the series entitled *Cultural Memory in the present*, Nancy's work is part of that text orientated post-modernism that owes much to Derrida and which revels in the intricacies and undecidabilities of philosophical works. This current of philosophical thought often produces works that do not fit easily inside the standard secondary readings and Nancy is no exception. On the one hand Nancy's text is about Hegel's dialectic, in particular the concept of the *aufheben* (sublation) and yet on the other hand it appears to be utterly outside the secondary literature on Hegel, leaving us in the curious position of reading a book that appears to be a piece of secondary literature yet operates, like much deconstructive work, as though it were primary. Even as a primary, however, there are difficulties. For example, it is difficult to summarise the argument of Nancy's text. At best one might summarise its concern as follows: the Hegelian *aufheben* relies intimately upon the material nature of the language in which it is articulated and simultaneously must go beyond the nature of our language. While Hegel may be said to focus on this 'going beyond', Nancy wants to draw our attention back to the very text itself. It is for this reason that Nancy's work is worth study, since it is an intimate meditation on the undecidable nature of the language of the *aufheben*.

Nancy speaks of the *unruhe* (restlessness) (p.148) at the heart of the dialectic, located in the *aufheben*, the subject of his work (p.9) but also asks, beginning in chapter 1, about the reading of Hegel (p.10). The necessity, posed by Hegel himself, is to read 'otherwise', to engage in a *fassen* (grasping) that is 'otherwise' (p.12). This is necessitated because the *aufheben* is contained in the *darstellung* (presentation) that is 'at the level of' the text itself (*a meme le texte*) (p.14). There is not an, expression or manifestation or even epiphany since both the form and the content of the speculative proposition, if taken in the Hegelian way, involves the activity of *aufheben*. To engage in such an *aufheben* is, precisely, to grasp the text philosophically (p.16). This problematic is laid out in Nancy's Preamble, chapter 1 of the text, as a problematic of reading and of the hermeneutic circle (p.15 – fn.14, p161).

An example of Nancy's approach can be found in chapter 2 when he presents a brief reconstruction of the movement of Hegel's text (p.43-44). It is clear that he identifies four moves, which set up the problematic of the *aufheben*. He is addressing the text of The Science of Logic and the first focus is on the Remark to the first chapter of the first book of this Logic. The first move is to simply use the word within the first chapter, without comment. The second step is to note its use through the Remark. The third step is the initial content of the Remark, to convert the use of *aufheben* from a negative meaning of suppression to a doubled meaning that includes preservation or raising up. Finally, the fourth move and the one critical to Nancy, is the implication of the Remark: the already used word has to be re-read both in the preceding pages of the first chapter of the Logic and in the rest of Hegel's text. This is a form of posterior anteriority, prompting the reading otherwise that will be, for Hegel, a philosophical grasping.

In chapter 3, Nancy pushes this structure of doubled reading within Hegel and reveals what he sees as an intimate relation with language at the heart of the dialectic. The speculative word is, for Nancy, neither conventional nor natural and he argues that “with respect to the two poles of philosophical semiology, *aufheben* adopts, if you like, the tactic of ‘neither...nor’”(p.60). Chapter 4 pursues further this problematic of the word and language. Nancy claims, “the concept must let itself be conceived in (and perhaps *as*) a certain form of writing” (p.77). He then draws us towards the speculative proposition, famously outlined by Hegel in the Introduction to the Phenomenology of Spirit, where the speculative proposition, the mechanics within which the speculative word works, is compared to the tension in musical rhythm between metre and accent (p.100). The difficulty of the finding the voice of the Hegelian text thus arises because it appears that the *aufheben* relies upon a very delicate tone or accent. There is, through this, a thought of simultaneous excess and absence within the *aufheben* that is Nancy’s central positive ‘argument’ and which I associate with the image of the live performance and the aesthetic difficulties that would be presented in attempting to either record or remember this performance.

Chapters 5 and 6 continue to pursue this thought of the excessive/absent nature of the *aufheben*, in particular bringing in the role of the joke or pun, the *Witz* (p.128-129), another bon mot but this time one which destroys the higher aims of the *aufheben*. At this point, right towards the end of Nancy’s text, the danger inherent in exploring the ‘play’ of meanings is brought fully to the fore – the danger of frivolity (p.130). It is undoubtedly amusing to find, in a text that is so clearly embedded within the deconstructive discourse of playfulness, this awareness of the frivolous but it is also a little like a self-knowing irony, a sort of in-joke. In the end, the charge often levelled against deconstructive texts of ‘not being serious philosophy’ depends entirely on our understanding of ‘serious philosophy’. If it involves detailed and delicate reading of small sections of philosophical texts, then Nancy’s difficult work is a fine example of such a practice and one worth returning too whenever the Hegelian *aufheben* is the focus of study.

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