Kristeva contra Adorno

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§ 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 exposits 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.

§ A PHORISTICS 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