Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing

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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.

§ APHORISTICS 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 para-taxis, 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
opus), is the unachievable goal, then given the previous critique, writing must balance the episodic and systematic approaches by employing the corresponding approaches of aphoristics and parataxis. The episodic strategy of writing employs aphorisms or fragments in the work of writing—whether book or oeuvre—and is thereby able to retain and sustain internal contradictions within the scope of the total project. Because the contradictory fragments in question are not entirely teased out, and because the contradictory relation between fragments is not made systematically explicit, the work is better able to dialectically include contradictory aspects within a totalizing unity than in the case of traditional systematic writing. Systematic writing is, at first face, not capable of containing contradiction within it precisely because the relations between contradictory statements would be understood as being in irreconcilable conflict with one another (given the condition of consistency). When contradictions are made explicit, in the systematic work, the contradictory terms are either fully instantiated, or distinctively clarified. The first case involves the antinomical positing of both terms of the contradiction at once and as irreconcilable, and the second case involves an explanation of a supposed contradiction in which one term is domain-specific to one theoretical sphere, and the other term to another area of discourse (resulting in their atonement or reconciliation). The full simultaneity of contradictory terms is not widely accepted, either in systematic writing or by critics of systematic writing. When contradictory terms are fully instantiated in a systematic work, the critical response is often to point out these contra-
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