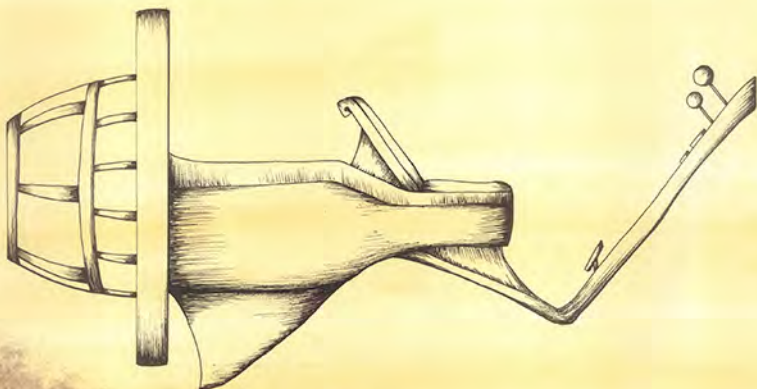


# Dialectics Unbound

On the Possibility of Total Writing

Maxwell Kennel



DIALECTICS UNBOUND  
ON THE POSSIBILITY OF TOTAL WRITING



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dead letter office

**BABEL Working Group**

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DIALECTICS UNBOUND: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF  
TOTAL WRITING

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dedicated to the memory of  
George Holst (1925-2009)



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## On the Possibility of Total Writing

*Maxwell Kennel*

### § INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of his review essay on Fredric Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*, Gopal Balakrishnan writes that, in the decline of late capitalism, "As more determinate forms of negation struggle to assert themselves—with whatever ultimate prospects of success—the need for a new term of totalization may soon become evident."<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, I aim to respond to that need, particularly where the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan, "The Coming Contradiction: On Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*," *New Left Review* 66 (November-December 2010): 53 [31–53].

between *writing* and *dialectics* is concerned, and in the context of Theodor Adorno's critique of G.W.F. Hegel's dialectic in *Negative Dialectics*. Keeping in mind the assessment of Adorno offered by Michael Rosen at the end of his book *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism*, I will explore Julia Kristeva's affirmation of *negativity* as the fourth term of the dialectic, and then conclude by arguing that the only way to imagine a new term of dialectical totality manifested in writing is to combine the *aphorism* and *parataxis*, two figures that are featured in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* and *Aesthetic Theory*, respectively.

#### § LINEAGES OF THE DIALECTIC

Before seeking a reevaluation of the possibility of dialectical totality—in and out of writing—we must first come to some understanding regarding the dialectic itself. Among the myriad inquiries into the meaning of the dialectic, one can pick out at least a few common themes. Etymologically speaking, it is certainly the case that the dialectic involves two voices (*dialexis*), which are at least distinct, if not opposed, or entirely contradictory. The ancient Sophists and Skeptics both maintained that on any given issue there are (at least) two sides, and this concept of dialectics as a dialogue between two is also evident in the Socratic approach. Both the process of merger and division employed in Sophistic rhetoric, and the pluralistic ontology of the Skeptics, can be seen as early precursors to the current understanding of the dialectic, troubled as it may be. Furthermore, both the ontology of flux proposed by Heraclitus, and the Neoplatonic movement from unity (*monē*), to the

leaving of oneself (*próhodos*), and then to a return to self (*epistrophé*),<sup>2</sup> seem to lead towards the (relatively) contemporary description of the Hegelian dialectic as a move from thesis, to antithesis, to synthesis.

This explanatory framework, proposed by W.T. Stace in *The Philosophy of Hegel*,<sup>3</sup> and condemned as too reductive a schema by Gustav E. Mueller in his article "The Hegel Legend of Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,"<sup>4</sup> has retained its explanatory and introductory power, but has also been found inadequate in its ability to describe the nuances of Hegel's system. In his recent study of the *Phenomenology*, *The Hegel Variations*, Fredric Jameson writes that,

We need to ponder a methodological issue and to forestall one of the most notorious and inveterate stereotypes of Hegel discussion, namely the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula. It is certain that there are plenty of triads in Hegel, beginning with the Trinity (or ending with it?). It is also certain that he himself is complicitous in the propagation of this formula, and at least partly responsible for its vulgarization. It is certainly a useful teaching device as well as a convenient expository framework: and is thereby called upon to play its role in that trans-

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 153.

<sup>3</sup> W.T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (Dover: New York, 1955), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Gustav E. Mueller, "The Hegel Legend of 'Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19.3 (June 1958): 411-414.

formation of Hegel's thought into a systematic philosophy—into Hegelianism. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Despite the complicity of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad in the vulgarization of Hegel's thought, it remains the case that an exposition on, and then clarification of, the triad is a good place to start when exploring the dialectic. The point of both the dialectic and the criticism of the aforementioned triad, it would seem, is that a definition of the dialectic cannot be fixed in place by any pithy phrase precisely because of its built-in iconoclasm and commitment to the reality of contradiction. Perhaps it is this refusal to become statically defined that has made the dialectic such a vital discursive figure.

Moving beyond the aforementioned triad, the next step in defining the dialectic is to briefly outline what is meant by the 'speculative' in Hegel's system. As expressed in his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel's logic involves three methods of individuation co-instantiated in every true logical moment: (1) the Understanding, which individuates with a "firm determinateness" that is distinct over against others,<sup>6</sup> (2) the Dialectical moment of the process of logical individuation, which is defined as the "self-sublation of such finite determinations by themselves and their transitions into their opposites," and (3) the Speculative moment which positively "grasps the unity of the deter-

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<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations* (London: Verso, 2010), 18.

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 80. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

minations in their opposition” (81, 82). It is this synthetic unity-in-opposition that has received so much criticism for its supposed complicity in the closure of Absolute Spirit, not to mention the worry that in unification the opposed terms or identities lose their opposing quality and become an indiscernible part of the homogenous mass of the unified totality. This view is opposed, however, by Fredric Jameson, who writes at the beginning of *The Hegel Variations* that,

It is above all else urgent not to think of ‘Absolute Spirit’ as a ‘moment,’ whether historical or structural or even methodological. Absolute Spirit cannot be considered as a terminus of any kind, without transforming the whole of *Phenomenology of Spirit* into a developmental narrative, one that can be characterized variously as teleological or cyclical, but which in either case is to be vigorously repudiated by modern, or at least by contemporary, thought of whatever persuasion.<sup>7</sup>

Jameson rejects the closure of Absolute Spirit in a completed totality on the grounds that it reduces the *Phenomenology* to a narrative, yet elsewhere he affirms narrativity as an essential aspect of dialectics, along with both reflexivity and contradiction. In the eleventh chapter of *Valences of the Dialectic*, a reprint of an article from a 1993 issue of *Science and Society*, Jameson sketches one of the clearest and fairest summaries of the dialectic available to the contemporary reader. Calling the dialectic an ‘unfinished

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<sup>7</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 1.

project' and resisting its relegation to the past, Jameson presents the dialectic as being open to future possibilities by its very nature, describing it via three devices:

1) Beginning with reflexivity Jameson points out that the dialectic reminds us "of the way in which we are mired in concepts of all kinds and [provides] a strategy for lifting ourselves above that situation, not for changing the concepts exactly but for getting a little distance from them."<sup>8</sup>

2) The second aspect of the dialectic, according to Jameson, is its relation to "telos, narrative, and history" and the imperative to "interrogate and undermine those narrative and historical ideologies by allowing us to see and grasp historical change in a new and more complex way" (287).

3) Lastly, it is contradiction that structures the dialectical situation for Jameson. Instead of a situation in which contradictions exhibit a "perpetual movement back and forth," or a totalization "in which the opposites and the contradictions are supposed to be laid to rest," Jameson writes (echoing Adorno) that, "where you can perceive a contradiction, there you already intuit the union of opposites, or the identity of identity and non-identity" (290).

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<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010), 281. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

This appropriately triadic construal of the dialectic does not fall prey to the reductive explanation offered by the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad, but instead illustrates the richness of dialectical thought, a part of which is its resistance to closure.

More generally, the popular rejection of the supposed closure of Absolute Spirit, and by extension the rejection of the synthetic stage of the dialectic, seem to be the result of a concern for what happens to identities that are subsumed under totality in the dialectical process. It remains to be seen, however, whether this concern takes the form of a dogmatic desire to conserve the fixity of identities against intercontamination with other contradictory identities, or if the concern is that synthesis violates or transgresses the boundary of identity. I take the former concern to be a thinly veiled apologetic for the self-same status quo, and the latter as a truly ethical concern regarding totality and dialectics.

The concern for identity, in its ontological and symbolic form, appears throughout the history of dialectical thinking. Where it is most manifest, I believe, is in the concerns regarding the aforementioned thesis-antithesis-synthesis triplet. I would argue that the will-to-reduction may be evident in the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad only insofar as the triad is employed beyond its initial strength as an introduction to the concentric circles of identity and contradiction that constitute the dialectic. Beyond its value as a teaching tool, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad falls into the trap that Mueller was concerned about in his article, namely Hegel's concern that the triadic form would remain "lifeless and



uncomprehended,” as Hegel perceived to be the case in Kantian philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Turning from Jameson for the moment, we can also see that Theodor Adorno expresses a similar concern in *Negative Dialectics*: first by his immanent critique of the dialectic via the assertion of nonidentity, and second by employing *models* and opposing method, system, and standpoint. The concern about whether reduction and violence are inherent in dialectics, or if dialectics can be imagined beyond a regimented and oppressive system, is essential if any robust idea of the total is to be imagined in general, much less in writing.

#### § THE VIOLENCE OF CLOSURE

To re-imagine dialectical totality, in writing and beyond, we must first consider the critique of totality as violence, whether in a termination (final closure, perfect synthesis, or supposed reconciliation), or in a violation of particular identities. The concern is such that any version of the total necessarily entails the violation of the sacred boundary of identity—that is, the violation or weakening of the ontological and semiotic division between what a thing *is* and what a thing is *not*. The process of individuating particular identities against the backdrop of the radical and infinite multiplicity of being necessarily involves some reduction, as the individuated thing is defined against what is alternate to it in order to distinguish or discern it as a precise singularity. Rather than allow Hegel’s dialectics

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<sup>9</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 29.

to be thought of as culminating in Absolute Spirit, however, it is imperative, with Jameson in mind, that the concept of dialectics be rescued from its condemnation to termination, and not be thought of as resulting in a static culmination that violates the particular identities that it includes. In order to avoid violating the particularity of identities, the dialectical model must not be thought of as an oppressive process of subsuming all identities under one total regime, and instead must remain an unfinished and open totality. This idea is echoed by Jameson, who writes of

the need to stress an open-ended Hegel rather than the conventionally closed system which is projected by so many idle worries about Absolute Spirit, about totality, or about Hegel's allegedly teleological philosophy of history.<sup>10</sup>

In dialectics, the need for a *telos* must remain as an unachievable trajectory in order to preserve the possibility of the new, rather than the alternatives: either an achieved total closure or a theory which never leaves the ground because of its lack of impetus. A dialectical totalization entirely devoid of a *telos* is as impotent as a violent dialectical totality which proclaims its success in achieving completion, and this is because without a trajectory—without a 'towards-which'—no grasping towards the total is ever attempted.

It is upon this imperative to think dialectical totality as non-terminating that we are able to

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 22.

think dialectics unbound of closure, whether that closure is borne out via synthesis, atonement, reconciliation, or another supposedly static result of mediation. As mentioned previously, the concern is such that in synthesizing or reconciling opposed or contradictory terms, the resultant third thing does violence to the distinct identities of the originally opposed terms. This respect and concern for the particular identities, in contradiction or opposition, often results in a resistance to dialectics because of the potential for loss in particular identities as they become part of the process of totalization. The worry that dialectics transgresses or violates the boundary of identity is a laudable pacifist impulse. However, what remains unconsidered by those overly concerned with the *conservation* of identities is the always-already of dialectics—that is, the embeddedness of dialectically opposed contradictions in identity, namely the interior oscillation of excess and lack, and the exterior exchange of gain and loss, that occur in the encounter between identity and other.

#### § TOTALIZATION WITHOUT TOTALITY

At its worst, the attempt to preserve particular identities against potential contamination with their opposites is a supremacist idealization of purity. At its best, the impulse to preserve the particular identities against their opposites is treated as a necessary part of the process of individuation in which identities are fixed upon by the perceiver. The question is, then, whether or not we can imagine a new term of the total, dialectically, and without the violence of closure. Rather than seeking a totality without totalization

I would suggest, in the Žižekian spirit of reversal, that the opposite is a better option: a totalization without totality. This is because a process of totalization as *becoming*, without any achieved goal or preoccupation with totality in-itself, lacks its object and can continue on a trajectory towards an unachievable *telos*. A totality without totalization may look like a complete system which does not (need to) subsume identities because it already has. On the other hand, totalization without its objectified end, totality, may be the better option because of its affirmation of the *process* of dialectics over the *product* of a completed totality.

The link between dialectics, identity, and totality is such that a totalization-without-totality dialectically incorporates or integrates particular identities without violating the sovereignty or sanctity of their particularity, and while also weakening the identity boundary by allowing for inter-contamination among contradictory identities in the context of the paradoxically un-whole whole of a totalization without totality. In writing, this may be evident in the paradox of the impossibility of truly completing a work, alongside the necessary practical closure of writing in submission or publication. The process of writing is a totalization without the finality of totality as an object in-itself, meaning that the work of writing is never complete, and yet in the last instance it must be completed in order to be called a singular thing.

The paradoxical act of writing is as much a symbolic act as an ontological one—a truth given to us by philosophical hermeneutics. The significance of hermeneutics for an understanding of dialectical totalization-without-totality is found in the importance it places upon the vital link

between *ontology* as the question of the meaning of being, and *semiotics* as the inquiry into the symbolic referent function of language. The ontological and symbolic act of writing is an exemplary manifestation of a nonviolent process of dialectical totalization. Michael Rosen writes in *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism* of the important connection between Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger. Reading Adorno as a hermeneutic thinker, Rosen locates seven contradictory claims made by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*: cognition of nonidentity, secularization, exceeding the object, historicity, revelation, the construction of models, and the critical recuperation of history.<sup>11</sup> Following from this, Adorno's rejection of systems, standpoints, or methods, leads him to an affirmation of what Rosen calls an "*interpretive discipline of experience*" (164)—a focus which he mobilizes in his critique of the dialectic.

#### § ADORNO'S IMMANENT CRITIQUE AND THE ASSERTION OF NONIDENTITY

Quoted in Rosen's work, Adorno affirms the primacy of experience, writing that "dialectical theory must be immanent" (154) and not only immanent, but also a materialism. Rosen writes that, in asserting the materiality of the dialectic, "Adorno is not making the banal Marxist criticism that Hegel mistakes for *mind* what is really

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Rosen, "A Negative Dialectic?" in *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 166–168. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

*matter*” but rather affirming that the “dialectical development of Thought furnishes the structure of reality, and, because it encompasses both *thought* and *reality*, there is no way to play one off against the other” (155–156). Rosen’s assessment points to the perhaps eternal conflict between Materialism and Idealism, to which Adorno responds in *Negative Dialectics* by arguing that Idealism fails to see the origin of *Geist* in society via the activity of mental labor. Rosen then points out that Hegel’s opposition to Materialism is on account of its reductive nature, and the fact that it does not acknowledge teleology or development. As if to counter, in Rosen’s assessment, Adorno criticizes Idealism’s reduction of the subject’s negativity to the Ideal sphere without sufficiently considering *Geist* as the “theoretical embodiment of a false society” and most importantly the “origin of *Geist* in social labour” (156). On the present account, the essential aspect of the immanent critique of the dialectic, from its assertion of *Geist* as society to its materialization of the dialectic, is that it points to the reductive tendencies of both Materialism and Idealism.

This opposition to reduction conforms to the concern expressed previously regarding the violation of identity by subsuming particular identities under an oppressive total system. Taken further, the concern for identity can be expanded to include a properly ethical concern for the Other, or for the presence of otherness within the identity of the total. On this note, Adorno’s immanent critique leads into what Rosen calls the “*transition to non-identity*” (158), which Adorno asserts, writing that,

Dialectics is the consistent consciousness of non-identity. It is not related in advance to a standpoint. Thought is driven, out of its unavoidable insufficiency, its guilt for what it thinks, towards it. If one objected, as has been repeated ever since by the Aristotelian critics of Hegel, that dialectics for its part grinds everything indiscriminately in its mill down into the mere logical form of the contradiction, overlooking—even Croce argued this—the true polyvalence of that which is not contradictory, of the simply different, one is only displacing the blame for the thing onto the method.<sup>12</sup>

Adorno first asserts the truth of nonidentity in dialectics and opposes the view that dialectics reduces all things to the logical form of contradiction. The importance of dialectics not being a standpoint is yet another apologetic for its open character, given that dialectics does not begin having already decided any aspect of its movement. Adorno continues the same section, writing that,

That which is differentiated appears as divergent, dissonant, negative, so long as consciousness must push towards unity according to its own formation: so long as it measures that which is not identical with itself, with its claim to the totality. This is what dialectics holds up to the consciousness as the contradiction. Thanks

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<sup>12</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond (2001); <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>

to the immanent nature of consciousness, that which is in contradiction has itself the character of inescapable and catastrophic nomothetism [*Gesetzmaessigkeit*: law-abiding character]. Identity and contradiction in thinking are welded to one another. The totality of the contradiction is nothing other than the untruth of the total identification, as it is manifested in the latter. Contradiction is non-identity under the bane [*Bann*] of the law, which also influences the non-identical.

For Adorno, the individuation of identities via the negation of other identities—a process similar to Hegel's concept of individuation via the Understanding—can either occur by exercising a claim to totality via an oppressive nomic principle, or identities can be individuated in accordance with the coexistence of identity and contradiction in thought.

The idea that the 'totality of contradiction' is the untruth of the 'totality of identification' is evident when contradiction is constrained by the law of non-contradiction which itself oppresses nonidentity as other to the individuated identity. In other words, identity can be individuated either by a violent imposition of particularity via the principle of non-contradiction, or more preferably with the knowledge that identity and contradiction are coinstantiated in consciousness. The nonviolent principle evident in the latter, which avoids the violent oppression of non-identity by identity, appears to be the better option, especially in light of our initial concern about the process of totalization with the regime of totality already being treated as a completed object instead of a work-in-progress.



In the rightful struggle for unity through reconciliation, Adorno's critique concerns itself, not with the concept of synthesis as such, but with the violent demand for totality. Against the idea that totality violates the sanctity of particular identities when it seeks to subsume the nonidentical under a regime, with Adorno as our guide, we should instead enact a synthetic atonement that allows identities to be what they are: bundles of excess and lack, gain and loss, potentiality and actuality. Adorno and Horkheimer write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that, "language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical".<sup>13</sup> Given that identity is always already caught up in language—between the symbolic and the ontological—we can take the previous pronouncement seriously. Things are not *only* what they are, things are far *more* and far *less* than merely self-identical. Alongside this notion, we find Adorno's assertion of nonidentity in *Negative Dialectics*—a critical move that has much import into the discourse on writing. Adorno states,

The totality is to be opposed by convicting it of the non-identity with itself, which it denies according to its own concept. Negative dialectics is thereby tied, at its starting-point, to the highest categories of identity-philosophy. To this extent it also remains false, identity-logical, itself that which it is being thought against.

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Continuum Press, 1988), 15.

According to Adorno, totality must remain self-identical and must thereby do away with non-identity. This means that under this violent version of totality nonidentity is the other that is at best ignored, and at worst oppressed, under the hegemony of total identity. The reality of contradiction in particular identities is unveiled by nonidentity when the thing that is individuated (identity) against the other (nonidentity) becomes strictly self-identical and subsumes the other under itself via repression, oppression, or ignorance. Closure and termination are issues for totality, but when totality is divorced from the popular conception that treats Absolute Spirit as a terminus then there is a real possibility that dialectics may no longer require a violent synthesis, such as in a totality without totalization, rather than the aforementioned process of totalization without totality.

Closure is a problem for both dialectics and totality because of the aforementioned concerns about violating the boundary of identity, a boundary that is expressed in individuation. To individuate an identity by separating what it is from what it *is not* will always involve a certain degree of reduction, but individuation need not entail any violation or transgression of the boundary between what a thing *is* and what a thing *is not*—it need only avoid subjugating the other of nonidentity: the set of what is alternate or what is not (nonbeing). Here we keep in mind the earlier hermeneutic point that the division between *is* and *is not* is ontological insofar as *is* refers to being and *is not* to nonbeing, and it is symbolic insofar as both terms signify and give themselves over to hermeneutic consciousness as that which interprets the meaning of experience.

## § A FOURTH TERM?

Apart from the suggestion that writing can enact a totalization without totality, there has been little description of what a dialectics unbound of the violence of closure would look like. First, it is surely important to affirm a concept of dialectical totalization as a trajectory towards a *telos* rather than a closed system, as we have done above, but in order to embody this hope it may be necessary to introduce a fourth term into the dialectical process in order to carry through that non-terminating process. Fredric Jameson points out that this possibility is made explicit by Hegel himself, stating:

Meanwhile, the tripartite formula is calculated to mislead and confuse the reader who seeks to process this material in a series of three steps: something for example utterly impossible to complete in the structurally far more complex play of oppositions in the chapter on the secular culture of absolutism; and alarmingly rebuked by Hegel himself in that famous passage at the end of the greater *Logic* in which he allows that “three” might be “four” after all.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of this suggestion by Hegel is clarified by Jameson who cautions against the reduction of the dialectical process to the execution of three easy steps (after which the dialectic is complete). Regardless of whether the synthesis becomes the new thesis, it remains that

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 19.

there is far more to the dialectic than merely the repetition of a formulaic triad.

Another thinker who affirms this fourth term, albeit under a different name, is the French philosopher Julia Kristeva who argues that *negativity*, not negation or nothingness, is the fourth term of the Hegelian dialectic. For Kristeva, negativity is “both the cause and the organizing principle of the *process*” of the dialectic.<sup>15</sup> Negativity mediates and supersedes the concrete moments of being and nothingness, and “while maintaining their dualism, negativity recasts not only the theses of *being* and *nothingness*, but all categories used in the contemplative system: universal and particular, indeterminate and determinate, quality and quantity, negation and affirmation etc.” (Kristeva, 109). The possibility of maintaining the independence of both parts of the dualism amidst a dialectically unified totalization is reassuring when we recall the fear of losing the particularity of identities to indiscriminate synthesis or subjugation under a homogenizing regime. Kristeva’s assessment of the fourth term of the dialectic as negativity is reassuring in that it allows for the maintenance of the specificity of particular dichotomized identities. The maintained dichotomies listed above are as much a concern for the question of dialectical totality in ontology as for the question of dialectical totality in semiotics, and furthermore in practical concerns of writing. As we will

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<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The Fourth ‘Term’ of the Dialectic,” in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 109. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

see below, the strategic use of the *aphorism* and *parataxis* in writing allows for a similar maintenance of particular identity, amidst the struggle for totality via the dialectic, in the context of a greater whole work of writing.

Kristeva continues by arguing that negativity is the driving force behind both Hegel's negation, and his negation of negation, while also arguing that negativity remains separate from both terms. Negativity functions as a "liquefying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates new organizations and, in a sense, affirms" (Kristeva, 109). This latter point is very much in line with the affirmation that arises out of the negation of negation for Hegel. The former, however, may give rise to fears about the solvent quality of totality as that which takes in every thesis and synthesizes it with its antithesis into a homogenous total system. Against this, Kristeva affirms that, in the move from Hegel's dialectic to dialectical materialism, negativity "already prepared the way for the very possibility of thinking a materialist *process*" (Kristeva, 110). For Kristeva, Hegel's concept of negativity 'links' and 'unleashes' both the real and the conceptual in its conceptual unity, and furthermore this conceptual unity "culminates in the ethical order: although it is *objectivity* itself, negativity is at the same time and for that very reason the 'free subject'" (Kristeva, 110). Kristeva states that this free subject "effects its *Aufhebung* in order to reintroduce him into a process of transformation of community relations and discursive strata" (Kristeva, 110), much like Adorno's subject who instates nonidentity and resists the false society of *Geist*.

## § KRISTEVA CONTRA ADORNO

The major point of contention between the recovery of the dialectic in Kristeva's concept of 'negativity,' and Adorno's assertion of nonidentity in his negative dialectics, is Adorno's rejection of the negation of negation as a legitimate affirmation and Kristeva's affirmation of the concept in and beyond Hegel. Adorno puts forth his negative dialectic in response to what he perceives to be Hegel's unjustifiable positing of affirmation or positivity as the result of the negation of negation. On this note Rosen writes:

Adorno's argument is founded on the charge that Hegel takes what is in essence a critical procedure—the attempt to articulate the contradiction between concept [*Begriff*] and subject-matter [*Sache*—and turns it, by a 'negation of negation' into an affirmative one. Hegel is accused by Adorno of going beyond the proper task of philosophy, the recollection to thought of the content which subsuming judgment has eliminated, by a gratuitous 'negation of negation' . . . . (161)

Rosen follows this exposition of Adorno's critique of Hegel with a quotation from *Negative Dialectics* which expositis on the inherent negativity of nonidentity, even given the assertion of the negation of negation. In the same passage Adorno accuses Hegel's positing of positivity from the negation of negation of betraying the dialectic by giving way to 'identification' or what he names 'identitarian thinking' elsewhere in the work.

Adorno's assertion of nonidentity opposes the notion that contradiction is in the essence of identities, and instead asserts itself as "the index of the untruth of identity" (Rosen, 161). For Hegel, contradictions are part "of the unfolding of Absolute Form" (Rosen, 161), and for Adorno contradictions, such as the one between identity and nonidentity, are the gatekeepers of identity. The untruth of identity emerges when individuation gives into the identitarian compulsion to fix or (de)limit identity too absolutely and too violently. Rosen writes that, for Adorno, "Dialectical thought treats individual phenomena according to a regulative ideal of their completion, which the standpoint of totality legitimates" (170). Rather than hold individuation to the standard of the regulative ideal of totality, Adorno allows individual phenomena to be individuated as positive identities, but not at the expense of nonidentity, which represents the contradictions present in the context of totality.

On the other hand, Kristeva affirms the negation of negation, and its resulting affirmation or positivity, while arguing that negativity is the fourth term of the dialectic. Negativity, for Kristeva, represents "the inseparability, the interpenetration, indeed the contradiction of 'Being' and 'Nothing' even if only in the sphere of the idea" (112). Importantly, Kristeva affirms the coinstantiation of contradictory terms in the ideal realm, leading me to believe that the positions of Kristeva and Adorno are not irreconcilable, as Adorno also acknowledges that the contradiction of identity and nonidentity is present in the conceptual totality.

With this in mind it is possible—although Kristeva affirms the positivity of the negation of negation, and Adorno opposes it—to pursue a

complementary reading of the two thinkers. In the first place, this is because both thinkers affirm a materialist sort of dialectic, which is hopefully capable of maintaining a non-reductive status. Kristeva writes that her argument for negativity “will become materialist when, with the help of Freud’s discovery, one dares think negativity as the *very movement of heterogeneous matter*” (113). Kristeva affirms that Hegel’s dialectic reconfigures being and nothingness and establishes an “*affirmative negativity, a productive dissolution* in place of ‘Being’ and ‘Nothing’” (113). Adorno seeks to make the dialectic a materialist idea in a different manner, as mentioned above. Instead of affirming Kristeva’s ascription of negativity to matter itself, Adorno affirms a “materialist practice of interpretation” (Rosen, 168), which affirms experience over method.

Given that the affirmation of a materialist dialectic may not be entirely sufficient for a compatibilist reading of Kristeva and Adorno, we may also have recourse to the fact that, with the help of a materialist dialectic, both thinkers seek to unbind dialectics from its relegation to closure and termination. Adorno writes that,

Secretly the *telos* of identification is non-identity, which is to be saved in it. The error of traditional thought is in taking identity to be its goal. The power that explodes the illusion [*Schein*] of identity is that of thought itself. (quoted in Rosen, 173)

In thought, then, it is possible to think identity and nonidentity, and in the process of individuating identities—what Adorno calls identifi-



cation—we can yet save nonidentity from the violence done to it by identitarian thinking. This opposition to the violence of closure for individuation can also be said to be opposed to the dialectical closure of totality. Kristeva also writes that negativity, as the fourth term of the dialectic, is “inseparable from the Hegelian notion of *Being* is thus precisely what splits and prevents the closing up of Being within an abstract and superstitious understanding” (113), and this desire to prevent the closure of Being, or Absolute Spirit, or dialectical totality, is a properly ethical impulse to save the other of identity—non-identity—from subjugation at the hands of identitarian thinking.

#### § APHORISTICS AND PARATAXIS

To have come through the critique of dialectical totality as violence, and to arrive at a dialectical approach to writing-towards-totality, may seem to be a stretch of the imagination. However, I maintain that writing gives us concrete examples of the dialectic at work as a totalization without its completed object of totality. Furthermore, writing offers concrete examples of how the violation of particular identities can be avoided, while offering an avenue for the unbinding of dialectics from its critiques and its reinstatement as ‘a new term of totalization,’ as Balakrishnan suggests is imminently possible.

As has already been pointed out, writing with the stylistic approaches of *aphoristics* and *parataxis*, is a very practical way of dialectically approaching totality along a trajectory of totalization. If the total work of writing and/or the writing of the total work (i.e., the grand theory, or *magnum*

*opus*), is the unachievable goal, then given the previous critique, writing must balance the *episodic* and *systematic* approaches by employing the corresponding approaches of *aphoristics* and *parataxis*. The episodic strategy of writing employs aphorisms or fragments in the work of writing—whether book or oeuvre—and is thereby able to retain and sustain internal contradictions within the scope of the total project. Because the contradictory fragments in question are not entirely teased out, and because the contradictory relation between fragments is not made systematically explicit, the work is better able to dialectically include contradictory aspects within a totalizing unity than in the case of traditional systematic writing. Systematic writing is, at first face, not capable of containing contradiction within it precisely because the relations between contradictory statements would be understood as being in irreconcilable conflict with one another (given the condition of consistency). When contradictions are made explicit, in the systematic work, the contradictory terms are either fully instantiated, or distinctively clarified. The first case involves the antinomial positing of both terms of the contradiction at once and as irreconcilable, and the second case involves an explanation of a supposed contradiction in which one term is domain-specific to one theoretical sphere, and the other term to another area of discourse (resulting in their atonement or reconciliation). The full simultaneity of contradictory terms is not widely accepted, either in systematic writing or by critics of systematic writing. When contradictory terms are fully instantiated in a systematic work, the critical response is often to point out these contra-

dictions as inconsistencies, regardless of whether they are explained or unexplained.

On the other hand, the episodic style and its aphoristic approach ensure that, if contradictions are present, the work is enriched by them and not betrayed. Rather than have the normative criterion of writing be the power of systematicity over the weakness of episodic or fragmentary writing, I argue that the two are incomplete without the other. The richness of total writing, being a mix of the episodic and systematic, must strategically employ the episodic capability to contain fully coinstantiated contradictions within the total work, as well as the systematic ability to flesh out the relations between contradictory terms, simultaneously.

Total writing has as its *telos* the paradoxical possibility and impossibility of completion, which, if it ever became fully actualized, would betray the commitment to the inviolable sanctity of identities declared previously. This model of infinite writing, which gives itself over to possibility and the new, is evident in two very different works by Adorno: the aphoristic style of the semi-autobiographical *Minima Moralia* and the *parataxis* of his posthumous magnum opus *Aesthetic Theory*.

#### § MINIMA MORALIA AND AESTHETIC THEORY

*Minima Moralia*, Adorno's reflections from a damaged life, is an episodic and aphoristic survey of various themes in art, literature, philosophy, and Adorno's own life as a thinker in exile. Divided into three chronological parts (1944, 1945, 1946-1947), the book contains reflective meditations on various themes with the only

underlying current being the author himself. One of these themes, caught between theory and biography, is that of the *observer*. Adorno writes that, “He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and mis-using his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest.”<sup>16</sup> Like the observational position, dialectics, in keeping with Jameson’s definition, involves getting some distance from opposed or contradictory terms and seeing negation or negativity in the context of a greater whole. This position, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, runs the risk of hubris and forgets the embeddedness of the observing subject. Adorno continues,

The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. (26)

The knowledge of one’s own entanglement has play in the dialectical trajectory of writing towards (but never achieving) totality. In the dialectical entanglement of the writer and the piece of writing, mediated by the writer’s presence in the piece of writing, the aphorism allows for the writer to create a text from outside without having to become fully one with the content. On the other hand, in order to be faithful to the entanglement of text and writer, and indeed between writer and reader, a certain measure of systematic engagement must be

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<sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 26. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

enacted by the writer, as Adorno suggests later in *Minima Moralia*:

A first precaution for writers: in every text, every piece, every paragraph to check whether the central motif stands out clearly enough. Anyone wishing to express something is so carried away by it that he ceases to reflect on it. Too close to his intension, 'in his thoughts,' he forgets to say what he wants to say. (85)

This paradoxical relationship between the occasional style of Adorno's aphoristic text and its perhaps musical imperative to focus on a central motif is a feature of the dialectic between the episodic and the systematic. This could be due to the distinction between form and content that has never ceased to interest dialectical theorists.

Although the editors of the text would disagree initially with the following assessment, I believe that, like *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory* is a systematic text in its form. The caveat being that the systematicity of the work is evident in its paratactical form, which is also fragmentary in its abridgment of ideas. The systematic presentation of *Aesthetic Theory*, however, is not of the crass or violent kind that would seek to make experience subservient to system or method. Instead, in its organization as a paratactical text, *Aesthetic Theory* is a work which weaves the concentric circles which Adorno praised in *Minima Moralia*: "Properly written texts are like spiders' webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm" (87). Although *parataxis* is only mentioned once, in the middle of *Aesthetic Theory* and in reference to art itself, the translator's introduction and the

editor's afterword both develop the importance of the figure for the form of the work.

In the words of Robert Hullot-Kentor, the most recent translator of *Aesthetic Theory*, the paratactical form of the work ensures that "it is oriented not to its readers but to the thing-in-itself,"<sup>17</sup> all in fidelity to Adorno's assertion of nonidentity and the idea that "[i]dentity must be more than identity in that it draws back into itself what it purports to overcome" (xi). This is certainly the case for writing, as Hullot-Kentor points out:

Thus Adorno organized *Aesthetic Theory* as a paratactical presentation of aesthetic concepts that, by eschewing subordinating structures, breaks them away from their systematic philosophical intention so that the self relinquishment that is implicit in identity could be critically explicated as what is nonintentional in them: the primacy of the object. (xii)

Divorced from their systematic intention, Adorno's aesthetic concepts affirm the primacy of the object, and similarly the text of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* puts the work of writing before both the reader and the writer. The paratactical structure of the text, as Hullot-Kentor points out,

demands that every sentence undertake to

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Translator's Introduction," in Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum Press, 1997): ix-x. All subsequent citations included parenthetically, by page number.

be the topic sentence and that the book be composed of long, complex phrases, each of which seems under the obligation to present the book as a whole, the [less reliable] 1984 translation carved up sentences in the image of declarative vehicles of content. The original paratactical text is concentrically arranged around a mute middle point through which every word seeks to be refracted and that it must express. The text cannot refer forward or backward without disturbing this nexus through which the parts become binding on each other. (xiii)

The mute middle point of the web-like text, and its inability to relinquish the burden of the whole work in each sentence by referring forward or backward makes *Aesthetic Theory* delicate. Hullot-Kentor continues, writing that,

the slightest slackening of intensity threatens to dissolve the text into a miscellany. Nothing supports the text except the intensity with which it draws on and pushes against itself. With few exceptions paratactical works are therefore short, fragmentary, and compacted by the crisis of their own abbreviation. Paratactical texts are intensive, almost to the denial of their quality of extension; and the more extensive the paratactical work actually is—and *Aesthetic Theory* is almost unparalleled in this—the greater the potential for its unraveling at each and every point. (xiv–xv)

The potential dissolution of the text on account of its paratactical structure remains consistent with Adorno's assertion of nonidentity. A text committed to the truth of identity, on the other hand, would seek to strengthen itself by individuating its concepts fixedly, and then confirming itself by systematically defining the concept once and for all. Instead of this, Adorno's text exhibits a vital weakness in its potential to unravel which is given by its ever imminent 'crisis of its abbreviation.' Hullot-Kentor calls the paratactical text fragmentary, and to a certain extent I agree, but there is an important sense in which *Aesthetic Theory* is a systematic text contra the aphoristic structure of *Minima Moralia*. The sense is that, although *Aesthetic Theory* abbreviates concepts on the level of the sentence, "A paratactical text is inimical to exposition, and Adorno uses the most condensed gestures to invoke rather than propound relevant philosophical arguments" (Hullot-Kentor, xiv–xv). *Minima Moralia* is abbreviated on the level of structure, as is made evident in its arrangement as a series of thematically focused paragraphs. Hullot-Kentor writes that, "Since the text does not labor under schematic requirements it can and must take a decisively new breath for every line" (xvi), and this is certainly the case in *Aesthetic Theory* which resists any identitarian version of systematization. In the editors' Afterword, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann write:

Adorno employs the concept of the fragment in a double sense. He means on the one hand, something productive: that theories that bear a systematic intention must collapse in fragments in order to release their truth content. Nothing of the



sort holds for the *Aesthetic Theory*. Its fragmentariness is the intrusion of death into a work before it had entirely realized its law of form.<sup>18</sup>

The intrusion of death into the work of writing, both as a concept in itself and through Adorno's heart attack prior to the official completion of *Aesthetic Theory*, is a formal aspect of paratactical abridgment, evident in the small death that occurs in the completing of a work. This is also evident in the logistical problems of *parataxis*, such as the death of the author, the author as detached observer, and also in the state of incompleteness exhibited by the work of total writing as a perpetual work in progress. This idea that every work is a work in progress is very much in line with the concept of a totalization-without-totality in writing. Every work, to some degree or other, strives to be a unified totality (even in the context of fragmentation), yet never achieves its end because of logistical barriers on the one hand (typographical errors, rejection by the publishing edifice, being forgotten in time) and conceptual barriers on the other hand (the continual firing of the dialectical engine which always generates a further negation or a further clarification). Like aphoristics, *parataxis* includes both identity and nonidentity in the work of total writing, and, if it succeeds, leaves the text vitally weakened and fragile, and yet also intensely constituted.

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<sup>18</sup> Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, "Editors' Afterword," in *Theodor Adorno: Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum Press, 1997), 460.

## § CONCLUSION

In sum—if one can honestly write summarily—the work of writing above has theorized that dialectics can be unbound of the violence of closure and reinstated as a new form of the total in writing, and that this can be accomplished *first* by the concept of totalization without totality, and *second* by the deployment of the figures of *aphorism* and *parataxis* into the work of writing. Given Adorno's assertion of nonidentity and its dialectical justification, and given Kristeva's fourth term (which may truly be Hegel's), it is possible to overcome the fear that closure or termination is inherent in the dialectic itself. It may instead be the case that we have yet to be entirely faithful to the contradictory iconoclasm of dialectical thinking, and by this I mean to say that the lineage of the dialectic as a concept is properly dialectical in itself, moving from its early stages as a dialogical concept, to the tripartite form and its critique, and through dialectical materialism to an ever new formulation. The future of the dialectic, as Jameson states in his work, is open, and my hope here is that this openness can be borne out, ontologically and symbolically, in the work of writing.



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## FURTHER READING



In order to unbind dialectics from the violence of closure, in light of the preceding work, much more than abstraction is needed. The following annotated bibliography points out several resources and further trajectories for dialectical thinking in order that it might be reimagined and given new life. I have annotated each resource with brief commentary on the role of dialectics in the work, accompanied by occasional suggestion regarding new directions for research.

Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond (2001); <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>. [Original Version: *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966.]

Given the quality of the translation, I have used an online draft version by Dennis Redmond, rather than the one by E.B. Ashton (detailed reasons for this choice can be found in a note that prefaces Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism*). In general, for Adorno, dialectics must be unbounded from the positive, and more specifically, "Dialectics is the consistent consciousness of non-identity." Against conflating difference with contradiction, Adorno points towards the con-

cept of nonidentity as that which is subjugated by 'identitarian' thinking: identity that is too fixed and too strongly individuated. The heterogeneous multiplicity of difference, according to Adorno, is done injustice by the dialectical tendency to reduce all divergence to contradiction. Throughout *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno presents a rightly troubled picture of the dialectic, not through definitions but rather through models, or exemplary constellations.

Bhaskar, Roy. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. London: Verso, 1993. [New Version: *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 2008.]

*Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* serves as a conjugation of the dialectic of Hegel and Marx (and others), with Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realist philosophy. Despite the heavy terminology and use of acronymic short-forms, the work does give some of the most lucid descriptions of the dialectic available to the contemporary reader. Bhaskar describes the dialectic first in terms of social or conceptual "conflict, interconnection and change" (3). Opposition then leads to transcendence, and in such a way that does not necessarily (for Bhaskar) include sublation or preservation (*Aufhebung*). With a focus on ontology, Bhaskar puts emphasis (like Kristeva and Adorno) on negativity, absence, and non-being. The work also proceeds from an important distinction between dialectical connection, and contradiction—meaning that the former need not necessarily indicate the presence of the latter. In addition to this, Bhaskar traces the lineage of the dialectic back to Aristotle, and then further to Zeno and his paradoxes. Lastly, and importantly,

Bhaskar's nuanced version of the dialectic also includes figures such as "the hiatus, chiasmus, and pause" (8).

Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C.L. Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Where other works referenced above and in this bibliography treat the dialectic in abstract terms (which is a valid approach to a properly theoretical figure), Fanon's treatment of the dialectic in Chapter Five of *Black Skin, White Masks* is much more immanent to real social concerns. For Fanon the dialectic is, at least in part, a reductive figure. Arising from his introspection Fanon's concern is that his being situated between the desire to be black, and the desire to be white, is reduced to a mere stage of a greater dialectic. The perspective of a supposedly greater context, given by the dialectic, is a condescending and supremacist perspective that would use the dialectic as insulation against the singular reality of concrete and immanent situations. This is a problem for dialectics in that, given an optimistic reading, it is against the dialectical impulse of totalization to be reductive in any way. The question for many, then, is whether the dialectic is idealistic (in the pejorative sense), and therefore inevitably reductive. I take this to be a pessimistic view, but I grant that the spirit of caution within it is very important for a nonviolent dialectics.

Groys, Boris. *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas H. Ford. London: Verso, 2009.

For Boris Groys, in his short treatise, the heart of the *logos* is paradox. This intensely dialectical



claim is backed by a robust and underlying definition of dialectical materialism that is present throughout the work, and appears alongside a critique of capitalist thought in the worthy tradition of the Frankfurt School and its Critical Theory. For more on Groys and his project, see Maxwell Kennel, “Weakness, Paradox, and Communist Logics: A Review Essay,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 16.2 (2012): 251–259, and “The Spirit of Contradiction: An Encounter with *Introduction to Anti-philosophy*,” *PhaenEx: Journal of Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* 8.1 (2013): 311–323.

Jameson, Fredric. *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 2009.

The eleventh chapter of Jameson’s collection, titled “Persistencies of the Dialectic: Three Sites,” is an excellent introduction to the dialectic and its history as a figure. Jameson avoids some of the traditional descriptors associated with the dialectic (sublation, negation, etc.) and instead turns to reflexivity, narrativity (*telos*, history), and (appropriately) contradiction. Articulating a sensible and sensitive understanding of the dialectic, Jameson also clarifies the question of the relationship between the dialectic and ‘method,’ early on in the essay.

Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

In the second section of Kristeva’s work, there is a chapter entitled “The Fourth ‘Term’ of the Dialectic,” which outlines the concept of ‘nega-

tivity' also outlined in the preceding work. For Kristeva the dialectic is structured by a negativity that is distinct from nothingness and negation, and which mediates and supersedes being and nothingness as a "liquefying and dissolving agent" (109). While critiquing the supersession in Hegelian dialectic as "erasing heterogeneity," she posits that negativity, in the true dialectic, "prevents the closing up of Being" and allows us to move from triplicity to this fourth term (113).

Lefebvre, Henri. *Dialectical Materialism*, trans. John Sturrock. New edn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

An excellent introduction to dialectical materialism, Lefebvre's study of Hegel and Marx digs into the mechanics of the dialectic. Addressing contradiction, negation, and sublation (*Aufhebung*), the book puts dialectical terminology and vocabulary to work, and puts forth a refreshingly positive view of contradiction: "dialectical unity is not a confusion of the contradictory terms as such, but a unity which passes through the contradiction and is re-established at a higher level" (27).



## AFTERWORD & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This work began as the main thesis for my undergraduate degree in Philosophy and Rhetoric & Professional Writing at the University of Waterloo. It was completed in May 2012 under the supervision of Dr. Winfried Siemerling of the English Department. Before submitting *Dialectics Unbound*, I had also submitted a longer piece entitled *Notes on the Compendium*, which would form my minor thesis, being structured more like a manifesto and suffering from an acute crisis of abridgment.

In the spirit of the Dead Letter Office series, *Dialectics Unbound* is that work bound for nowhere and yet retaining the “possibility and . . . darkling shape of a more full-bodied form and structure” that the series prospectus promises. In light of this, I have also sought to expand *Notes on the Compendium* and it is my hope that it will appear soon as an expansion and actualization of the ontology of identity and totality expressed above.

In the way of acknowledgment, I am first thankful for my family and their support and for providing me with a space to write and think, complete with warmth, food, coffee, and healthy distraction. I would also like to thank my advisor Winfried Siemerling for agreeing to advise this

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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament. He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distances would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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*From a certain point on, there is no more turning  
back. That is the point that must be reached.*

~ Franz Kafka, *The Zurau Aphorisms*

## Dialectics Unbound

### On the Possibility of Total Writing

Maxwell Kennel

*From a certain point on, there is no more turning back. That is the point that must be reached.*

~ Franz Kafka, *The Zurai Aphorisms*

*Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing* re-imagines figures of ontological totality, in and out of writing, first by exploring some lineages of the dialectic, and second by engaging thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and his assertion of nonidentity, Julia Kristeva and her positing of a fourth term of the dialectic, and Fredric Jameson's treatment of the dialectic as an open totality. By articulating a concept of totalization-without-totally, *Dialectics Unbound* seeks to free the concept of the dialectic from the violence of closure, and then to take this unbound dialectics to the work of writing through a brief examination of *parataxis* and *aphoristics* as approaches to writing, both possible and impossible.

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