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Undialectics: Marx and Hegel Thinking Through Roland Barthes

ANDY STAFFORD

Introduction

In a recent review article on Marxism and contradiction, Joshua Moufawad-Paul (2020) complains that the word “dialectical” is often employed “like a magical wand to sanctify various relational phenomena”; and that, consequently, “dialectical and relational are taken to be synonymous [...] [and] the term ‘dialectical relationship’ is a tautology.” It is with this idea in mind that we investigate here the use of the dialectic, of dialectics, in the work of Roland Barthes. Peppered throughout his voluminous writings, published and unpublished, the dialectic and the dialectical are regularly invoked to underline as well as explore complexity and, in the case of *Mythologies*, to combat the elusive powers of myth and its ideological distortions.

Such is the regularity with which Barthes invokes dialectical thought and such is the inventiveness (as this article will argue) with which he designs and provisionally recommends nuances, modifications and neologisms. “Dialectique interne,” “dialectique d’amour,” “dialectique à deux termes / temps,” “dialectique amputée” are all terms coined by Barthes in his early career; and later, Japan shows him a “dialectique nouvelle” (*L’Empire des signes* 97).

In Barthes’s early writings, the dialectic finds its expression in his writings on the nineteenth-century romantic historian Jules Michelet. Using two slightly different expressions—the “dialectique à deux termes” and the “dialectique à deux temps” (“Michelet, l’Histoire et la Mort” 110-12)—Barthes tried in the 1950s to show how the oneness in Michelet’s historiography with the “people” of history, the historian’s total identification with the forgotten masses of the past, was beholden to a dialectical form of writing. By both

being here in the present (the present of Michelet's writing of the 1840s and 1850s) and at the same time *with* the masses in the past—in *their* present, as it were—, Michelet was able to solve the historian's conundrum by applying a "two-term" dialectic to his writing of history, in what Barthes called Michelet's "double saisie" (Michelet 23).

It may be also that, alongside the Brechtianism and Sartrianism of Barthes's ideological critique in *Mythologies*, there is a deeply Nietzschean strand, albeit based on the earliest writings in Nietzsche's first essay *The Birth of Tragedy*. Indeed, it is a Nietzschean suspicion of Socratic dialectics that informs Barthes's approach to the dialectic. Nietzsche's infamous rejection of the dialectic—be it socratic, Hegelian, Marxian, or other—seems to have contributed to the unorthodox nature of Barthes's use of the dialectic. Indeed, in his 1960 essay "Écrivains et écrivains," Barthes explained, in a footnote, that he felt a strong pressure to "être dialectique"; he argued however that being dialectical was only possible at the level of analysis, and not at all in the way that writing—language in general—operated: one could not actually *write* in a dialectical fashion (Stafford, "Roland Barthes, dialecticien?" 221).

Barthes's reticence in 1960 to "*having to be*" dialectical was undoubtedly connected to the publication the same year of Jean-Paul Sartre's two-volume *magnum opus* on the dialectic. Sartre defined it antithetically, the "anti-dialectique" being the "moment (intelligible) du dépassement, par la matérialité, des libres praxis individuelles, en tant qu'elles sont multiples" (*Critique de la raison dialectique* t. II 459). The alienation that anti-dialectical thought entailed, Mark Poster has suggested (*Sartre's Marxism* 37 59), underlined that the Sartrian dialectic was synonymous with totality. This was at odds with Barthes's growing interest in the late 1950s in the structure of the "detail," be it in fashion, Brechtian theatre or photography (Stafford, "Afterword: Something out of Nothing" 139–40). Furthermore, in the first volume, Sartre had argued that though language was the intermediary between "structures inter-individuelles" and represented an act that was deeply historical (181), language was nevertheless to be taken as a "dispersion," not an act of "totalité"; for Sartre, this meant considering humans as entirely separate individuals, and that, in good Hegelian fashion, individuals were linked to an "extériorité absolue—leur lieu historique et concret d'intériorité" (*Critique de la raison dialectique* t. I 182). Sartre's view in 1960 of atomised individuals was likely of no use to the semiology and structuralism that Barthes was developing; nor did it suggest that language could actually *be* dialectical.

This reticence towards, or suspicion of, the written dialectic dovetailed with Barthes's development of semiology and structuralist analyses. Though

Saussurean linguistics was based on a differential model of analysis that placed the unity of opposites at the base of its method, structuralism developed this unity of opposites—in a manner not dissimilar to the way Mao's thought privileged the unity of opposites—towards an unsynthesised dialectic, an open-ended, formalist dialectic that seemed at once to eschew the Hegelian and Marxian one and, simultaneously, to posit a hyper-dialectical sensibility.¹ A reading of Barthes's 1970 writing on Japan, alongside his posthumously published writing on China based on the *Tel Quel* visit of 1974, shows how his own writing tried to grapple with the dialectic as a form of writing but which, ultimately, seemed to elude him. Indeed, it was during this period 1970–1974 that Barthes changed his analysis of Marx and came to see him as a “writer of paradox.” The nature of language was such that even Marx—the theoretician and practitioner of the dialectic was unable to *write* the dialectic in his research on Capital.

However, it is the final neologism, in Barthes's final essay *La Chambre Claire* (1980), that of “indialectique,” which we will investigate here. This will require reading Barthes through Marx and then Hegel. We will do this backwards as it were, not out of an isomorphism with Hegelian undialectical formulations, but because, at least in terms of dialectics, Barthes seems to read Hegel through Marx. This raises questions also about the constantly increasing importance of Hegel across Barthes's career, either as support for his ideas, more commonly though as foil. If both Jacob Bittner (2017) and Nikolaj Lübecker (2010) establish the Hegelian dimensions to the “early Barthes” in *Le degré zero l'écriture* in 1953, both then skip to the “late Barthes.” Bittner traces the “absolute of literature” in Barthes's 1979 lectures *La Préparation du roman*; whereas Lübecker considers *Comment vivre ensemble*, adducing notions of community and distance that suggest an interpretation of Hegel in the “late Barthes” at odds with Alexandre Kojève's insistence on recognition as the key element (*Community, Myth and Recognition* 123–130).

Barthes's differences with Kojève's near-hegemonic imposition of his Hegel since the lectures he had given in Paris in the 1930s might have encouraged the humorous and ironic “Et si je n'avais pas lu Hegel?” (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 678). Indeed, the idea that Barthes had not read Hegel is highly unlikely, as his reading and use of Hegel is one of regularity and wide variety across his career. To my mind there is little doubt, for example, that not only had Barthes read Hegel's *La peinture hollandaise, ou la transfiguration de la vie quotidienne* ([1827–1830] 1964) before he went to look at Dutch painting in Delft and to write “Le monde-objet” in 1953, but also that he was seeking to radicalise Hegelian aesthetics. Why else use as the epigraph to “Le monde objet”

this (relatively obscure) quotation from Marx (but which Barthes subsequently removed from the *Essais critiques* version in 1964): “L’histoire ne peut répondre aux vieilles questions qu’en s’en posant de nouvelles” (Barthes, “Le monde objet” 394)? It suggests that the profoundly historical-materialist reading of Dutch masters in “Le monde objet” was, originally at least, Barthes’s attempt to marxianise Hegel’s aesthetics, just as *Le degré zéro* had “marxianised” Sartre’s.

Writers, thinkers, and crucially essayists in French, since the 1950s, have engaged with, and then (of course) overcome, Hegelian dialectics in what Malgorzata Kowalska (2015) has called “dialectics beyond dialectics.” The various iterations of dialectics in Barthes’s work run alongside these “dialectics after dialectics,” but take a different route. The Barthesian dialectic—were there to be such a thing—moves towards a truly *writerly* praxis: or rather series of *essais* (experiments) in writing the dialectic, writing “dialectically,” in both signifier *and* signified. It is a sort of writing-constraint beloved of the OULIPO, but, as always with Barthes, “responsible.” We will try to navigate the various engagements with both Hegel and Marx in Barthes’s writings, without getting caught up in the lengthy debates over Marx’s complex use and abandoning of Hegelian thought and method discussed recently by Alex Callinicos (2014), Frederick Jameson (2010) and Jean-François Gava (2011).

Gava’s work on “contrariety without dialectics” in Hegel and Marx gives us a useful philosophical context to Barthes’s suggestion that Marx’s language itself is “undialectical.” It is worth pointing out at once that the “indialectique” [undialectical] is not to be taken as the anti- or the non-dialectical—that immobilised and ossified figure that Barthes, in *Mythologies* in 1957, had considered as typical of, if not fundamental to, bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology and cultural hegemony. The “undialectical,” in other words, contains the dialectical; or rather, it is not its polar opposite; acting more like a supplement, the dialectical in the undialectical allows, paradoxically, for a productive, if not radical, form of critical engagement. In this sense, the undialectical is to be sharply differentiated from the “negative dialectics” of the Frankfurt School and of Western Marxism more generally. The undialectical, at least in Barthes’s thought, may be closer to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*Les aventures de la dialectique* 251-2) called “hyperdialectique,” a taking of the dialectical to its formal and formalist extreme. The working hypothesis of this article then is that the “undialectic” is Barthes’s way to “bend the stick” in the historical dialectic, towards a voluntarism of human agency, away from the determinism of passivity; in other words, to expose the malleability of human society in relation to its eternalist fixity.

I Paradox in Marx and Barthes

“La subversion la plus profonde [...] consiste [...] à inventer un discours paradoxal [...]”

(Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 812)

This project in Barthes's work betrays a level of complexity because it involved a language-based investigation and theorisation of Historical Materialism that begins with a suspicion of any links made between History and Language and which will, later in his career, become a wider critique of the “verisimilar” in language (Amossy, “Introduction to the Study of Doxa”). This included close analysis of Marxist language, in all its facets. In 1953, Barthes described Marxist writing as “litotique,” in which “chaque mot n'est plus qu'une référence exigüe à l'ensemble des principes qui le soutient d'une façon inavouée” (*Le degré zéro de l'écriture* 20). He cited the frequently-used word “impliquer” in Marxist language, for example, which eschewed its neutral dictionary-definition in favour of a “signe algébrique qui représente toute une parenthèse de postulats antérieurs”: “[I]née à une action, l'écriture marxiste est rapidement devenue [...] un langage de la valeur”; and this was évident, he suggested, even in Marx's own writing, which, though “en général explicative,” shows this “valeur” (21). Barthes nuanced his argument carefully however. Even though Stalinism had built on values to create a language which was beholden to “values” only and purely “tautologique,” he delineated Stalinised language from a true “explication marxiste des faits, ou une rationalité révolutionnaire des actes,” in that Stalinised language merely described the real “sous sa forme jugée, imposant une lecture immédiate des condamnations.” As Philippe Roger points out (*Roland Barthes, roman* 316-7), Barthes was quick to differentiate Stalinist language from that of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky which, “proprement marxiste,” had none of the “stalinisme triomphant” (22).

Though sharply distinguishing a false language of Marxism from a real one, Barthes's analysis of Marx's own use of language was acutely aware of its value-laden tendencies. It was not far then for him to underline, twenty years later in 1971, “la nature indialectique du langage” in Marx, an “écriture paradoxale” that could counter doxa only and was not able to operate on the world beyond anything more than “la chaîne des discours” (“Ecrivains, Intellectuels, Professeurs” 894-5). This was based on a reading of Marx's famous 1847 critique of the anarchist maverick Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

Barthes's reading in 1945 of Marx and Engel's *Holy Family* (1844) had not been useful nor enjoyable by all accounts—"lourd, ennuyeux" (Calvet 99), "faible et puérile" (Samoyault 208)—though the German philosophers' first published book was possibly more profitable to Barthes than is acknowledged. Nonetheless, it is the Marx and Engels of their next two writings, *The German Ideology* (1845) and then *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), that have left their mark on Barthes's work. *The German Ideology*, not widely available in Western Europe until 1952, is unmistakable in *Mythologies* and especially "Le mythe, aujourd'hui" in 1957. However, the "undialectical" that Barthes attributed to Marx's writing referred to *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

If *The Holy Family* involved a defence of Proudhon's early critique of political economy, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx's first major critique of political economy, he dismissed Proudhon's work for its use of Hegelian dialectics and for failing to rise "above the bourgeois horizon." For Marx, Proudhon failed to see that "economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production"; "holding things upside down like a true philosopher," Proudhon saw in actual relations "nothing but the incarnation of these [. . .] categories" (*The Poverty of Philosophy* chapter 2, section 1, second observation). Indeed, the very title of Marx's broadside against Proudhon illustrates Barthes's point about undialectical writing in Marx's work. The subtitle of *La Misère de la philosophie* (originally written in French in 1847)—"Une réponse à la philosophie de la misère par M. Proudhon"—was a direct inversion of the title of Proudhon's 1846 essay *Philosophie de la misère*, and which uses a neatly-balanced, inverted paradox.²

Unlike *The Holy Family* or *the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—the latter of which Barthes did apparently enjoy (Stafford "Roland Barthes, dialecticien?" 228)—, we do not have any accurate record of Barthes's reading of *The Poverty of Philosophy* before his 1971 discussion of "undialectical language" in Marx. Indeed, the only reference to Proudhon in the early Barthes is to the former's astoundment in 1858 at the politically-tortuous nature of Michelet's "prodigieux chemin" (Michelet 174, note 40). However, there is a distinctly Marxian paradox, an "indialectique," in Barthes's extraordinary 1958 critique of Voltaire.

A key political moment of the perceived *coup d'état* by Général de Gaulle in May 1958 is the opportunity for Barthes to write a Marxian paradox whilst showing Voltaire's philosophical and political shortcomings: "Voltaire n'a d'autre système que la haine du système (et l'on sait qu'il n'y a rien de plus âpre que ce système-là)" ("Le dernier écrivain heureux" 99). In continually

opposing “intelligence” to “intellectualité,” Voltaire had participated in a “lutte manichéenne entre la Bêtise et l’Intelligence” in which system belongs to the former and “toute liberté de l’esprit” to the latter (100). We will return to this opposition between “bêtise” and “intelligence.” Barthes’s dialectical solution in 1958 to this paradox is to point to the liberalism that it founds, albeit a contradictory one:

Comme système du non-système, l’anti-intellectualisme élude et gagne sur les deux tableaux, joue à un perpétuel tourniquet entre la mauvaise foi et la bonne conscience, le pessimisme de fond et l’allégresse de la forme, le scepticisme proclamé et le doute terroriste. (100)

Barthes’s description of Voltaire’s “alibi incessant”—“cette simplicité et ce bonheur”—suggested that it was bought at a price: “une ablation de l’Histoire et [. . .] une immobilisation du monde”; against which Barthes posited Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s view of the corruption of humanity by society through which Rousseau could establish “le principe d’un dépassement permanent de l’Histoire” (100).

It is interesting to note that, one decade later in 1971, following his brief analysis of Marx’s undialectical language and the resultant paradoxes, Barthes seemed to revisit his 1958 critique of Voltaire’s lack of system, but with a modified outcome for the use of the paradox and its radical potential:

[U]n système qui réclame des corrections, des translations, des ouvertures et des dénégations est plus utile qu’une absence informulée de système; on évite alors, par chance, l’immobilité du babil, on rejoint la chaîne historique des discours, le *progrès* (*progressus*) de la discursivité. (“Ecrivains, Intellectuels, Professeurs” 895)

This is a good example of Barthes’s own “spiral.” Whereas in 1958 he had “resolved” the Voltaire blockage using intellectual and anti-intellectual, here by contrast—faced with the same paradox—he now transcended the paradox with a forward-moving motion of the *à-coups* in Chomsky, but also in Marx whose “discours est presque entièrement *paradoxal*.” For Barthes, the “détachement” and “reprise” involved in critiquing Proudhon, for example, did not lead to a circle but a spiral; this was thanks to the “*déport* de la circularité (de la forme paradoxale)” in which the “déterminations historiques” of Marx’s writing could be articulated.

However, to get the measure of Barthes’s “undialectics”—his use of paradox—we must now consider the regular engagement with Hegel in his

work. According to Lucien Colletti (cited in Gava, *Contrariété* 245), rather than Hegel, “le père moderne de la théorie des oppositions réelles est Kant.” Nevertheless, in 1873, in the postface to the second edition of *Capital* volume 1, Marx had suggested that Hegel’s “mystification” of the dialectic “by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner” (*Capital* 103). The battle over Hegel’s dialectic had thus already begun. Far be it from our argument to suggest that Barthes specifically intervened in this perennial debate; however, it will become clear hopefully, in this second section on Hegel, that Barthes actively engaged with both Marxian and Hegelian dialectical formulations. It is the undialectical that bears this out.

II Hegelian paradox

Though Barthes’s “indialectique” was used negatively in relation to Sartre and Marx’s inability to use language dialectically (and thereby get beyond paradox), this turns around in *La Chambre claire*. The notion of “undialectics” is stated most clearly—perhaps surprisingly—in his final essay in 1980, where, quoting Hegel and Edgar Morin and their work on death, Barthes laments that, as a person who has produced no offspring, his own impending (and imminent) demise was to be an “undialectical” one (848). However, and by way of a dialectical inversion, he also suggested, in good essayistic fashion—that is, provisionally, provocatively—that, via photography, or rather via a photograph (a portrait of his mother as a young girl, the “winter-garden” image which we never see), he had actually now managed to inscribe his own mother into immortality. This is because he had turned history backwards and begat, in writerly fashion, this little girl who became, by way of an *entelechia* in the photograph, his own “offspring,” albeit in a purely writerly or intellectual manner. It is this raising of the undialectical, the negatively undialectical (that is, unproductive, without trace, empty in future terms), to the positive, even voluntarist, *Aufhebung* of production, that should retain us here. Indeed, it was Marx in *The Holy Family* who had noticed this backwards (dare we say, proto-deconstructionist?) mode in Hegel’s thought: “In Hegel’s philosophy of History, as in his philosophy of nature, the son engenders the mother, the spirit nature, the Christian religion paganism, the result the beginning” (*Holy Family* chapter 8a).

If Barthes’s very last essay was adopting in the notion of “undialectics” the (paradoxical) backwards movement of History, there is an equally telling

deployment of Hegel at the very beginning of his career, in his 1942 article on André Gide:

Je voudrais que ceux qui reprochent à Gide ses contradictions (son refus de choisir comme tout le monde), se rappellent cette page de Hegel: "Pour le sens commun, l'opposition du vrai et du faux est quelque chose de fixe; il attend que l'on approuve ou bien que l'on rejette en bloc un système existant. Il ne conçoit pas la différence des systèmes philosophiques comme le développement progressif de la vérité; pour lui diversité veut dire uniquement contradiction. . . L'esprit qui saisit la contradiction ne sait pas la libérer et la conserver dans son unilatéralité et reconnaître dans la forme de ce qui semble se combattre et se contredire, des moments mutuellement nécessaires." ("Notes sur André Gide et son *Journal*" 36)

Quoting Hegel in 1942 from the second premise of the Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to defend contradiction in Gide's diaries might look like a hammer to crack a nut; but it underlined the radical spirit of contradiction, the sensitivity to dialectics, that the young Barthes had developed even before his initiation into Marxism three years later. With respect to the work of Bittner and Lübecker on Barthes's engagement with Hegel, it is important not only to stretch the timescale of Hegelian thought in Barthes's work, but also to consider the wider push-and-pull of Hegelianism.

This in a sense summarises Barthes's regular (if minor) engagement with Hegelian thought. At times, there is a re-reading, re-ordering and even partial rejection of Hegel. For example, Hegel's philosophy of History is shown to be limited—like Michelet's—in its romanticist, organicist "laws" of history ("Les révolutions suivent-elles des lois?" 102). More nuanced however is the use of Hegel by Barthes to understand the direction of meaning in clothing in relation to the body. At various stages, Hegel's account of clothing, especially in the ancient Greece of his *Esthétique*, is used in *Système de la mode* (1156) to underline the passage operated by clothing from body as "sensible pur" to that of meaning; only then however for this passage to be subjected to Barthes's inversion of determinants: "la silhouette [. . .] rend le vêtement sensible et le corps signifiant" ("Erté ou A la lettre" 925; Stafford, "Afterword: Something out of Nothing" 153-6). There is little doubt that this inversion of determinants in Barthes's theories of clothing is linked to his suspicion of both Hegel and Marx who, in *Sur Racine*, are shown to have constructed systems of thought in which History and literary forms are too tightly connected and then fail to

see the “paradoxe fondamentale”: “l’œuvre [. . .] est à la fois signe d’une histoire, et résistance à cette histoire” (149). However, this seemingly anti-determinist view is in fact a qualified, dialectical view which, as with Marx and Hegel’s philosophy, insists on the double nature of reality.

Barthes’s deployment of Hegelian categories raises questions as to his approach to dialectics. Jacob Bittner draws on the early collaborative work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, and then on Philip Büttgen’s theory, to underline the difference between *Aufhebung* and *Witz* in Hegel’s writing, involving in the latter a Cicero-inspired “tollere” (elimination) that is at odds with a dialectic that insists on *Aufhebung*’s meaning of preservation and raising (over and in favour of its other meaning of eliminate) (“Roland Barthes and the Literary Absolute” 4). One question then is: do Barthes’s various dialectical formulations partake in this *Witz*? As Bittner points out (2–3), Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe do not see the *Witz* as anti-dialectical, rather partaking in *Aufhebung*’s “volonté du système,” a voluntarism which is transformed in the late Barthes into the “will to write.”

However, Barthes’s most involved appreciation of Hegel is in the relationship to Nature and points to an incipient voluntarism. In “Le mythe, aujourd’hui,” he had nuanced the “cerisier” in Marx and Engel’s example of humanity’s control over Nature (in *The German Ideology*) by suggesting humanity’s ability to act directly on the world, outside of the intransitivity of myth and language, which he characterised in the figure of the “bûcheron” (*Mythologies* 233). It allowed Barthes a gap of communicational positivity in a world dominated by myth: “[L]e langage proprement révolutionnaire ne peut être un langage mythique. La révolution se définit comme un acte cathartique destiné à révéler la charge politique du monde: elle *fait* le monde [. . .]. C’est parce qu’elle produit une parole *pleinement* [. . .] que la révolution exclut le mythe” (234; italics in the original). This is perhaps not so much a hyper-dialectics as a dialectic of “concrete” action of humans, and one which strikingly prefigured the influential work of Karel Kosik (1970). The highly restricted conception of language’s ability to act in the face of myth was also a crucial aspect of Barthes’s argument that Maurice Blanchot (1957), in his otherwise thought-provoking review of *Mythologies* at the time of its publication, inexplicably overlooked. Furthermore, “Le mythe, aujourd’hui” involved a Marxian critique of Hegel. The dialectical structure of myth and its similarity to Hegel’s “Absolute Spirit” have been underlined by M. A. R. Habib (*Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory* 138–141); reminding us of Marx’s critique of Hegel’s definition of reality as one of “pure essences,” Habib argues that through myth Barthes presents the

dialectic as a culmination of bourgeois ideology “which reconciles, naturalises and brings all into a harmonious totality” (141).

The Marxian critique of Hegel that subtends “Le mythe, aujourd’hui” does not however discount Hegel’s writing on ancient Greece. In 1963, Barthes’s “concrete” voluntarism allowed him to glimpse an unmediated world that he characterised in the Hegelian “*frisson du sens*”:

Au dire de Hegel [dans *Leçons sur la philosophie de l’histoire*], l’ancien Grec s’étonnait du *naturel* de la nature; il lui prêtait sans cesse l’oreille, interrogeait le sens des sources, des montagnes, des forêts, des orages; sans savoir ce que tous les objets lui disaient nommément, il percevait dans l’ordre végétal ou cosmique un immense *frisson* du sens, auquel il donna le nom d’un dieu: Pan. Depuis, la nature a changé, elle est devenue sociale: tout ce qui est donné à l’homme est *déjà* humain, jusqu’à la forêt et au fleuve que nous traversons lorsque nous voyageons. Mais devant cette nature sociale, qui est tout simplement la culture, l’homme structural n’est pas différent de l’ancien Grec: lui aussi, il prête l’oreille au naturel de la culture et perçoit sans cesse en elle, moins des sens stables, finis, “vrais,” que le frisson d’une machine immense qui est l’humanité en train de procéder inlassablement à une création du sens, sans laquelle elle ne serait plus humaine. (“L’activité structuraliste” 218-19)

As Barthes’s justification for “activité structuraliste,” this Hegelianism did not take the law of history from Hegel (rejected as we saw above for its analogical lack of specificity), rather an assertion of the double nature of work, and of a work: “une même identité l’exercice de l’œuvre et l’œuvre elle-même” (219). This was a form of divination, a *mantéia* in Hegelian thought, that had consequences for literature as a double, dialectical form—“la littérature [. . .] est une mantique, [. . .] à la fois intelligible et interrogeante, parlante et silencieuse, engagée [. . .] mais dégagée” (219)—but also for History:

Ce qu’il y a eu de révolutionnaire dans Brecht [. . .] [n]’était-ce [. . .] la décision de lier au marxisme, sur le théâtre, la place d’un réflecteur ou l’usure d’un habit? Le structuralisme ne retire pas au monde l’histoire: il cherche à lier à l’histoire, non seulement des contenus [. . .], mais aussi des formes, non seulement le matériel, mais aussi l’intelligible, non seulement l’idéologique, mais aussi l’esthétique. (219)

Thus Hegel’s “*frisson du sens*” was a way to describe polysemic cultures where mythic language saw meanings in everything (“Une problématique du sens,”

512-13); and it could help to account for today's mass culture and the naturalisation and rationalisation of signs, or connotation: "les objets culturels élaborés par notre société sont arbitraires (comme systèmes de signes) et cependant fondés (comme procès rationnels)" (*Système de la mode*, 1183-84).

This double, paradoxical aspect of culture was most clear for Barthes in how we understand photography; and it was Hegel who had understood this in relation to the ancient Greeks, by his placing emphasis on the "façon dont ils faisaient signifier la nature," rather than "décrivant l'ensemble de leurs 'sentiments et croyances' sur le sujet"; and it was the time-specific codes, rather than a simple analysis of their signifieds (which are trans-historical), that allowed the modern world to understand how we commune with, for example, a press photograph; consequently, suggested Barthes, rather than looking for the ideological content, we should, following Hegel's "mantique" of codes of connotation, "espérer retrouver, dans leur finesse même, les formes dont notre société use pour se rasséréner[.]" ("Le message photographique" 1133).

This use of Hegel suggested a more active voluntarism than Julia Kristeva's 1971 account of Barthes's Hegelian approach to literature ("Comment parler à la littérature" 35-36). Indeed, Barthes continued this active Hegelianism in his analysis of Brecht's writings in the 1973-1974 seminar *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, where he engaged with the German dramatist's dialectical *joie de vivre*: "'Dialectique': a) Engels-Brecht: 'propriété de la nature'; b) Mao-Brecht: la lecture *fine* (principal/secondaire) des contradictions [. . .]; c) enfin, dans le contexte brechtien: instrument en vue d'un effet, la remédiabilité des maux" (209-10). The reference here to Brecht's reading of Mao on contradiction is fortuitous for our argument as it reveals an important similarity with Barthes's "undialectics." In 1937, Mao had described contradiction thus:

L'existence des contradictions est universelle, mais elles revêtent un caractère différent selon le caractère des choses et des phénomènes. Pour chaque chose ou phénomène concret, l'unité des contraires est conditionnée, passagère, transitoire et, pour cette raison, relative, alors que la lutte des contraires est absolue. ("De la juste solution des contradictions au sein du peuple" 128)

It suggests that Barthes's "undialectics" had taken him into a formalist dialectics that swung between contradictions without pausing to synthesise in any way. Bittner puts it succinctly: "Does the either-or of the antinomy of Witz interrupt the both-at-once of dialectical *Aufhebung*?" ("Roland Barthes and the Literary Absolute" 4). The answer that Barthes might then give (at least with respect to Brecht) was the "lecture *fine*" that allowed for the ability

of humans to act in and on History (if only, as with Brecht, in theatrical representation).

In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (674), he also developed the notion of Hegel's "frisson du sens" within the important concept of the Neutral, which, as we shall now see, maintained a distinct, active, voluntarism. However, both the Neutral and the Non-Vouloir-Saisir (henceforth NVS) are prepared for by the "dialectique nouvelle" he had found in Japan: "L'individualité [. . .] est simplement différence, réfractée, sans privilège, de corps en corps" (*L'Empire des signes* 99).

III The Neutral and NVS as undialectics

It is perhaps the theory of the Neutral that illustrates best Barthes's "undialectics," where, in a series of lectures in 1977–1978, he took a seemingly passive and uncommitted figure only to insist upon its active and socially engaged dimensions. In the search for an active definition of the Neutral, he looks for the "esquive de l'assertion" that is active, dialectical but not one-sidedly anti-determinist: "Je ne pose ici que le principe d'un "dossier" concernant les esquives de l'affirmation à même la langue (esquive renvoie à l'idée que la négation—ou la dénégation—ne défait pas l'assertion, mais la contre: elle est elle-même assertion du non, affirmation arrogante de la négation)" (*Le Neutre* 75). Crucially, this outline of a denial of negation involved, firstly, Hegel's characterisation of ancient Greek scepticism as a "suspension de jugement" that relies on a relation: "ce n'est pas "en soi" mais seulement dans une relation à une autre" (cited in *Le Neutre* 75). In this critique of "c'est"—of the philosophically affirmative nature of language—borrowed from Hegel, Barthes now returns to his interest in Gide's *Journal* citing Gide's "[a]spect systématique": "Je n'écris plus une phrase affirmative sans être tenté d'ajouter: 'peut-être'" (76). However, this is purely the writer assuaging the perceived arrogance of language in its assertive mode, and Barthes's conclusion is startlingly voluntarist: "En fait, l'écriture est fondamentalement assertive: mieux vaut l'accepter stoïquement, 'tragiquement': dire, écrire et se taire sur la blessure de l'affirmation" (76). Not only does Barthes play out here a performative contradiction—a paradox: how can one affirm the affirmative nature of writing?—but also he asserts within it the active nature of the Neutral: "Parce qu'il vise radicalement le rapport de l'être et de la langue, Le Neutre ne peut se contenter des modes [. . .] qui codent officiellement dans la langue l'atténuation de l'affirmatif." The only solution, he concludes, is "fai[re] entendre que tout paradigme est mal posé, ce qui est dévier la structure même du sens," in what he calls the "exemption du sens"

(76-7). This is a formulation of undialectics that, not at all devoid of volition nor active work, leads the late Barthes to make one further undialectical formulation, the “Non-Vouloir-Saisir” or NVS (*Le Discours amoureux* 245).

The development of the NVS represents a significant shift in Barthes’s thought in the 1970s away from the “double saisie” that he had distilled in Michelet’s historiography; but it did not at all imply any form of passivity. The “Vouloir nous brûle” of desire, attraction, love (expression borrowed by Barthes from Balzac for the title of his 1957 essay on Balzac’s play *Le Faiseur*) is not negated in the “non-vouloir-saisir”; otherwise why include “vouloir”? Lübecker suggests that it is crucial for Barthes to “underline the *intensity* of the non-will-to-possess” (*Community, Myth and Recognition* 130). Rather the volition is tempered, nuanced: as Barthes put in his seminar on the discourse of love in 1975, “comprendre: n’est-il pas un virus moderne?” (*Le Discours amoureux* 119).

Barthes explores in *Le Neutre* a number of examples of what we have called “undialectics” including a typical Zen dialectic.³ However it is the one on “bêtise” which allows us to see a constant in Barthesian thought, the critique of liberal tolerance—of “liberal humanism” as Habib insists with respect to “Le mythe, aujourd’hui” (*Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory* 141)—especially in Voltaire. In a final visit to the lack of “system” in Voltaire, picking up on the paradoxes he had used in the 1958 and 1971 articles, Barthes now sets out the dialectical schema thus:

1. Bêtise, tautologie, scientisme borne
 2. Intelligence, paranoïa
 3. Innocence (mystique), sagesse, “méthode” (= Tao)
- (*Le Neutre* 165)

How does this “Zen” dialectic fit with the 1958 critique of Voltaire and the question of “bêtise” we saw above? Indeed, this Zen dialectic follows in *Le Neutre* the long quotation from Voltaire’s *Essais sur la tolérance* which had raised Barthes’s hackles in 1958.

Barthes quotes at length from Voltaire’s narration of the story of the Canton Emperor Kang-hi who adjudicates the interminable argument between the Jesuit and the Chaplain by ordering that they both be put in prison, “jusqu’à ce qu’ils fassent semblant de se pardonner” (*Le Neutre* 153-5). For Barthes, Voltaire’s story, though involving the “fuite hors du débat, de la controverse” of the Emperor’s final order in ways that look like a definition of the Neutral—what he calls the “réponse à côté” (148-53)—, the story’s resolution by Voltaire is anything but indicative of the Neutral; simply because, Barthes suggests, it

involves a stark and authoritarian power relation of imprisonment: “Et nul Neutre n'est possible dans le champ du pouvoir” (155). Voltaire's error for the late Barthes is to have ignored the dialectic of power; whereas, in 1958, Barthes had exposed the absence of a dialectic of History.

The critique of power is part of a wider suspicion towards Hegelian logic that is evident in the late Barthes's writing. Lübecker traces it in the 1978 interview on violence with Jacqueline Sers, in which Barthes insists that left-wing philosophy of the “person” is rare. Defining it as part of Barthes's anti-conflictual stance, Lübecker suggests that, rather than a form of bourgeois individualism, the “asocial atopia” is concerned with community (*Community, Myth and Recognition* 130-5). Lübecker considers the “utopia of a socialism of distances” in *Comment vivre ensemble* as an antidote to an oppressive, Hegelian “struggle for recognition” (136). The late lectures perform this utopia in a less political, more ethical, view on “how to live together,” for which literature provides the NVS. To allow literature to found what Lübecker calls “non-collective co-existence” (138), Barthes's teaching becomes “deliberately *para-doxical*.” Without noticing this is how Philippe Roger characterised Barthes's stance already in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Roland Barthes, roman 317-8), Lübecker characterises the politics of a sceptical Hegelian Barthes as a “non-engaged engagement”: “where non-conflictual passion can thrive; a zone where we can enjoy sensuous life with a passion that does not divide” (138).

The voluntarism of the Neutral and the NVS is thus not total. Indeed, in *Le Neutre*, Barthes is quick to critique the “volonté” of the modern world (from Descartes to Hegel, though in Nietzsche it needs heavy qualification) as an arrogance of power, including a certain “universal” which (including Marx) seems obsessively caught up in war and political history (200). Only Michelet's interest in the history of “affect” allows for the Neutral and the NVS to operate, thereby returning to a dialectic from the beginning of his career where Michelet's history of sensibilities had impressed the young Barthes. However, in the Neutral and the NVS, it is still an undialectics of the active, but without the arrogance of power. This volition extends to the very final phase of Barthes's life, to the “vouloir-écrire” of the *vita nova*, which though “intransitive,” involves, paradoxically, an intense volition. Indeed, if it is true that what Marie Gil calls the “oscillation” (Barthes's constant, life-long, swinging between contrary and opposing phenomena—an “undialectics” we could say) comes to an abrupt end with the loss of his mother in 1977 inaugurating the final period of “stase” (Roland Barthes. *Au lieu de la vie* 466-67), then the desire to write, the voluntarism of *écriture*, seems to survive the extended mourning.

IV Conclusion

It may be that Barthes's use of the dialectic across his career has both hard and soft versions—soft as in Moufawad's complaint above, but hard as a serious attempt to understand, mobilise and relativise contradiction. Therefore, if dialectics is really about human social relations, about how humans interact via language, what about “undialectics”? Is Barthes trying to find a language of transformation that allows human relations to flourish? If so, the theorist of (non-arrogant) transformation uses, paradoxically, an active not passive volition for power relations between humans to be suspended. There is nothing anti-dialectical or non-dialectical about “bending the stick” towards voluntarism, to undermining and trying to outwit determinism if not historicism. Perhaps the “undialectics” in Barthes's use of Hegel and Marx, his voluntarism, should lead us to Antonio Gramsci's famous formulation that he borrowed from Romain Rolland in 1920 (cited by Antonini, 42n.1): “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”

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Notes

1. Extracts from Mao's 1937 essay “On Contradiction” are included in *Le petit livre rouge* (Seuil, 1967), especially in chapter XXII “Méthode de pensée et de travail”, pp. 122–37; however, the full version of Mao's essay was discovered only in the late 1970s.

2. Barthes does not mention an earlier Marx where, alongside Feuerbach's, the use of balanced and neatly chiselled paradox (or “chiasm”) is widespread; for example, in the *Introduction* to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844) Marx famously wrote in maxim form: “the weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons” (*Early Writings*, 251); and Feuerbach in 1841: “Philosophy which begins with a thought without reality necessarily ends with a reality without thought” (cited by Lucio Colletti in his *Introduction to Marx, Early Writings* 24).

3. See the “Zen” dialectic, “les montagnes sont des montagnes, et les eaux sont des eaux” (*Le Neutre*, 164–65).

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