Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing
MaxwellKennel

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§ A FOURTH TERM?

Apart from the suggestion that writing can enact a totalization without totality, there has been little description of what a dialectics unbound of the violence of closure would look like. First, it is surely important to affirm a concept of dialectical totalization as a trajectory towards a telos rather than a closed system, as we have done above, but in order to embody this hope it may be necessary to introduce a fourth term into the dialectical process in order to carry through that non-terminating process. Fredric Jameson points out that this possibility is made explicit by Hegel himself, stating:

Meanwhile, the tripartite formula is calculated to mislead and confuse the reader who seeks to process this material in a series of three steps: something for example utterly impossible to complete in the structurally far more complex play of oppositions in the chapter on the secular culture of absolutism; and alarmingly rebuked by Hegel himself in that famous passage at the end of the greater Logic in which he allows that “three” might be “four” after all.\(^{14}\)

The importance of this suggestion by Hegel is clarified by Jameson who cautions against the reduction of the dialectical process to the execution of three easy steps (after which the dialectic is complete). Regardless of whether the synthesis becomes the new thesis, it remains that

there is far more to the dialectic than merely the repetition of a formulaic triad.

Another thinker who affirms this fourth term, albeit under a different name, is the French philosopher Julia Kristeva who argues that negativity, not negation or nothingness, is the fourth term of the Hegelian dialectic. For Kristeva, negativity is “both the cause and the organizing principle of the process” of the dialectic. Negativity mediates and supersedes the concrete moments of being and nothingness, and “while maintaining their dualism, negativity recasts not only the theses of being and nothingness, but all categories used in the contemplative system: universal and particular, indeterminate and determinate, quality and quantity, negation and affirmation etc.” (Kristeva, 109). The possibility of maintaining the independence of both parts of the dualism amidst a dialectically unified totalization is reassuring when we recall the fear of losing the particularity of identities to indiscriminate synthesis or subjugation under a homogenizing regime. Kristeva’s assessment of the fourth term of the dialectic as negativity is reassuring in that it allows for the maintenance of the specificity of particular dichotomized identities. The maintained dichotomies listed above are as much a concern for the question of dialectical totality in ontology as for the question of dialectical totality in semiotics, and furthermore in practical concerns of writing. As we will

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see below, the strategic use of the *aphorism* and *parataxis* in writing allows for a similar maintenance of particular identity, amidst the struggle for totality via the dialectic, in the context of a greater whole work of writing.

Kristeva continues by arguing that negativity is the driving force behind both Hegel’s negation, and his negation of negation, while also arguing that negativity remains separate from both terms. Negativity functions as a “liquefying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather re-activates new organizations and, in a sense, affirms” (Kristeva, 109). This latter point is very much in line with the affirmation that arises out of the negation of negation for Hegel. The former, however, may give rise to fears about the solvent quality of totality as that which takes in every thesis and synthesizes it with its antithesis into a homogenous total system. Against this, Kristeva affirms that, in the move from Hegel’s dialectic to dialectical materialism, negativity “already prepared the way for the very possibility of thinking a materialist process” (Kristeva, 110). For Kristeva, Hegel’s concept of negativity ‘links’ and ‘unleashes’ both the real and the conceptual in its conceptual unity, and furthermore this conceptual unity “culminates in the ethical order: although it is *objectivity* itself, negativity is at the same time and for that very reason the ‘free subject’” (Kristeva, 110). Kristeva states that this free subject “effects its *Aufhebung* in order to reintroduce him into a process of transformation of community relations and discursive strata” (Kristeva, 110), much like Adorno’s subject who instates nonidentity and resists the false society of *Geist*.