Lineages of the Dialectic

Published by

MaxwellKennel.

Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing,


For additional information about this book

https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76444
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 (*moné*), to the
leaving of oneself (próhodos), and then to a return to self (epistrophé),\(^2\) 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*,\(^3\) and condemned as too reductive a schema by Gustav E. Mueller in his article “The Hegel Legend of Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,”\(^4\) 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-


formation of Hegel’s thought into a systemic philosophy—into Hegelianism. . . .

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,6 (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-

---

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.7

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

---

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.”

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).

---

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.9

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