Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing

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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. 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

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.12

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

to the immanent nature of consciousness, that which is in contradiction has itself the character of inescapable and catastrophic nomothetism [Gesetzmässigkeit: 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”. 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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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.