



# verifiche

«VERIFICHE» ISSN 0391-4186

- M. Giusti *Filosofia del diritto senza Scienza della logica? Un dibattito in corso sulla filosofia sociale di Hegel*
- A. Nuzzo *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy and the World at the End*
- M.A. Werle *Motivos da estética de Kant na estética de Hegel*
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VERIFICHE 2022

1-2

2022

ANNO LI N. 1-2

verifiche  
rivista semestrale  
di scienze umane

Verifiche. Associazione di Studi filosofici  
Sede: via Francesco Algarotti 13/a – 35125 Padova  
Direttore responsabile: Antonella Benanzato  
Amministrazione: info@verificheonline.net  
Autorizzazione Tribunale di Padova n. 2445 del 17/09/2017  
Poste Italiane s.p.a. - Spedizione in Abb. Postale 70% - NE/PD  
Digitalandcopy sas - Vignate (MI), Via Roma 25  
Anno LI - N. 1-2 Gennaio-Dicembre 2022  
www.verificheonline.net

PREZZO € 55,00

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Rivista fondata da Franco Chiereghin e Giuliano Rigoni

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«Verifiche» is an international biannual, peer-reviewed Journal (ISSN: 0391-4186)

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## Verifiche

International biannual, peer-reviewed Journal (ISSN: 0391-4186)

### ABBONAMENTO/SUBSCRIPTION PRICE

Italia: privati € 55,00 (sostenitori € 65,00; studenti € 35,00); enti: € 80,00.

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Italia: € 40,00; Europe and Mediterranean Countries: € 40,00 (plus € 11 shipping charges).

Other Countries € 40,00 (plus € 16 shipping charges).

### MODALITÀ DI PAGAMENTO/METHOD OF PAYMENT

Con bonifico bancario intestato a/By bank transfer to:

«Verifiche. Associazione di studi filosofici»

Intesa Sanpaolo Spa - Filiale terzo settore Veneto centro, via Jappelli 13 - Padova

IBAN: IT54X0306909606100000142839

Nella causale specificare il numero o l'annata (per ordini) oppure solo l'abbonamento (in caso di abbonamento annuale). Please indicate *issue number* and *year* (for single issue) or *year* only (for yearly subscription).

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Cover Design by Giulia Battocchia

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Anno LI, N. 1-2, 2022

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Dir. resp. Antonella Benanzato • Amministrazione: Via F. Algarotti 13/a - 35125 Padova  
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Padova n. 2445 del 17.09.2017  
Digital And Copy S.a.s. - Vignate (MI) - Via Monzese 40 - A. LI (1-2), 2022

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v *Editoriale / Editorial*

## ***Padova Hegel Lectures***

1 *Filosofia del diritto senza Scienza della logica? Un dibattito in corso sulla filosofia sociale di Hegel*

Miguel Giusti

19 *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy and the World at the End*

Angelica Nuzzo

37 *Motivos da estética de Kant na estética de Hegel*

Marco Aurélio Werle

## ***Essays***

61 *Dietro le quinte dell'eticità: normatività e disposizione soggettiva nella Fenomenologia dello spirito*

Sabina Tortorella

87 *Bringing Back the Picture: A Revision of the Pictorial Understanding of Language in Light of Wittgenstein*

Ahmet Süner

109 *Everything is Its Opposite: Bennett's Stalemates, Willard's Draws, Kant's Antinomies, and Hegel's Sublation*

J.M. Fritzman, Miguel D. Guerrero, and Emma S. Moorhead

133 *I correlati neurali dell'intersoggettività. Nota su alcune scelte lessicali a proposito dei neuroni specchio*

Franco Chiereghin

### ***Discussions***

163 *The Practical Beyond Ethics. Notes on George di Giovanni's Interpretation of Classical German Philosophy*

Paolo Livieri

179 *Evaluations are No Propositions: A Reply to Kantian Nonconceptualists Concerning the Critical Theory of Taste*

Mahyar Moradi

203 *Kant über das Erhabene und die Freiheit. Zum Gefühl der übersinnlichen Bestimmung des Gemüts*

Barbara Santini

229 *Der sich begreifende Begriff. Nota sui significati di concetto nella Scienza della logica di Hegel e la sua genesi*

Paolo Giuspoli

255 *Socialisation and Personification as Forms of Domination in Marx*

Pablo Pulgar Moya

- 277 *Un argomento fenomenologico contro l'esistenza del libero arbitrio*  
Luca Zanetti
- 303 *Il dibattito sul realismo e le sue dicotomie: immagine manifesta vs immagine scientifica del mondo e ontologia vs epistemologia*  
Andrea Velardi
- 323 *L'amore e oltre. Note a Il dio dalle frecce fiorite. Miti e leggende dell'amore in India, di Giuliano Boccali*  
Franco Chiereghin

### ***Book Symposium***

On Angelica Nuzzo's *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*

Edited by Giovanna Luciano

- 337 *Introduction*  
Luca Illetterati
- 343 *A Philosophy of Crisis: Immanence and Normativity in Hegel's Logic*  
Giovanna Luciano
- 349 *Obliquity in Question: Method, Transformation, and Metaphilosophical Implications*  
Giovanna Miolli
- 359 *Hegel's Discursive Logic: The Re-Enactment of Method*  
Giulia Bernard

- 367 *Advancement, Stasis, Revolution: On Angelica Nuzzo's Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely*  
Giulia La Rocca
- 373 *On the Use of Literature in Philosophy. Considerations on Angelica Nuzzo's Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett*  
Francesco Campana
- 379 *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely – Once Again*  
Angelica Nuzzo

### **Book Reviews**

- 387 I. Chiaravalli, *L'oggetto puro. Matematica e scienza in Descartes*  
(Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero)
- 393 L.L. Pizzichemi, *L'uso di sé. Il concetto di 'uso' in Kant e la questione del fondamento della filosofia trascendentale*  
(Mateja Lara Schmidt)
- 398 S. Møller, *Kant's Tribunal of Reason: Legal Metaphor and Normativity in the Critique of Pure Reason*  
(Lara Scaglia)
- 403 Marina F. Bykova (a cura di), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Fichte*  
(Francesco Azzarone)
- 409 Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic*  
(Silvia Locatelli)
- 413 Andrea Staiti, *Etica naturalistica e fenomenologia*  
(Rosario Croce)



# ON THE USE OF LITERATURE IN PHILOSOPHY. CONSIDERATIONS ON ANGELICA NUZZO'S *APPROACHING HEGEL'S LOGIC, OBLIQUELY: MELVILLE, MOLIÈRE, BECKETT*

by Francesco Campana\*

One of the most original and exciting aspects of Angelica Nuzzo's *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett* is the author's confrontation with literature, that is, the fact that the proposed interpretation requires both «a philosophical and a poetical endeavor»<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the volume is full of quotations from literary artworks, discussions of literary passages, references to authors, works and approaches that belong primarily to the literary sphere. This sphere is fruitfully made to interact with the philosophical and Hegelian one, producing very interesting results. What I would like to ask Professor Nuzzo for is a further examination of this pivotal aspect of the volume and a reflection with respect to the value and use of literature, starting with the way literature is treated in the book. In general, it seems to me that we can roughly identify three levels in which literature is presented here:

1 – The first level is the structural, which concerns the synchronic or synoptic reading advanced in the book, that is, the new organization and arrangement of the contents of Hegel's Logic. This reenactment articulates the method as a plot, a  $\mu\tilde{\nu}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ , in which the logical process unfolds through a discursive movement, a kind of narrative structure organized in the three phases that make up the *Part II* of the volume (*Structure of Action. Logic and Literature*): the beginning, the advance, and the end (the beginnings, the advances, and the ends). In this discourse, «the

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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. 4.



development of the logic stages a movement in which the action, not the agent, is the protagonist and in which the action is directly performed and not merely described»<sup>2</sup>. There, the absolute method follows and becomes this literary pattern and is truly such at the moment it succeeds in recapitulating the plot unfolded by the logical path into a coherent and unified story<sup>3</sup>. This is a configuration that Nuzzo clarifies in Chapter 2 through passages from Aristotle's *Poetics*, in some ways explicitly confirming once again the literary root of this first level.

2 – The second level constitutes one of the main focuses of the book, namely, the use of literature as a figure that exemplifies and realizes the logical articulations of the method. At this level, literature illustrates in the form of concrete actions what thought has expressed and performed in its pure element. On this basis, with regard to beginnings, there is an analysis of Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* in Chapter 4, where the literary characters of Billy Budd, Claggart, and Captain Vere realize the logical figures of initial action, specifically as an act of violence, in the spheres of Being, Essence, and the Concept, respectively.

In Chapter 5, on advancements, the reference is to Molière's *Le Tartuffe, ou l'imposteur*. Here the reading – «indirectly or in a negative way»<sup>4</sup>, the author says – is about, on the one hand, the fanatic-absolutist Orgon as the stubborn embodiment of advancement and, on the other hand, the double hypocrisy of the impostor Tartuffe, in his own way fanatical but in a complementary way to the former, as a paradigm of blocked, stalled advancement.

Finally, in Chapter 6, the modes of ending are discussed. This is first done through Beckett and, among other texts, especially through his *Endgame* as an illustration and instantiation of the indifference and impossibility of ending. Then, the modes are addressed through the discussion of Leopardi's *Dialogo della Natura e di un islandese* from the *Operette Morali* and through several of his and Elizabeth Bishop's poems, articulating the comparison

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 212.

between the Essence that desires, claiming the end, and the Concept as the place where this end is finally realized. Here literature has an exemplary and illustrative function, which, however, goes beyond a simple application or exposition aimed at clarification of a theory to specific cases. In this circumstance, it constitutes a kind of possible completion, a new and necessary (and necessarily open-ended) reactivation of the method, ultimately posing itself as an integral part of philosophical reasoning.

3 – The third and last level is more contingent in its general significance but nonetheless fundamental to some passages of the book. Here, the author uses literature to move through some particularly significant folds in her reasoning. One example is the use of Goethe's *Faust II* (along with his philosophy of nature), where Nuzzo develops her reasoning on the term, function, and reality of the figure, or *Gestalt*, and Hegel's dialectic-speculative logic as a process of *Gestaltung* and *Umgestaltung* of logical form. Another example is the discussion of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, when she introduces the modes of advancement as being «'in transformation' or 'in translation'» and also «right in the middle of the process and of the story»<sup>5</sup>. Another again is the reflections on Nadine Gordimer's novel *July's People* (along with her non-fiction production) in the appendix on the Interregnum and then later in the articulation of the connection between the understanding of the present time as a time of crisis, on one side, and the revolution, on the other.

This is a more lateral level, and perhaps the author could have not drawn on literary works to make these arguments (in fact, in other, similar passages, we find references to authors outside the literary sphere, or at least not as directly literary, such as Plutarch, Gramsci, Bauman, and Thucydides). However, even at this level, the presence of literature is significant. It is, therefore, pertinent to note that in some particularly relevant passages of the argumentation also, literary reference appears consistently and persistently, and this does not seem at all coincidental.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 171.

Within this framework, my questions all revolve around the more general issue of the cognitive value of literature. In other words, I am interested in asking the author for insights into the relationship between literature and philosophy and, starting from the volume under discussion, into the use of literature in philosophical practice. There is no shortage of comments on this in the volume, and I would like the author to return to it and develop her thoughts further. For instance, she explicitly comes back to the interpretation of what I have just above identified as the second level of the use of literature, namely, figural exemplification through literary works. In the Introduction, she states the following:

Importantly, I do *not* offer an alleged ‘Hegelian’ reading of these texts; rather, I use other voices and other narrative forms in order to offer a fresh and utterly unprecedented analysis of Hegel’s texts, an analysis able to bring to light how concrete, versatile, open to unimagined possibilities the argument of the logic is<sup>6</sup>.

Later in the book, moreover, in reference to Beckett’s specific case, the author informs us that

at stake was not a ‘Hegelian’ interpretation of Beckett’s *Endgame* but rather the reverse, namely, the use of Beckett’s text to show the far-reaching and concrete validity of the structures of the logic beyond the logic itself<sup>7</sup>.

The author thus emphasizes the fact that the use of literature is not aimed at an interpretation of literature that can be considered ‘Hegelian’. Rather, she uses literature to express, clarify, and illustrate the concepts of Hegelian philosophy. Therefore, the preponderant perspective, the starting and ending point, seems in this context to be the philosophical one. The author’s informing us that a ‘Hegelian’ interpretation of the examined literary artworks is

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 337.

not where we should look for the focus of her analysis makes sense with respect to the general discourse that is proposed. However, the practice that is put in place may perhaps offer theoretical insights that go beyond the main goals of the volume (and even be consistent with them).

Indeed, there is no denying the fact that it is precisely by virtue of the confrontation with Hegel and thus a ‘Hegelian’ interpretation in the broadest sense that original and, in many ways, innovative, readings emerge or depart from the canonical interpretations of the literary artworks under consideration. A particularly good example of this might be the dialectical and not at all Manichean reading of the relationship between Billy Budd and Claggart. If the specific interpretations are not Hegelian in the strict and technical sense, that is, with respect to the specific principles of Hegelian aesthetics, what I wonder is whether this general use of literature as proposed by Nuzzo – so not only the figural use but also the structural and the lateral ones (i.e., all three levels mentioned above) – is not, in a broader sense, ‘Hegelian’.

Clearly, the volume’s ‘oblique’ approach tells us that Nuzzo’s use of literature is unexpected, original, and, in terms of her choice of topics and works, also somewhat personal. Beyond that, though, can art express or contribute to achieving in a ‘Hegelian’ way the kind of knowledge exhibited in the volume? After all – as the author herself reminds us at the beginning of this book and had already delved into in some other previous texts – it is Hegel himself who posits art, after and in light of the objective spirit, as one of the three forms of the absolute spirit (along with religion and philosophy), and this perhaps can help us in conceiving the Hegelian role of art in understanding the world and the logic of transformative processes or crises in the world.

In this broader sense, is there anything Hegelian about the use of an artwork in a cognitive endeavor? If so, what kind of cognition is expressed, in a Hegelian sense, by art and, more specifically, by literature? In particular, what peculiar contribution can be made by the use of literary artwork, by a work that belongs to the domain of art but is at the same time no longer expressed through the immediacy of intuition (*Anschauung*) and instead through what may be

considered a further degree of mediation, namely, by the words and the poetic or imaginative representation (*bildliche Vorstellung*), which already refer to the next forms of the absolute spirit, that is, religion and philosophy?

Ultimately, if art and literary artworks express a kind of knowledge, what relationship is there between art and literature, on the one hand, and world and reality, on the other, from a cognitive and, perhaps, even transformative practical-political point of view? What role do art – and literature – play in understanding our present and its transformations and crises?