Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing
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uncomprehended,” as Hegel perceived to be the case in Kantian philosophy.  

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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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.¹⁰

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

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