Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing

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§ 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.”¹ In the following pages, I aim to respond to that need, particularly where the relationship

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