

## WHO'S AFRAID OF DIALECTICAL TRANSITION? COMMENTS ON KATRIN PAHL, *TROPES OF TRANSPORT*

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*Tropes of Transport* examines the emotional undercurrents in the dynamical notion of truth that Hegel introduces in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is clearly a major work and I suspect it will become a milestone.<sup>1</sup>

I could spend the entire time simply listing the many places in which I found Pahl's readings of Hegel to be illuminating and convincing (two virtues which do not always go together!). That would not be helpful, so let me say in general that her expositions of this most obscure of philosophers are remarkably clear and that her knowledge and application of the enormous secondary literature is comprehensive and judicious. Particularly impressive—indeed, unexcelled to my knowledge—is her adduction of poetry in the service of explaining Hegel (see the accounts of Goethe at TT 122-128 and of Hölderlin at 136-149). Her later discussions of Hélène Cixous and Clarice Lispector, while a farther reach both culturally and temporally, serve to underline Hegel's contemporary relevance. Among other discussions I found particularly valuable, to list them shortly, were the brief accounts of Socrates as a foil to Aristotle (TT 53-57), of Kant and the Beautiful Soul (TT 47-39), her proposal of “acknowledging” as a translation of the Hegelian *Anerkennung* replacing the problematic “recognition” (TT 120-121), and the account of animal despair (TT 1287-191; this account is especially important because Hegel's passage on animal despair is, as I have argued elsewhere crucial to understanding the nature of his “idealism” itself).<sup>2</sup>

A full discussion of all this would be longer than *Tropes of Transport* itself, and perhaps than the *Phenomenology* itself; I will focus on just a few points here.

One important thing to understand about *Tropes of Transport* is the success Pahl has in opposing traditional readings of the *Phenomenology*. These are many and varied, to be sure, but many of them fall into three families. First, writers as far back as Schelling and Kierkegaard have avoided discussing affect in Hegel altogether, seeing Hegel's philosophy as entirely dispassionate. Hegel thus gets integrated into the history of philosophy as a bloodless metaphysician who substitutes an abstract, indeed a desiccated, “consciousness” for human reality.

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Other approaches are less concerned with seeing Hegel as merely one more figure in the history of philosophy than with the arguments and dialectical transitions which the book actually presents. They attend to each of the books' phases separately from the others, thus postponing worries about the overall pathway in which each stage of consciousness together with the arguments and transitions supposedly stands.

Finally, when the *Phenomenology* is neither dissolved into the larger history of philosophy nor split up into its component sections, the nature of its overall pathway becomes an issue. This pathway, however, is usually considered to be built according to the template given in the book's Introduction: consciousness adopts a defining "certainty," a way of proceeding; this is then subjected to experience and found wanting; and a new certainty is adopted. Since the new certainty is better than what it replaces the overall process is triumphal, and triumphalism is the keynote of most readings of the *Phenomenology*. Triumphalist readings do accord some emotional valence to the book, but it is one of confidence as Spirit progresses in the style of a *Bildungsroman* to the heights of "absolute knowing." To be sure, the road taken by consciousness is unsparingly arduous and often painful, but these are merely gloomy intrusions into the overall "royal road to science" (§ 70).

But there are discordant notes in all this. The "royal road" to which Hegel alludes, for example, is something from which he also distances himself: spirit finds its truth "in utter dismemberment" (§ 32). That affect is, somehow, important to Hegel is suggested by the fact that his many criticisms of Romanticism, for example, are directed not against emotion itself, but against Romantic views of it as (a) irrational and (b) relegated to subjective interiority (§ 12-13). And that gloomier emotions may not be merely episodes in a generally happy ascent is underscored when Hegel describes the march of consciousness that is the *Phenomenology* itself, not merely one stage or even one section of it, as a "pathway of despair" (§ 78). What can this mean? Are we to take it at all seriously? Are we to suspect that emotions not only play an ongoing role in the *Phenomenology*, but that those which do are unpleasant ones?

The traditional answer is: Of course not! As Pahl puts it, "The *Phenomenology* has never been read as what it claims to be: a pathway of despair" (TT 208). In presenting just such a reading, Pahl argues that such darker affects as fear and despair are not merely introduced into the *Phenomenology*'s progress from time to time, but are integral to its entire course. Indeed, for Pahl it is precisely via such emotions that consciousness is "transported" from one configuration to another. She demonstrates over and over again that the emotional dimension of the *Phenomenology* is not only central to the work as a whole, but actually shows us what kind of "whole" it is.

Consider, then, despair (*Verzweiflung*). In Hegel's usage, the term is understood, as so many are, etymologically, and this means as an intensification of doubt (*Zweifel*). So understood, despair is assimilated to the "self-consummating skepticism" (*sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*) which Hegel advocates (TT 183-184). Central to this, in turn, is the "strangely impalpable" nature of despair in the *Phenomenology* (TT 182). Though its origins in skepticism mean that it brings about the abandonment of consciousness' certainties,

Yet despair ruins the self without ever completely annihilating it. The self in despair still always contradicts even its own negation; it will multiply, fly ahead of itself, and spoil the peace of its own death (TT 185).

Despair, like skeptical doubt for Hegel, is essentially incomplete—(and so, as we will see again, is consciousness itself: "The subject of the *Phenomenology* is a subject in despair that keeps changing its form and does so to no end (no purpose no limit)" (TT 186).

Negating its own negation, despair becomes impalpable and, indeed, "light hearted" (187). It is this affirmative despair that Hegel attributes to animals in the famous passage from the *Phenomenology* on "animal idealism," which consists in the fact that animals fall victim to despair over sensory beings, then fall to them and consume them (TT 187-190) This consumption of life by life is for Hegel, Pahl argues, the definition of life itself, which

then becomes “a way of thinking.” As living, thought is exposed, over and over again, to time and destruction: a “desperate” enterprise indeed, long before it arrives at its conclusion in *der absoluten Zerissenheit*.

It is also full of fear. “Transitions are moments of absolute fear. They are moments of death and birth. They are frightful because there is no rule to go by” (TT 169). As each stage of the books ends, we have a moment of painful terror in which the future (of the book, and so of consciousness itself) is radically—fearfully—open.

“The moments of impossible fear function as a turning point around which the movement of the *Phenomenology* pivots” (TT 177). It is for example in the trembling of the “absolute fear” felt by the bondsman, in whom *alles Fixe hat gebebt*, that self-consciousness finds its body (TT 162). Finding its trembling body, however, means losing its status as consciousness: “Because consciousness is an abstraction absolute fear simply destroys it” (TT 165-166). Pahl therefore argues that absolute fear exceeds the grasp of the phenomenologist, and it is in fact the *fear* of absolute fear that actually drives the transitions in the *Phenomenology*. For absolute fear, the fear of losing everything that consciousness *is*, is the fear of transition itself. With this we see how central it is to consciousness that it must resist the onward movement of the *Phenomenology*: consciousness, in short, “is afraid to discover new truths” (TT 157). The fear of absolute fear which drives the *Phenomenology* is what keeps negation determinate, we may say: if consciousness were willing to lose everything at once, it could cut to the end.

Thus, while it is never directly experienced within the *Phenomenology*, absolute fear is presented: in the interstices, the transitional points where the rules of a previous shape of consciousness are no longer in play but the new ones have not been clarified (TT 166, 169). This culminates in the meta-Schillerian final words of the *Phenomenology*, which excise Schiller’s own references, in his poem “Die Freundschaft,” to anything transcendent—to divinity, to things as being “shadows” of something more real, to the “entirety” of such things, and so forth (96-99). Far from ending with a triumphant escape from history, the *Phenomenology*, at its end, “surrenders to the uncontrollable effects of place and time” and abandons its meaning to its readers (TT 99). The *Phenomenology* ends, as Hegel promised, in *absolute Zerissenheit*, dismembered ruin.

This poses more general questions—first of all those of what sort of thing an Hegelian transition can be. The fundamental transitions of the *Phenomenology* are for Pahl neither what Hegel claims they are—clear and necessary steps forward—nor what so many take them to be: sophisticated “waves of the dialectical wand” (as J. N. Findlay somewhere calls them). Rather they are “the *Phenomenology*’s strong points because they are where the Concept shows its weakness:” where it succumbs to despair and fear. Both arise because, as we have seen, consciousness does not know, when one standpoint crumbles beneath it, what the next will be. Thus, because of its affects of pain, fear, and despair, the book cannot, Pahl argues (at TT 167-180), be grasped as a single narrative in which each stage moves forward from the previous one in a transparent way:

The fact that Hegel’s text does not satisfy the reader’s desire for logical and narrative continuity is precisely its strength. Despite expectations to the contrary the *Phenomenology* does not offer a continuous exposition and does not provide a coherent logical derivation of each shape of consciousness out of the preceding one (TT 167).

This has implications, as I noted above, for the nature of consciousness itself, for the unity of consciousness requires the unity of its story. No being which is fractured by the kind of loss that absolute fear threatens can be integrated with itself: “Only tremulous subjects, moving from one figure of themselves to another, riddled with intervals that intertwine exteriority and interiority, are transported with fear” (TT 15). Thus,

As a result of these gaps or leaps in progression, it appears that the *Phenomenology* does not have one protagonist who develops to ever greater self-awareness, but many protagonists. This does not mean that the many figures of consciousness and spirit are unrelated, but (a) that their sequential relation is tenuous, and (b) that they form connections other than linear (TT 167).

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Pahl applies this to Hegel's account of one of the most important transitions he discusses anywhere, the "time of transition" in which the *Phenomenology* itself is written: the transition from historical time to the "non-linear time of speculative science" which, Hegel hopes, the book ushers in (TT 172-173). Coming about through a transition—indeed, most crucially through the book's final transition into *die absolute Zerissenheit*—this transition is also not to be understood in advance: the new world which is being born as Hegel writes (and, in his view, from his writings) is as little to be understood as the future adult is from the newborn as which it begins

But here is where Hegel gets in his own way. The moments where consciousness opens itself out to absolute fear turn out to be moments of parabasis where the figure of the "phenomenologist—" the famous *wir*—steps in to hold things together until the new rules are articulated and the next phase can begin (TT 170f). Hegel in fact fights against his own insights throughout the entire book—and thinks he wins:

By insisting in the preface on his authority and superior knowledge, Hegel lends weight to a linear reading of the text. By describing the movement as a progression, he favors the next "higher" form of consciousness over the present one. And by stressing that spirit's movement is continuous, he encourages the sense that the *Phenomenology* has only one protagonist and that the differences between the *Gestalten* indicate a development or growth of consciousness rather than an interaction between different consciousnesses (TT 174).

I do not see the "phenomenologist" as quite so sinister. The issue (simplified a bit) is that the phenomenologist (*wir*) is the figure who at the end of the book is revealed as the one who has been producing the connections among its parts, and it is this action of the phenomenologist which provides the transition to Hegel's later, systematic works. In order to do this, the phenomenologist must indeed have some unity of [his/Hegel's?] own; and it is from this unified perspective that the phenomenologist undertakes the sovereign development of thought, not as consciousness, but in the "element of thought" which constitutes the system.

The question of the viability of Hegel's later system thus hinges on the question: Is there some kind of unity that can be *legitimately* accorded to the phenomenologist? Is the phenomenologist something more than Hegel's own effort to keep the book's own deeper insights at bay? Hegel's final dialogue with Schiller, I suggest, provides a clue; for the many changes he makes in Schiller's poem, which include the elimination of references to the divine "Master of Worlds" and, indeed, to any kind of "true" reality, amount when taken together to a spectacular collapse into self-reference (even Schiller is gone, distorted beyond recognition). At the end, then, all we have is the "foam" of words that is the *Phenomenology* itself, and the phenomenologist who has written it. Hegel himself is gone, for as the *Phenomenology*'s earlier discussions of language teach repeatedly, I am my words, and nothing more. Like Schiller, he disappears at the end, along with everything else, leaving only the phenomenologist—who is thus unified, not from within by a sovereign center, but by nothing more than the sudden disappearance of everything—a disappearance which takes only three letters to write: "n," "u," and "r." It is this loss of reality which enables what is left—words—to connect themselves freely with each other, thus giving rise to the system.

And so my question to Pahl: Will she, like so many writers on Hegel from Marx on, dismiss his later writings as a recoil from the fearsome and desperate truths uncovered in the *Phenomenology*? Or will she take her approach into those writings, which would transform our understanding of them as well?

That would require, among other things, understanding the kind of admittedly muted emotion involved in the many transitions-by-death in the system: the death of nature, i.e. "of the [natural] individual out of itself," which gives rise to spirit; the anthropological culmination of the soul in dead habit (*die Ge-wohnheit*); the death of meaning in mechanical memory (*das Ge-dächtnis*); the death of abstract right in crime; the death of "Kantian" morality in absolute vanity (*die absolute Eitelkeit*) and wickedness (*das Böse*); the death of the family in the passing of the parents; the death of civil society in class conflict; the death of the state at the hands of history; the death of art at the hands of reflection; the death of God; and so on. Are these without emotional transport?

Or is there some sort of muted-but-hysterical fear in them?

I hope Pahl will answer some of these questions—eventually. For today, none of this affects Pahl’s account of the *Phenomenology* itself, which as she says is basically written from the standpoint of consciousness rather than that of the phenomenologist. Her account of the *Phenomenology* alerts us not only to its emotional dimension but also to the ways in which standard readings tend not to see the direct relations that operate between later sections and earlier ones that precede them by many pages. Pahl clearly exposes the problems in explaining each chapter of the *Phenomenology* only, or even predominantly, out of adjacent sections. The book’s unity is woven with far greater complexity than that of a standard narrative.

In short, *Tropes of Transport* is a major work. It carries forward the temporalized and contextualized views of Hegel now being developed by scholars as diverse as William Bristow, Catherine Malabou, Terry Pinkard, and Slavoj Žižek, and does so without reducing him to his historical context. Thus, it relates Hegel to some of the poetry of his time without actually making a poet of him (though Pahl’s observations on the poetic dimension of Hegel’s thought are extremely instructive). Her organization of the book by thematic gesture (“Juggle,” “Tremble,” “Acknowledging,” etc.) is well taken—given her approach and its success, a linear treatment of the text would hardly be in order. I would therefore have found an index of passages useful, and I have no fear that some industrious graduate students will not produce one in a couple of years.

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NOTES

1. "TT" abbreviates Katrin Pahl, *Tropes of Transport*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. Paragraph numbers below refer to Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (A. V. Miller, trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979

2. See my *Understanding Hegel's Mature Critique of Kant* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, 81-84.