dictions as inconsistencies, regardless of whether they are explained or unexplained.

On the other hand, the episodic style and its aphoristic approach ensure that, if contradictions are present, the work is enriched by them and not betrayed. Rather than have the normative criterion of writing be the power of systematicity over the weakness of episodic or fragmentary writing, I argue that the two are incomplete without the other. The richness of total writing, being a mix of the episodic and systematic, must strategically employ the episodic capability to contain fully coinstantiated contradictions within the total work, as well as the systematic ability to flesh out the relations between contradictory terms, simultaneously.

Total writing has as its telos the paradoxical possibility and impossibility of completion, which, if it ever became fully actualized, would betray the commitment to the inviolable sanctity of identities declared previously. This model of infinite writing, which gives itself over to possibility and the new, is evident in two very different works by Adorno: the aphoristic style of the semi-autobiographical Minima Moralia and the parataxis of his posthumous magnum opus Aesthetic Theory.

§ Minima Moralia and Aesthetic Theory

Minima Moralia, Adorno’s reflections from a damaged life, is an episodic and aphoristic survey of various themes in art, literature, philosophy, and Adorno’s own life as a thinker in exile. Divided into three chronological parts (1944, 1945, 1946-1947), the book contains reflective meditations on various themes with the only
underlying current being the author himself. One of these themes, caught between theory and biography, is that of the observer. Adorno writes that, “He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest.”

Like the observational position, dialectics, in keeping with Jameson’s definition, involves getting some distance from opposed or contradictory terms and seeing negation or negativity in the context of a greater whole. This position, as Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, runs the risk of hubris and forgets the embeddedness of the observing subject. Adorno continues,

The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. (26)

The knowledge of one’s own entanglement has play in the dialectical trajectory of writing towards (but never achieving) totality. In the dialectical entanglement of the writer and the piece of writing, mediated by the writer’s presence in the piece of writing, the aphorism allows for the writer to create a text from outside without having to become fully one with the content. On the other hand, in order to be faithful to the entanglement of text and writer, and indeed between writer and reader, a certain measure of systematic engagement must be

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enacted by the writer, as Adorno suggests later in *Minima Moralia*:

> A first precaution for writers: in every text, every piece, every paragraph to check whether the central motif stands out clearly enough. Anyone wishing to express something is so carried away by it that he ceases to reflect on it. Too close to his intension, ‘in his thoughts,’ he forgets to say what he wants to say. (85)

This paradoxical relationship between the occasional style of Adorno’s aphoristic text and its perhaps musical imperative to focus on a central motif is a feature of the dialectic between the episodic and the systematic. This could be due to the distinction between form and content that has never ceased to interest dialectical theorists.

Although the editors of the text would disagree initially with the following assessment, I believe that, like *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory* is a systematic text in its form. The caveat being that the systematicity of the work is evident in its paratactical form, which is also fragmentary in its abridgment of ideas. The systematic presentation of *Aesthetic Theory*, however, is not of the crass or violent kind that would seek to make experience subservient to system or method. Instead, in its organization as a paratactical text, *Aesthetic Theory* is a work which weaves the concentric circles which Adorno praised in *Minima Moralia*: “Properly written texts are like spiders’ webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm” (87). Although *parataxis* is only mentioned once, in the middle of *Aesthetic Theory* and in reference to art itself, the translator’s introduction and the
editor's afterword both develop the importance of the figure for the form of the work.

In the words of Robert Hullot-Kentor, the most recent translator of *Aesthetic Theory*, the paratactical form of the work ensures that “it is oriented not to its readers but to the thing-in-itself,” all in fidelity to Adorno’s assertion of nonidentity and the idea that “[i]dentity must be more than identity in that it draws back into itself what it purports to overcome” (xi). This is certainly the case for writing, as Hullot-Kentor points out:

Thus Adorno organized *Aesthetic Theory* as a paratactical presentation of aesthetic concepts that, by eschewing subordinating structures, breaks them away from their systematic philosophical intention so that the self relinquishment that is implicit in identity could be critically explicated as what is nonintentional in them: the primacy of the object. (xii)

Divorced from their systematic intention, Adorno’s aesthetic concepts affirm the primacy of the object, and similarly the text of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* puts the work of writing before both the reader and the writer. The paratactical structure of the text, as Hullot-Kentor points out,

demands that every sentence undertake to

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be the topic sentence and that the book be composed of long, complex phrases, each of which seems under the obligation to present the book as a whole, the [less reliable] 1984 translation carved up sentences in the image of declarative vehicles of content. The original paratactical text is concentrically arranged around a mute middle point through which every word seeks to be refracted and that it must express. The text cannot refer forward or backward without disturbing this nexus through which the parts become binding on each other. (xiii)

The mute middle point of the web-like text, and its inability to relinquish the burden of the whole work in each sentence by referring forward or backward makes Aesthetic Theory delicate. Hullot-Kentor continues, writing that,

the slightest slackening of intensity threatens to dissolve the text into a miscellany. Nothing supports the text except the intensity with which it draws on and pushes against itself. With few exceptions paratactical works are therefore short, fragmentary, and compacted by the crisis of their own abbreviation. Paratactical texts are intensive, almost to the denial of their quality of extension; and the more extensive the paratactical work actually is—and Aesthetic Theory is almost unparalleled in this—the greater the potential for its unraveling at each and every point. (xiv–xv)
The potential dissolution of the text on account of its paratactical structure remains consistent with Adorno’s assertion of nonidentity. A text committed to the truth of identity, on the other hand, would seek to strengthen itself by individuating its concepts fixedly, and then confirming itself by systematically defining the concept once and for all. Instead of this, Adorno’s text exhibits a vital weakness in its potential to unravel which is given by its ever imminent ‘crisis of its abbreviation.’ Hullot-Kentor calls the paratactical text fragmentary, and to a certain extent I agree, but there is an important sense in which Aesthetic Theory is a systematic text contra the aphoristic structure of Minima Moralia. The sense is that, although Aesthetic Theory abbreviates concepts on the level of the sentence, “A paratactical text is inimical to exposition, and Adorno uses the most condensed gestures to invoke rather than propound relevant philosophical arguments” (Hullot-Kentor, xiv–xv). Minima Moralia is abbreviated on the level of structure, as is made evident in its arrangement as a series of thematically focused paragraphs. Hullot-Kentor writes that, “Since the text does not labor under schematic requirements it can and must take a decisively new breath for every line” (xvi), and this is certainly the case in Aesthetic Theory which resists any identitarian version of systematization. In the editors’ Afterword, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann write:

Adorno employs the concept of the fragment in a double sense. He means on the one hand, something productive: that theories that bear a systematic intention must collapse in fragments in order to release their truth content. Nothing of the
sort holds for the *Aesthetic Theory*. Its fragmentariness is the intrusion of death into a work before it had entirely realized its law of form.  

The intrusion of death into the work of writing, both as a concept in itself and through Adorno’s heart attack prior to the official completion of *Aesthetic Theory*, is a formal aspect of paratactical abridgment, evident in the small death that occurs in the completing of a work. This is also evident in the logistical problems of *parataxis*, such as the death of the author, the author as detached observer, and also in the state of incompleteness exhibited by the work of total writing as a perpetual work in progress. This idea that every work is a work in progress is very much in line with the concept of a totalization-without-totality in writing. Every work, to some degree or other, strives to be a unified totality (even in the context of fragmentation), yet never achieves its end because of logistical barriers on the one hand (typographical errors, rejection by the publishing edifice, being forgotten in time) and conceptual barriers on the other hand (the continual firing of the dialectical engine which always generates a further negation or a further clarification). Like aphoristics, *parataxis* includes both identity and nonidentity in the work of total writing, and, if it succeeds, leaves the text vitally weakened and fragile, and yet also intensely constituted.

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