“Speaking in Water”

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Here is how the text of the *Aufheben* reads: in a metrical, mechanical way, right at the level of its form, in a neutral voice, by speaking in water.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Speculative Remark*

I.

The translation of *The Speculative Remark* poses a number of technical difficulties, some of which should be pointed out:

In the original text all passages from Hegel are quoted in French, even if, in some instances, references to the German edition alone are given. Nancy, however, abundantly inserts either complete sentences, phrases, or words in German in all of them, and his commentary, in aiming to adhere to the terms of Hegel’s text, makes this gloss indispensable. However, some German phrases or words to which Nancy attracts notice in the French passages do not appear in the English translation of Hegel. I have accordingly modified the English translation following Nancy’s gloss and commentary on the text when necessary. Where this would have required too drastic a retranslation of Hegel, I have simply pointed

out the absence of the terms and the transformation it imparts to Nancy's text.

This problem is in fact only one among others brought about by the unavoidable discrepancies between the French and the English translations of Hegel, imputable to the necessarily divergent relation of French and English to German but whose imprint on the translated text is everywhere apparent. The numerous instances of such disparities have unequally unsettling effects on the legibility of the book. Leaving aside for the moment the word and the concept of *Aufhebung*, one of the most visible cases is perhaps also the one that has had the most resonance as far as Nancy's work is concerned, namely, the expression *à même*, which refers, in Nancy's inflection of this idiom, to the relation that is indicated by the Hegelian *an sich*, usually translated as *in itself*; more precisely, it refers to the *nearness and separatedness* that attach to the preposition *an*. *À même* is found in Nancy's early work up until the more recent study on Hegel.¹ In *Le discours de la syncope: I. Logodaedalus* (1976), for example, Nancy speaks of the impossibility of ignoring existing interpretations when approaching Kant, writing that they are "inscribed right at the level of Kant's text" [*à même le texte de Kant*]; and later, in *Une pensée finie* (1990), Nancy points out that decision in Heidegger, taken as an exposition on the "undecidability of meaning that existence is . . . [,] can take place only . . . just at 'the impossibility of deciding.'" ² It occurs in *Hegel, L'inquiétude du négatif* (1997), whereby to speak the language of thought "is not to speak yet another mysterious language. But it is not either, especially not, to enter into the ineffable. It is *to think*: that is, to speak right at the level of language [*à même la langue*]." ³ In *The Speculative Remark* the expression passes almost unnoticed when it first appears in the preamble (" . . . all theory . . . which can be verified right at the level of Hegel's text [*à même le texte de Hegel*]"), and it will be used many times before the emphasis of the preposition *an* of the Hegelian *an sich* inflects the previous and

subsequent "à même" of the book and beyond it (*RS*, 110–15). Given its pervasiveness, the idiom could serve as a guiding thread through Nancy's work, and *The Speculative Remark*, in dealing explicitly with the expression, and in drawing out its Hegelian provenance, would be our point of reference. But this might amount to nominalizing the expression, whereas what *The Speculative Remark* in fact inaugurates, and what is developed more manifestly in later works, is the opening of philosophical concepts "onto that which in natural and technical languages cannot pretend to the status of name, that is, cannot claim the status of autonomous units of sense—through the opening onto prepositions, particles and syncategoremata of all kinds," as Werner Hamacher has pointedly stated.⁴ Such alteration of philosophical language cannot but have repercussions on translation. Explanatory notes in translations and commentaries of Nancy's work where *à même* appears suggest unanimously that no conjunction in English can adequately convey the relation of which Nancy writes.⁵ Departing somewhat from existing translations, where *à même* is most frequently translated as "right on," "right at," or "just at," it has in most cases been translated here, perhaps more prosaically, as "right at the level"—such as in "right at the level of the text," "right at the level of form," "right at the level of grammar," and so forth. The brutal and contrasting "at the level" can remind us that if what is at issue is a relation and a formula that one could think untranslatable (as *The Speculative Remark* states with respect to the passage from German into French [*RS*, 110]), it is nevertheless not simply unutterable [*inénonçable*].⁶

The Speculative Remark discreetly gestures toward a tradition, not exclusively French, of pronouncements concerning the impenetrability of Hegel's language, which the reference to Alexandre Koyré's "Note sur la langue et la terminologie hégéliennes" signals. But even if partially to this end the book presents itself as a com-

mentary, the terms, the language of the book, are not uniformly Hegelian. The reader will indeed soon note how Nancy plays on the proximity of Hegelian language to "ordinary language," even while such an articulation, which is precisely at issue in Hegel, runs noisily through the commentary. I have adopted as far as possible existing English translations of Hegelian terms, except where the confusion between Hegelian and "ordinary" languages is purposely aggravated.⁷

One of the exacting rules of translation whereby one should "translate the same into the same, and the different into the different" has therefore been broken.⁸ The French equivalent of the Hegelian concept of *übergehen* (*passer* [to pass over]) and the series of neighboring expressions, such as the reflexive form of the verb *se passer* (to occur), are notable examples of expressions that had to be translated into a variety of verb phrases such as, among others, to pass through, to go through, to occur, to happen. Although it relates apparently less directly to the German *merken* (*RS*, 67), *remarquer*, to which diverse verbal constructions more or less closely connected to the etymology of *remarquer* (to mark again) are attached, has also been conveyed by different verbs: to draw attention to, to note, to notice, to point out. This of course applies even more to *relever*, which Jacques Derrida proposed as an equivalent of *Aufhebung* (sublation) in "The Pit and the Pyramid," and to its equivocal cognates *se relever*, *relever de*, *relevant*. Ultimately, we could include in the list of terms that oblige us to produce more than one equivalent a great number of expressions and words—such as, for example, *relief* (remnant and relief), *mettre en relief* (to bring into relief), *aller de soi* (to go without saying), *articuler* (to utter and to articulate), *retour* (return and recurrence)—that do not belong strictly to what is compiled in glossaries under the heading of Hegelian language but that, as the commentary unfolds, no longer simply stand outside of it. I have tried as far as possible to respect the lexical coherence of the text, but some of the nuances,

which the ambiguous status of these terms entails, are necessarily lost in translation, a loss for which no amount of notes can make good. Further, the German word *Witz* has not been translated as "joke," "wit," or "witticism," thus following the original text and previous translations of Nancy's work on the *Witz*.⁹

Finally, anyone comparing the two versions of the text will note that many parenthetical clauses and some sentences of the original are suppressed and that some appear to have been modified more markedly than others. Jean-Luc Nancy has sanctioned these modifications and has in fact, although in rare instances, himself reformulated passages of the original.

2.

Never is the attempt to separate "technical" concerns from the philosophical import of the book more likely to fail than when dealing with *The Speculative Remark*, for the places where the translation most threatens to have an obscuring effect correspond precisely to the most salient points of the commentary. In other words, what the translation cannot help but handle roughly are the very motifs that give the commentary its movement: *relève*, *remarque*, *passer*, *aller de soi*, *à même*, *accent*, *relief*. It is as though the more these motifs refuse to be translated, the more the analyses of speculative dialectics developed in *The Speculative Remark* are confirmed.

Translation, or in any case the difference between languages, is momentarily at issue in Hegel, as Nancy points out, but it participates in a general concern for language inherent to the very object of study. Is the fundamental concept of the dialectical process, the *Aufheben*, indeed not above all well known for the "double meaning" of its word and the reflection upon language that, in Hegel's steps, it compels one to undertake? More decisively, is Hegel not the one who has insisted on the identity of being and thought,

warning against isolating the difficulties of philosophical discourse (of discursivity) from the difficulties of being:¹⁰

Nancy's early "Essay on the Hegelian Concept of the *Aufhebung*" endorses this thought unreservedly by taking seriously the discursive problems attached to the position of the concept of the *Aufhebung* and their uneasy articulation with Hegel's so-called theory of language and of philosophical exposition (philosophical *Darstellung*). The Remark on the expression *Aufheben* of the *Science of Logic*, and its partial repetition in Hegel's other writings, provides the impulse for such an inquiry by drawing attention to the contingent speculative resources of the word *Aufheben*. As soon, however, as what might have been considered the isolated property of a fundamental concept can be extended to many other concepts, the seemingly marginal worry about the relation between a concept and its word obliges one to ask about the fate the dialectical process reserves for elements of discourse beyond words, such as the proposition, syntax, and grammar. And the commentary can all the more apply itself to reconstituting Hegel's speculative syntax and grammar, since they are not thematized as such by Hegel.

Dealing with speculative dialectics and the concept of the *Aufhebung* from the point of view of words, accent, proposition, syntax, and grammar is justified by the rules of reading philosophical writings stated in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There is no question here of expounding, as the book does, on the prescriptions attached to speculative exposition. Suffice it to say that it is the impasses to which they give rise and their exacting character as far as reading is concerned that propel the study. Now if, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel enunciates an imperative to read philosophical propositions *otherwise* and thus makes us inherit the task of conceiving of *another* word, *another* expression, *another* grammar, *another* syntax, *another* writing, *another* style, *another* language, *another* form, this imperative

reaches, for Nancy, the reading of Hegel himself. Hence the question "What is it to read Hegel?" must be asked from the outset, and it also obliges us to conceive of *another* expression, *another* grammar, and so forth. This apparently straightforward question, however, introduces not only the classical problems of presupposition and of the hermeneutic circle, which will be acute throughout the commentary, but also, as a note specifies with respect to the question now slightly displaced, an *alterity* in Hegel that one ought to try to *read*.¹¹

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the intelligence of *The Speculative Remark* hangs, to a great extent, upon how one understands "alterity in Hegel," which does not necessarily only mean alterity according to Hegel. (The study asks: "Might Hegelian mastery, the *sublation* [relève] [*Aufhebung*] of the negative, not be absolutely ineluctable?" [Chapter 1].) Depending on whether one conceives of it as an absence or as an excess of determinations, or even as such an alternative, one may be tempted to assimilate it to any of the so-called motifs of the commentary, including, above all, to the *Aufheben*. Hence, supposing that it be indistinguishable from the movement of sublation as the book describes it, the "alterity in Hegel" might be thought to take the form of a disappearing, to consist in a "negative epiphany":¹² sublation "resists any effort to explain it" (*RS*, 152), "refuses to let itself be identified" (57), takes place as a "pure metrics" (127); its syntax is a *Zerstören*, a destruction (127), and it is graspable only by letting it vanish (109). From this view Nancy's "negotiations" with Hegel's texts would serve the purpose of marking the places of such vanishings.¹³ But nothing would be as misleading as such an accentuation of vanishing alone. One must also note how the process of sublation is characterized by an excess of occurrences ("it repeatedly occurs," as we will read), which the commentary no less registers.

Instead of going through it in order to discern in each of its moments what kind of "alterity" is at issue—*The Speculative Remark*

does not allow for dealing with "alterity" in this way—let us briefly and finally consider what, at various moments, is called *Hegel's text*, for the weight of the demonstration lies to a large extent on it. If it is no more *easily locatable* than "alterity," it does appear to encompass all the displacements, the slidings, the gaps, the floating, the vanishing, whose repercussions the commentary underlines whenever the *aufheben* and the *language* of speculative dialectics are at issue. From this view the *text* might be the unique *figure* of alterity that one "ought to try to read," in which case our perplexities over the mode of presence of the *text* might turn out to redouble those that the commentary discerns in Hegel around the mode of presentation of the transient concept. Hence that *The Speculative Remark* should demonstrate how "dialectics functions only through decisions taken elsewhere," as Nancy writes in a subsequent work, has a special resonance here, since the question arises as to what sort of "other place," if any, the text might stand for (should "another place" be added to the list of modifications prescribed by speculative dialectics?).¹⁴

"Reading otherwise," then, engages the various forms of blockage of speculative dialectics that *Hegel's text* presents, such as, for example, the neutralization of the voice, mechanical recitation, the "singular literality" of certain metaphors, the warding off of the dangers of the *Witz*. But here, too, it is never simply a matter of seizing points of resistance to speculative dialectics, forms of subtractions from it. The unsettlement, the slidings, the "accumulation of gaps" to which the text points, as so many instances of such halting, cannot be the prerogative of any isolated moment, however disruptive, and ought rather permanently to be thought of as an incessant movement, an unrest. We might be tempted to identify the *aufheben* with this "movement," in which case *The Speculative Remark* replies that the latter rather precisely troubles the conceptual identity of the *aufheben* (RS, 109). At least one mode of presence of the *text* as the alterity "one ought to try to

read" might therefore be a continuous reminder to us of the conceit of aiming to dissipate this movement, whether it be by arresting it or by apprehending it as a disappearing.

For that reason, in addition to reading *The Speculative Remark* in relation to the recent work on Hegel, it might be useful to refer to some of the author's works more or less contemporary, and not just chronologically, with our text. Nancy makes many signs throughout these texts toward the *apprehension* of the undecidable, just as, in the vein of Derrida's work, and as we briefly indicated, it is one of the stakes of his reading of Hegel. In *Ego Sum* Nancy speaks of the "undecidable taken as such"—*mutatis mutandis*, the attempt to arrest the movement of the text—as the most acute way in which a discourse "gives itself the consistence, the substance and the stature of subject."¹⁵ In the preamble to *Le discours de la syncope: I. Logodaedalus*, more particularly in its polemical development on the effects of fashion (on *la mode* and *le mode*), Nancy even goes so far as to speak of "the transubstantiation, in a hitherto unheard sense, of everything [including the thought of the undecidable] which . . . cuts into and undoes the system of substance" whereby everything that displaces this system is hypostatized (7).

We cannot here examine in detail how the preoccupation with the substance and with the subject from the point of view of "the undecidable taken as such" can be articulated with Hegel's undecidable discourse of the *Aufhebung*, as the book invites us to do. Suffice it to say that although *The Speculative Remark* is unmistakably concerned with the *text* (with *Hegel's text*), the concept of the text that might be said to emerge from it cannot hastily be assimilated to all other works and thought where issues of text and reading stand out.¹⁶ Such a problematics signals an ongoing concern for the inheritance of romanticism as it emerges in filigree in *The Speculative Remark* and explicitly in Nancy's work on the concept of Literature and on the *Witz*.¹⁷ But even if such a concern finds a unique formulation in his work, the preoccupation

with textuality is not explainable only with respect to it. Incidentally, one of Nancy's rare direct statements on the "problematics of textuality" is found in a preface written not long after *The Speculative Remark* for a book devoted to textual invention in Kant. The passage deserves to be quoted at length or perhaps even *annexed* to the book:

Somewhere . . . in a place and time which cannot be assigned by the discourse of philosophy, something trembles or vacillates, something collapses in the very movement of foundation, something which inaugurates philosophy occurs in a sort of jolt, of throb or of pulsation—perhaps also a drive [*pulsion*], as at the confines where Freud has ventured, an indis-sociable life (and) death drive. And it is precisely what is at issue in problematics of textuality. The latter are in this way problematics in the plural, for there is no system, no order, no monological field which confers upon them the unity of a discourse; but they are problematics, in the most rigorous sense of the word . . . at the same time as their very rigor makes of them, in the strongest but not the most pathetic sense, unrests [*inquiétudes*].¹⁸