

BOOK REVIEW

A PREFACE TO A NEW ERA

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G. W. F. Hegel and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. with running commentary Yirmiyahu Yovel, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2005, ISBN: 0691120529 (available through Footprint Books in Australia).

Yirmiyahu Yovel's book proposes an extensively annotated translation of the Preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, with at least half of most pages occupied by notes and comments, sometimes explaining brief allusions or points of translation, but as often entering into extended discussions, sketching out the implications of particular passages in relation to Hegel's thought in general. The translation has deliberately been made with clarity of meaning as the primary aim, and it constantly breaks up and reconstructs sentences, sacrificing some of the stylistic qualities of the original that other versions retain, but producing a text that is considerably easier to follow. The work also contains a substantial introduction, a brief history of the reception of Hegel in Europe and a selective annotated bibliography (mainly of works in English).

The work is of great value to the understanding of Hegel's very difficult work, thanks to Yovel's deep knowledge of the subject—many of the notes contain far-reaching discussions of the meaning of particular terms and concepts in Hegel, and few would read it without learning much about the subject. It is a peculiar stylistic habit of Hegel, especially in the *Phenomenology*, to refer to sources and critical adversaries without specifically naming them, and to incorporate allusions with only minimal signals to the reader. These are by no means merely incidental details, since much of the work's narrative energy comes from its movement between one polemical opponent and another and from its critical appropriation of ideas and metaphors taken from the tradition. Just to have these allusions reliably provided on a line by line basis is already an invaluable aid to studying the work; but Yovel's commentary goes much further, accompanying the text with a constant work of exegesis and elucidation. For the reader, the result is a quite

different experience of Hegel's text. One can give oneself over to the almost novelistic style of Hegel's exposition, without the peculiar anxiety that comes from the struggle to understand, and begin to appreciate what is, in some ways, a more accessible and more 'readable' style than that of many philosophical works. One could certainly imagine an even more detailed annotation, something close to the various scholarly Shakespeare editions, for example, with their extensive scholarly apparatus—Yovel will often refer to concepts that are to be found 'in Kant' or 'in Spinoza' without being more specific. But it may well be that this readability, which is one of the text's greatest accomplishments would be thereby diminished. Although it takes some getting used to, one can read the text and the commentary simultaneously without too greatly losing the flow of the demonstration, something for which scholarly editions are not usually designed.

Notwithstanding an overall stance of pedagogical neutrality, the introduction gives a general sense of the critical orientation from which the study proceeds, in relation to Hegel scholarship. Yovel separates his approach from those scholars, such as the proponents of the 'social Hegel', who concentrate their attention on particular analyses to be found in Hegel's work that speak most directly to contemporary concerns. Instead he seeks to maintain a closer proximity to Hegel's own meaning, such as this can be reconstructed from a sense of the whole of his work and of its historical situation. Hegel's apparently hyperbolic speculative tendencies are seen as having their roots in a coherent intellectual project, seeking to find a philosophical response to the general sense of dissatisfaction with the consequences of Enlightenment, a dissatisfaction expressed in Hegel's time, of course, by the various Romantic tendencies. A similar approach has recently been argued in greater detail by Michael Forster in the early chapters of his book, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of a spirit* (University of Chicago, 1998), and Yovel's position, in this respect at least, seems quite close to this work.

Seeing that the dissatisfaction with Enlightenment is ultimately a dissatisfaction with thought itself, or at least with what Hegel calls, in accordance with the Romantic critique, 'the abstract intellect', Hegel proposes that thought must transform itself. From being an alienating power, separating the human from his own life, the work of thought has to become a constructive and integrating force. The dialectical reason introduced by the *Phenomenology* is intended to accomplish such a transformation. One of most visible consequences of this project in Hegel's philosophy, as Yovel observes, is the integration of philosophical rationality with the phenomena of life and society, with history, art and politics. Hegel's thought grounds itself in the experience of life in its material and social dimensions, and this is reflected in the unprecedented wealth of historical content that enters into his philosophy. Philosophical reason is no longer something outside the world of experience, knowing it and evaluating it, but something that develops in and through it. As Yovel writes: 'The conceptual essence of philosophy, and of absolute Knowing, is distilled through practical forms of experiencing oneself, others and the world' (7). In a sense this sounds almost like a realist argument, a reminder that philosophy after all lives in a specific world, that it has its historical conditions, something not too far from the anti-theoretical platitudes that are incessantly repeated in so much theory and criti-

cism. Worked out in all its consequences, however, this 'realism' turns out to be rather remote from what is ordinarily understood to follow from an acknowledgement of the material and social embeddedness of knowledge and reflection. For Hegel, the actuality of thought signifies (to use Yovel's terms) that 'Philosophical contemplation is not only knowledge about reality, it is, so to speak, reality's contemplation of itself' (27).

One can see the 'Preface' as the key elucidation of the implications of such an insight for the *method* of thought. In his introduction, Yovel proposes to grasp the essential elements of Hegel's argument by examining the well-known statement from the Preface, according to which the absolute is to be viewed as subject as well as substance. From this statement, Yovel shows, the axioms of Hegel's philosophy can be progressively unfolded. Let us here remark merely one of these. In one of the most fascinating threads of the Preface, the transformation of rationality is said to be demanded within language itself, as Hegel proposes the necessity for a 'speculative proposition' (182-183), in order to overcome the implicit abstract rational non-dialectical structure that lies in ordinary language. Ordinary predicative language, it transpires, is incapable of stating Hegelian doctrine. Even if one declares something very Hegelian, if one says, for example, in summing up Hegel's position, that 'the subject is absolute', this statement cannot express the idea that is contained in it, because (as Yovel explicates it) the grammatical subject, the subject of the sentence is inadequate to express the nature of the Absolute as subject. In such a sentence, Hegel writes:

The subject is taken as a rigid point, to which the predicates are attached by a movement which belongs to the one who knows about the subject, but which cannot count as belonging to the point itself; yet only through this movement would the content be presented as subject (108-109).

It would be statement *about* the subject, a statement that would be made from another point of view, one whose status and location remains unclarified. The Absolute, however, cannot be simply be given to such a disinterested onlooker. The actuality of the subject is self-movement, or 'self-reflection in being-other'. In order to represent this dialectical movement, the structure of discourse has to be transformed in order to allow the subject—the subject as Absolute—to speak, to come to expression. The peculiar structure of the *Phenomenology*, as a work that narrates its own genesis, undoubtedly corresponds to this demand—even if this narrative structure is not to be taken itself as simply the realization of what is intended as the alternative to predicative language, the linguistic form that Hegel calls 'the speculative proposition', an idea which, as Yovel remarks, still remains somewhat obscure (c.f., 109).

The inaccessibility of Hegel's standpoint from within ordinary language is the main topic of the 'Preface', which is why it can only fulfil its task by explaining that it cannot possibly undertake it. The same difficulty is encountered by Yovel, in introducing this 'Preface'. His didactic purpose places his work at the service of knowledge, with its demands for a brief summaries, main points, and comparisons, and in consequence the tendency is towards encapsulating in a few key terms and formula a specific position within the history of ideas. Take, for example, some summary orientations from the

beginning of Yovel's introduction. For Hegel, Yovel writes, there is 'an encompassing rational, even divine principle' in history (10): this principle—'spirit'—is the 'dialectical outgrowth and evolution' of nature (11): in realizing this principle, human history 'promotes the inner telos of being itself' (12). Stated like this, in the language of the 'ordinary' proposition, such a position can be recognized and, inevitably, judged from the security of a general, disinterested reason. Yovel gives voice to a characteristic response, commenting that 'All this was frightfully ambitious and hopelessly optimistic, a symptom of the exuberant hopes of budding modernity' (12).

The problem, of course, remains that of the grounds from which such a judgment issues. With greater detail than anyone has ever done, Hegel provides an account of the genesis of his own philosophical position. How then can it be subject to a kind of general judiciousness, to a 'we' that, unlike Hegel's, has not accounted for its provenance? Yovel's tone here at least seems to invoke the evidence of common sense the same that that Hegel dismantles with his inimitable sarcastic glee. And yet the second part of the sentence clearly implies a different, historical kind of legitimation. Hegel, it suggests, can be judged and criticized from the vantage point provided by our historical relation to the phenomenon 'modernity', by the distance that comes from occupying a post-modernity of sorts. The point is not greatly developed, though this is understandable in a text that is almost entirely absorbed in the task of elucidation. A few brief notes towards the end of the introduction seem to tend in the same direction. Yovel suggests that a productive relation to Hegel's thought depends on the rejection of 'the claims of totality and final synthesis...which close and lock the Hegelian system' (62), and here the claim seems to rest in a sense of a contemporary conjuncture, that allows us to look back on such claims as belonging to a past era.

The reference to 'budding' modernity, as kind of first moment at which these tendencies would be in full bloom, is undoubtedly intended to recall a striking passage in the Preface, in which Hegel inscribes his work into the emergence of modernity

It is further not hard to see that our time is a time of birth and transition into a new era. Spirit has broken away from its former world of existence and imaging [vorstellen]; it is about to sink all that into the past, and is busy shaping itself anew.
(82)

These sentences are more than just an incidental historical reference, they are essential to the point of view adopted in the 'Preface'. The ongoing reception of Hegel tends to circle around the question of how we assess the claim of Hegel that, in educating us to the position of the 'we' that speaks in the *Phenomenology*, he allows us to accede to 'our time', the time at whose inception he inscribes his own work. It is surely because of this ambition that there can be no preface or introduction to Hegel's work in the ordinary sense, no summary for a separate, atemporal space of knowledge. The paradoxical closure of the *Phenomenology*, the need to install oneself within it in order to understand it, is not, in the last instance, a matter of the structure of a dialectical logic, but of modernity as a peculiar kind of historical event. Contrary to Yovel's suggestion, however, that by its total character Hegel's work is consigned to a past epoch, for many thinkers, this claim

to speak for 'our time' is held to be still valid, even to be valid because of the totality it describes. This is the case for Heidegger, in his writings on modernity, and it is still true for Blanchot, who takes the dialectical reason to be epitomized by the passage in the 'Preface' presenting Spirit as 'the work of the negative': one can find a similar tendency in much French thought, in Nancy for example, and in a number of others. This only confirms, however, the sense that the critique and the interpretation of Hegel depends on the historical schema in which we understand his relation to our own time.

Hegel's 'Preface' has long been recognized as one of the central documents for the study of his thought. Yovel's lucid translation and superb exegesis gives it a new accessibility in English and provides the conditions for a renewed engagement with one of the crucial texts in the history of 'our time'.