

Rebecca Comay, Frank Ruda, *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 178, € 24.95, ISBN 9780262535359

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Can one attempt a rigorously non-metaphysical rendering of Hegel's philosophy by affirming what is normally taken to be its most indigestible core? Can a potential for transformation be reconciled with some of the seemingly most narcissistic issues of the system, namely "absolute knowing" and "God's thoughts before the creation"? *The Dash – The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* by Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda risks a positive answer to this question.

The work is engaging and experimental as few books on Hegel's philosophy are. Combining the "paranoid microscopism of the detail with a preposterous macroscopism of the system" (p.7), the volume rests on an irrepressible duplicity. Two books stand at its centre: *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *the Science of Logic*. The two authors, Comay and Ruda, discuss some of the less palatable issues of Hegel's work, driven by a deceiving "stupid little observation" (p.6): Hegel punctuates strangely. Two marks of punctuation keep obsessing them – or rather one, a "dash", that repeats itself at the end of the *Phenomenology*, detaching Hegel's text from a (misquoted) epigram by Schiller, and at the beginning of the *Logic*: "Being, pure Being, –".

The text is unsettling, and it fails to meet the expectations of those in search of a definitive clue regarding the question of which of the two books should take precedence over the other. Its attempt consists rather of unhinging this interpretative framework and of discussing a constitutive (i.e. unresolved) oscillation between the two works, which allows a reading that views them as different acts of a single play meant to reframe subjectivity against its voluntarist background.

The volume is articulated in two main parts, divided into three chapters co-authored by Comay and Ruda, followed by two further chapters: the first written by Comay, the last by Ruda.

The first chapter, "Kant Brought to His Senses", aims at bringing to the fore Hegel's response to the impasse between "a deadly formalism that seems to ignore concrete life practices" and "an artificial liveliness that numbs itself in the repetitive rituals of

daily life” (p.12), in which philosophy seems to be hopelessly caught. How should such an antagonism be shaped in order to avoid being a paralysing symmetry? In order to elucidate the question of decision, the authors first take issue with what they call a deflationary pragmatist approach to Hegel (p.15). What is to be critically questioned is the idea of a space of reasons as a normatively structured framework, with which a community can engage as a collective of rational agents that are committed to negotiating their shared orientation. The question is whether this revisionary, potentially endless procedure points towards an increasing transparency, since it apparently replaces rationality with an a-historical condition of possibility, thereby reverting itself by introducing a new givenness: its language games function “as a new transcendental” (p.13). Against such a background, the Hegel of Comay and Ruda, on this point resembling Slavoj Žižek’s Hegel, excavates the “incompleteness and inconsistency of materiality itself” (p.18). By bringing the cracks inherent in every transcendental conception of language and thought to the fore, Hegel radicalizes the Kantian void, revealing the absence of any pre-existing orientation that can be thought of as self-sufficient for occupying a privileged position in the world.

Such a *detour* is meant to introduce what is at stake at the point where thinking seems to ground, to justify and to recover itself in an alleged act of returning-to-itself: the “absolute knowing” at the end of *Phenomenology*. Here a space of agency opens – a space, namely, where all previous coordinates waver and spirit becomes itself “in the form of free contingent happening” (p.24). The task of the *Logic* will be to formalize in the form of an abyssal resolve this radical externalization, where “the coordinates within which this act could even be considered a sacrifice” (p.24) are relinquished. This will in turn repeat the divestment of the subject, rather than transcendently securing it in a beyond of experience. The question of this odd repetition lies at the heart of the second chapter, “The Tale of the Two Books”. How to face the endless oscillation between the “first” first-part of the system and its other first-part, i.e. the *Logic*? The point of departure here is the interpretative struggle that concerns the relation between the only two books Hegel effectively wrote (p.29) – not taking in consideration his “textbooks”, that according to the authors are not able to perform the genesis of speculative thinking (pp.30-35). The logical square of oppositions effectively displays four

options in interpreting the continuity and discontinuity between the books, according to the preference that is given to either the first or the second (p.37). Unsurprisingly, the authors opt for a fifth option, which in a way unhinges the discussion: “there is an active (or absolute) non-relation between the two works” (p.43). The result is extremely thought-provoking, since a constitutive uncertainty is seen at work in passing from the one to the other book. Whether the *Phenomenology* leads us to doubt that there is a consistent subject, thereby pushing thought to the point of a particular erasure, forgetfulness and collapse, the *Logic* needs to begin anew: it must perform a second, more radical beginning, that deletes the deletion accomplished by absolute knowing. In order to have no presuppositions, the *Logic* must erase everything – thereby repeating an erasure it must forget and sliding back “into a domain it has already superseded” (p.50); on the other hand, by performing a task (the critique of subjectivity) that the *Logic* itself should achieve, *Phenomenology* has in turn thus “always already launched into the project it is supposed only to introduce” (p.50).

This manoeuvre is further explored in the third chapter, “The Dash, or How to Do Things with Signs”. The dash displays a puzzling temporally ambiguity, expressing a moment of hesitation in thinking, that could mean “a definitive breaking off, a temporal digression, or an emphatic clarification” (p.55). Furthermore, since the dash can come as pair or not, it points to two opposite directions, forcing us to stumble and go back to the beginning – i.e. to experience the “*Stoß*” we encounter in the most notable speculative words, which is accidental but nevertheless accessible only as “the result of speculative thinking” (p. 56).

This powerful reading of the materiality proper to the philosophical *Darstellung* introduces the last two chapters. In chapter four, “Hegel’s Last Words”, Comay provides an insightful consideration of the dash posited by Hegel at the end of the phenomenological section on “absolute knowing” while misquoting Schiller’s 1782 poem “Die Freundschaft”. First, attention is drawn to highlight Hegel’s way of remembering the epigram: “neither strict citation nor free paraphrase” (p.73). Furthermore, the persistence of the element of poetic *Vorstellung* at the core of philosophy allows Comay to give a far more general digression on the different possible acts of resistance against speculative ‘digestion’. As the “mortifying passage” through mechanical memory allows the meaningless signifiers to be

semantically reinvested as the medium of *Denken* (p.75), the story of the *Phenomenology* as a whole is said to perform the gradual divestment of every last shred of unelaborated positivity confronting, blocking and frustrating (but also seducing and narcotising) thought (p.83) – with a further twist, though: negation itself “must be purged of its own tendency towards self-reification” (p.84). The final dash is then to be taken as a “minus sign” that performs a procedure of sublation.

To efface even this trace is the task of the *Logic*, discussed in the fifth chapter, “Hegel’s First Words”. How should the beginning of a science be understood, which on the one hand is the result of the self-negating mediation of the *Phenomenology*, while at the same time should be seen “as something unanalysable” (p.90)? What does it really mean to decide, to resolve for this beginning, without presupposing anything, not even the liberation depicted at the end of *Phenomenology*? The necessity and impossibility of this beginning is elucidated with reference to the “first” “sentence” of the *Logic*, “Being Comma Being Comma Dash” (p.91). The anacoluthon (*Satzbruch*), the repetition of “Being” performed by a “comma”, which ends repeating itself, is excavated by Ruda in a spiral of growing suspense. The aim is to divest “Being” from the appearance of representing a preformed space where further differences would then take place in a process of “(auto)-differentiation” (p.98). While the comma repeats itself, thereby enabling a series of differences that precedes negation and determined identity, the dash bars thought from within, exposing it to a speculative counterturn. In that it forces thinking to come again to the beginning, in order to access its true meaning, the dash performs a “*Stoß*”. This makes the advent of the “temporality of retroactivity” (p.103), that in turn reveals to be itself a “retroactive phenomenon” (p.103).

In the “Epilogue” the possibility of a new beginning, i.e. of thinking beginning in a new way, is emphasised, thereby raising its political stakes by releasing the “*Entschluß* from the grip of any subjectivist interpretation” (p.108). What emerges is therefore a renunciation of agency, that lies at the heart of action and faces (the necessity of) its contingent happening.

Such an original proposal is developed by the volume as a whole in a fascinating way, to the point of exposing the reader to the same exercise of bewilderment staged by its object – and inevitably to its circular structure. The short-circuiting of Hegel’s most indigestible metaphysical baggage with Lacan’s not-all,

Freud's repetition or Gödel's theorems of incompleteness is therefore extremely effective – only for those, though, who have already digested these encounters, that are outlined in many cases very suggestively, though intentionally paratactical.

The fruitful strategy for exploring the *other side of absolute knowing*, without deflating its speculative core, is based on this decentring strategy. In order to exercise it, however, one cannot but perceive the re-emergence of a further 'other', which has always already been fatally missing in this discourse: Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* and the *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights* – not to mention his *Lectures*. Indeed, their exclusion is not a case of omission. As remarked above, these works are intentionally left out in chapter two, where they are said to display the "objectification of [the] truth in the form of knowledge" (p.32), mechanically organised along paragraphs, and to embody the "university discourse" (p.34) *in contrast to* Hegel's speculative works. How is this opposition that animates the narrative of the "two (speculative) books" to be read? Is it harmless? Or is it the effect of an optical illusion, as it were, which may be further questioned? In other words: why not face the discursivity of this "other" as the most radical and inalienable experience of material resistance that is immanent in speculative thought itself – as the authors of the volume have masterful shown?

To purge the "two" of its tendency towards fetishization by performing a literally reading of its foreclosed "other", seems to us one of the challenges posed by a brilliant work, which will certainly be an inescapable reference for all further investigations of the topic.

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