

# What is a Compendium? Parataxis, Hypotaxis, and the Question of the Book

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*Writing, the exigency of writing: no longer the writing that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in the service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say, moralizing), but rather the writing that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question – and first of all the idea of God, of the Self, of the Subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work so that this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the Book as its goal rather signals its end: a writing that could be said to be outside discourse, outside language.*

– Maurice Blanchot (*The Infinite Conversation*, xi)

## The Compendium

Beginning with the idea and practice of writing, and moving to the subject or self, then to truth and the One, and arriving at the Book and the Work, Blanchot's words reflect the trajectory of the following work of writing. True to the embeddedness of the subject in the work of writing, the term "Compendium" has been a metonym for me over the past few years as I have thought about the concept of totality alongside its expression in figures such as the One, the Whole, or the All. In the following I aim to share some of the content of this metonym, and to enrich it by making some distinctions. <sup>1</sup> Here the term "Compendium" will refer to a concept of totality that is *ontological* (pertaining to being, and the copula) and also *textual* (pertaining to the symbolic, and the signifier-signified relationship). The Compendium is a figure for thinking the world as a Book, in the broadest sense – an approach to reality that is by no means new, but one that is due for renewal.<sup>2</sup> In partial answer to the question of the Compendium we will say that the word 'Compendium' stands in for expressions which seek to totalize, or concepts which seek to approach the concept of 'everything,' particularly when these expressions are bound up in the question of the Book (both the book as a physical object and the Book as a metaphysical figure: a way of thinking about the work in and of writing). The question of the Compendium is strongly associated with the physical and metaphysical form of the Book, like the mysterious and symbolic books which are opened in the Biblical book of Revelation, the book of life and the book of death, which together constitute an important couplet.<sup>3</sup>

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## Parataxis & Hypotaxis

There are two helpful distinctions that will bring us closer to an answer to the question "What is a Compendium?" The first distinction is between two figures in and for writing: *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*. Typically paired in contrast to one another as literary techniques, with *parataxis* indicating a side-by-side placement of textual elements and *hypotaxis* referring to subordinate arrangements of textual elements, the two figures can be understood as having a philosophical significance in addition to their practical function as devices for writers. For us these two terms will remain between philosophical theory and writing practice, and serve as a perspective for our writing and creation of texts. Here I take texts to refer to anything from the concrete written words in a book, to the ontological text of the world that we experience.

*Parataxis*, as a figural way of thinking about the ontological structure of texts, refers to texts which are tightly woven and interdependent – texts within which each sentence bears the weight of the entire work. *Parataxis* often involves repetition, great density, and fragility. One of the best examples of this sort of text is Theodor Adorno's posthumous *magnum opus*, *Aesthetic Theory*. In addition to the text itself, the translation history of the book may also help us to better understand *parataxis* and its relation to *hypotaxis*. The final published version of *Aesthetic Theory*, in German, was a text that Adorno intended to revise and rewrite, but this intention was never realized because of his untimely death. Where the German text of *Aesthetic Theory* certainly exemplifies the concept of *parataxis*, the first English edition took this densely woven text and carved Adorno's lengthy paragraphs and lengthy sentences into manageable 'bite-sized' pieces of English text. The first translator took further liberty and inserted headings and new paragraph breaks where there were none in the original.

*Aesthetic Theory* was eventually retranslated by Robert Hullot-Kentor and is now available in a form that is much more faithful to the original work. <sup>4</sup> The pertinent idea that this translation history points to is the distinction between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*. Where *parataxis* describes texts which are repetitive, densely woven, and often fragile, *hypotaxis* describes texts which are hierarchical and in which the primary relation is linear – the latter of which is very similar to the first English translation of *Aesthetic Theory*. On the other hand, the original German text that Adorno wrote was very dense, often repetitive, and contained long sections of text unbroken by paragraphs or headings. This example of *parataxis* was then turned towards *hypotaxis* through the initial

translation which took a text that was, in many ways, nonhierarchical and nonlinear, and artificially subjected it to a hierarchy that was not its own (and here I take the word of Fredric Jameson who comments on the two translations in a note at the beginning of his book *Late Marxism*).<sup>5</sup>

The point here is not about translation, but rather the distinction between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis* precisely as they are figures for discourse, written or otherwise. The concept of *parataxis* looks far more postmodern and rhizomic than the concept of *hypotaxis* which remains very modern and arborescent. This is a more figural way of talking about the distinction. However, if we wanted to take a more precise and analytical approach we could say that on the level of form *parataxis* involves a relationship between sentences and paragraphs in which each part bears an equally crushing responsibility to present the whole content of the text. As well, on the level of content, *parataxis* requires that each concept in a work take on the full conceptual weight of the total work.

Continuing the analysis, we could say that *parataxis* describes texts in which there is no (or very little) linear or causal move from antecedent to consequent, whether in content or form. Instead, *parataxis* describes texts which weave together concepts via conjugations or associations. The concept of *hypotaxis*, on the other hand, requires that texts submit themselves to hierarchy, one example of which is logical argumentation. The contingency of the conclusion upon premises in *hypotaxis* is certainly distinct from the repetition, re-presentation, and conjugation of concepts in *parataxis*, and I think that this is evident in the difference between the writing styles prevalent in contemporary Analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy. It is not the case that the distinction between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis* absolutely corresponds with the writing styles of Continental and Analytic philosophy (respectively). There are thinkers who take exception to this pattern, such as Badiou's more formal approach in the discourse of Continental philosophy to give one example.

However, when Analytic philosophy takes its writing lessons from the sciences, and seeks to do philosophy via the clean linear move from antecedent to consequent, then I think that Analytic philosophy writes with *hypotaxis* in mind. On the other hand, when Continental (particularly German and French) philosophy takes its writing lessons from narrative or poetry then Continental philosophy writes with *parataxis* in mind. It is not fair to say that all those writing Continental philosophy are looking to narrative and poetry for stylistic direction, just as it is not the case that all those writing Analytic philosophy have mathematics and science as their writing format, however there are

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some striking ways in which the differing epistemologies of Continental and Analytic philosophy encourage writing with *parataxis* and *hypotaxis* in mind (respectively).

For some, writing with *parataxis* or *hypotaxis* in mind is a conscious decision and a product of stylistic self-consciousness, and for others it is an unconscious discursive and epistemic requirement that must be met in order to be involved in a particular discourse. Before moving on to our second distinction, and then an examination of the question of the Book, it is important to point out that both totality and figurations like the One, the Whole, and the All, come out of very human desires to totalize or to actualize our being-towards-totally. The relationship between identity and totality then can be construed, with Heidegger in mind, as striving toward wholeness, completion, or fulfillment, each of which is a quality of compendia.<sup>6</sup>

### Compilation & Selection

The first distinction between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis* pertains to both form and content, and to both the mechanics of writing and the ideas to which writing refers. The second distinction pertains to both as well. In the process of writing and in the process of perception as well, there is a tension between *compilation* and *selection*. To begin with, in the work of theory-writing there is compilation, and this is because writing theory requires a broad perspective and certain measure of totalization. On the other hand, writing theory requires that the writer *select* an idea or a combination of ideas to individuate out of a radical and infinite multiplicity of identities and combinations.

The concern here is not primarily for the writing of a theory about a specific idea, like a secondary work or a reference text. But rather the concern is with the writing of grand theories: Marx and Marxism, Derrida and Deconstruction, Husserl and Phenomenology, Sartre and Existentialism, Saussure and Structuralism – each of which strives along a trajectory towards being all-encompassing, whether it intends to or not. Today, we could even say that Speculative Realism has embarked on this journey, and perhaps now we could say that the discourse of Speculative Realism has reached the inevitable point after which a grand theory leaves the hands of its writer or writers and becomes a possession of the collective consciousness of the academy, or (perhaps now) the mass consciousness of the blogosphere – and this is a true *pharmakon*, a poison and a cure, a blessing and a curse.<sup>7</sup>

When we write theory, whether the scope is that of a grand theory or a particular theory, we

write in the tension between *compilation* (making good on the desire to be all encompassing) and *selection* (being required to decide and discern and to judge what is included in the work and what is deleted or appended or abridged or given over to ellipses). Generally speaking, the work of theory-writing often comes out of a desire to totalize, that is, to develop a theory of everything that is able to apprehend new experiences and ideas while still remaining whole. I grant that this is not a universal desire, and that not everyone who sits down to write a work (or book) of theory does so because of their will-to-totally, but it remains that this drive to totalize does condition a great many writers of theory (especially those who seek to develop grand theories like those mentioned previously).

At the beginning of his book of interviews, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, Sartre is quoted as saying, after completing the first volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: “I no longer feel the need to make long digressions in my books, as if I were forever chasing after my own philosophy. It will now be deposited in little coffins, and I will feel completely emptied and at peace – as I felt after *Being and Nothingness*. A feeling of emptiness: a writer is fortunate if he can attain such a state. For when one has nothing to say, one can say *everything*.”<sup>8</sup> This is where our two initial distinctions come to bear on the being-towards-totally as it is expressed in the concrete practice of writing: the first being between *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*, and the second being between compilation and selection.

Where this second distinction is concerned there is a certain paradox at play given that selection is inescapable, and compilation is unachievable. Selection is inescapable (with the figure of the Compendium in mind) because, even when the imperative to compile is followed to excruciating lengths, selection still has the last word. This is why the Compendium is a figure rather than some material thing that can actually be accomplished or actualized. No matter how far one goes along with the will-to-archive and the will-to-compile, it is only ever a question of minimizing selection and never eliminating it. This leads to the second point, which is that total compilation is unachievable. The closest thing to total compilation that we have before us is the ontological and textual fabric of the world. Even in the case of the world, compilation cannot be enacted in a total fashion because of the need to include both the sphere of the actual and the sphere of the possible or potential. This is another way in which compilation is always-already selection, and further evidence that total compilation is practically impossible.

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## Discursive Figuration and Total Writing

Rather than figuration referring to a figure of speech or an image, here the term points to a way in which to think about the work of writing, both the work put into writing, and the work that is the result of writing: the finished yet incomplete final piece. As figures or figurations, the Book and the Compendium are ways of thinking about the work of writing and the human desire for the wholeness, completion, and fulfillment that are made manifest in the completed form of the book (whether a published or printed or saved document put to rest by the author). These two figures bear more strongly upon works that seek to be all-encompassing, and works that strive towards expressions of totality such as the One, the Whole, or the All.

Moving on to the topic of the subtitle, and on a more prescriptive note, I would say that there is more hope for theory-writing to be found in *parataxis* than *hypotaxis*. Part of the reason for this claim is the poststructuralist critique of hierarchies, and yet another part is the compelling line of thinking called “weak thought” (in theology by John D. Caputo, and in philosophy by Gianni Vattimo, among others).<sup>9</sup> The consequences of these two convictions are such that if one is to strongly assert the truth of a grand theory without leaving the realm of hierarchy-critique and weak thought, then one must write paradoxically with *parataxis* in mind, and in so doing write weakly and non-hierarchically. This does not mean avoiding a sort of topography or topology when writing theory, rather it means avoiding both subjugation and oppression in thought by pursuing a nonviolent sort of ontology.

In order to do this, theory writing does not present itself as an exercise in logical analysis where one mechanically moves from a set of premises (via contingency) to the inevitable conclusion (via necessity). Instead, theory approaches the idea of a Compendium. Given that the figural Compendium places *parataxis* and compilation above *hypotaxis* and selection, then the question becomes: is placing one part of a binary term before another not just another way of selecting, or another expression of *hypotaxis*? Counter to the urge to resign oneself to the reign of selection, with some qualification one can nonetheless write without deciding whether selection and *hypotaxis* should be subservient to compilation and *parataxis* (which is to say that writing-without-decision is somewhere between and beyond possibility and impossibility). This dilemma can be disarmed by stating that theory writing is not about primacy, and not about having-decided-beforehand, both stylistically and also where content is concerned.

This is the paradox of writing: always striv-

ing along a trajectory (*telos*) towards totality via *parataxis* and compilation, but always being drawn back to finitude and making selections, and placing one idea before another with *hypotaxis* in mind. In light of this paradox, the question of the Compendium as a figure for discourse and a figural Book has resonance with Jacques Derrida’s essay on Edmund Jabès’ *Book of Questions*, found in his *Writing and Difference*.

## The Question of the Book

“Little by little the book will finish me.”<sup>10</sup> Derrida quotes Jabès, and proceeds to outline the reflexive relationship between the author of the book and the book itself, each of which are subjected to the other through a sort of chiasmus, both ontological and textual (not that the two are entirely separable). The Book, for Derrida like Blanchot in the introductory quotation, “infinitely reflects itself” and “develops as a painful questioning of its own possibility”, and in light of this we can draw an association with the painful tension between the practical reality of selection and the ideal trajectory of compilation.<sup>11</sup>

This tension in writing, between the will to total compilation and the necessity of abridgment, is an ontological tension between part and whole just as it is a textual tension between signifier and signified. The ontological tension in writing that Derrida expresses in his essay on Jabès is between everything and nothing – a contradiction which Derrida finds in Jabès’ *Book of Questions* and also in the divine, in God.

When one writes between compilation and selection one writes towards totality, and here we can follow Derrida who states that the lapse in signification, presumably in the signifier-signified discrepancy, is a “rupture with totality itself” and furthermore that this lapse cannot be rectified through deductive reason or even philosophical discourse.<sup>12</sup>

This rupture with totality, found in the troubled relation between signifier and signified, can also tell us a lot about the Book and about writing. Given an understanding of writing as an ontological act that strives towards (but never accomplishes) totality, we can see the written book as the manifested and given body of that striving. Perhaps in other disciplines or even other schools of philosophy there is a cultural climate within which the article is prized above the book, but I am fairly confident, especially when referring to the grand theories of Continental thought, that there is a respect for the book as a uniquely meaningful object capable of apprehending totality. Derrida writes,

Between the too warm flesh of the literal event and the cold skin of the concept runs meaning. This is how it enters into the book.

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Everything enters into, transpires in the book. This is why the book is never finite. It always remains suffering and vigilant.<sup>13</sup>

Here the vitality of the literal event is compromised by the deadening weight of the concept, and the figure of the Book assists in this lapse of meaning. The Book is a totalizing object, much like the figure of the Compendium, and yet this totalization lacks its final object of completed totality both because the figural Book is necessarily incomplete, and because the physical book is always-already a product of selection. Instead of achieving its end of being a place where everything takes place, it suffers from the lapse of writing, the discrepancy between event and concept.

Derrida continues his exposition on Jabès by bringing to light yet another reflexive relation, a reversal of the relationship between the Book and the world. Derrida writes that, for Jabès, “the book is not in the world, but the world is in the book.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to what was stated before, I take figuration to mean that the concepts employed, such as the Book or the Compendium, are not subject to the supposed rigor of analysis that is so prized by Enlightenment or Capitalist realisms. The figure of the Book and the figure of the Compendium cannot be held accountable to standards imported from scientific method, given an understanding that these standards require a concept to be replicable, consistent, falsifiable, measurable, and so on...

This is an important point to make, especially in the present atmosphere within which theory must justify itself under conditions that are not its own. Instead of being held to these standards, figuration serves as a way in which to think about writing that leaves thought open to idealistic speculation, imperfect analogies, and most importantly the ever-present gain and loss that occur in the relationship between thought and being. By extension the figural way of addressing writing indulges in enough generalization to accommodate the excess/lack relationship between the ideal form of the Book or the Compendium, and the manifested and given body of a text (as it is practically completed and closed).

Here we speak against the hostile atmosphere which would have theory submit itself to hierarchical rigor, rather than Blanchot’s “enigmatic rigor”, by being explicit about the discursive conditions and epistemic conditions under which theory operates. To write with *parataxis* in mind is, to a certain degree, to write with weakness as one’s methodology (with weak thought being in opposition to *hypotaxis* and hierarchy as much as weak thought can be in opposition to anything).

Rather than asserting the strength of hierarchical theory, and rather than employing antagonistic argumentation with the goal of refutation, different discursive and epistemic conditions for theory writing must be cultivated (and these are by no means new).

First the critical and theoretical spirit reveals itself as being concerned with the task of complication – especially the complication and critique of binaries, dichotomies, dualities, polarities, paradoxes, parallaxes, hybridities, and especially antinomies. Second, theory positions itself as a sort of showing or revealing, rather than being ultimately focused on coming to full agreement or disagreement. This is where figuration can help theory-writing, both by placing emphasis on teleologies and trajectories (like *parataxis* and compilation), and by shifting focus away from pure primacy, power, or absolute origin.

Figuration then, assists theory writing by placing the concern of theory outside of the concerns of the hard or soft sciences, and into the realm of thought or the idea. To speak of ‘the’ Compendium or ‘the’ Book, here, is to generalize not regarding the perfect form of the Compendium or Book, but to engage speculatively with an abstract idea which remains singular and yet complicated by multiplicity. The question of the Book that Derrida asks through Jabès is a question of everything and nothing, totality and nonbeing, and this question is a concern for writing and a concern for the figure of the Compendium so defined by the tension between compilation and selection, and *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*. On the note of nonbeing, we can look to the final page of Derrida’s first essay on Jabès in *Writing and Difference* and notice the introduction of his neologism, *différance* (with an ‘a’). Derrida writes:

Life negates itself in literature only so that it may survive better. So that it may be better. It does not negate itself any more than it affirms itself: it differs from itself, defers itself, and writes itself as *différance*. Books are always books of *life* (the archetype would be the Book of Life kept by the God of the Jews) or of *afterlife* (the archetype would be the Books of the Dead kept by the Egyptians).<sup>15</sup>

This introduction of *différance* into the equation of the Book, alongside ontological affirmation and negation, hearkens back to the discussion of the symbolic lapse earlier in his essay. Differing and deferring, *the* Book is always a Book of Life and a figure for the intersection of the *vital* (life) and the *total* in writing. In a way, the writer of the Book may be someone who lives life, and in another way the writer of the book-as-object may be

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someone who engages in the act of writing, both practically (by inscribing words on paper, or typing script on a computer) and ontologically or symbolically (by investing their existence and inexistence into a work worthy of the figural Book).

In addition to the writer as writer, the writer also serves as an editor, and the editorial role alongside the idea of the Compendium shows the editor to be one who collects and compiles, while being restrained by eventual selection and decision. Beyond this the editor of works and texts, in both the Book and the world, is engaged in a process of inscribing notation – of annotating (on) the Compendium. Eternal commentary is a feature of the textual Compendium, just as open-ended totality describes the ontological Compendium. The writer as writer does not simply write texts, but rather engages in a profoundly ontological act of inscribing their existence into the world, and the writer as editor does not merely annotate or alter texts as they are, but rather comments upon the text of the world.

### In/Conclusion

So as we create texts, and as we write and create theory, let us be and remain attentive to the figure of the Compendium and the figure of the Book. These two concurrent metonymies are essential for total writing (grand theories, etc.), and may be forgettable for those concerned with fragmentary or hierarchical writing (which are valid in their own right). From the ontological and symbolic text of the world and phenomenological experience, to concrete texts such as books or mixed media, the figure of the Compendium and the figure of the Book are important for the actualization of the human will to be all-encompassing. The figure of the Compendium teaches writers of theory that the repetition, density, and fragility of *parataxis* offers a strong sort of weakness which does not become yet another variety of oppressive and hegemonic thought.

Rather than write with *hypotaxis* in mind, subjugating one thought to another via cause and effect or antecedent and consequent, I would hope that theory-writing could guiltlessly indulge in the dialectical and contradictory conjugation of ideas, and take this as a legitimate methodology. Rather than being ashamed of showing resonances or giving way to abridgment or ellipses, it is my own authorial (but not authoritative) conviction that one need not give up on totalizing and constructing grand theories because of the fact that complete totalization is impossible, and one need not give up on totalizing and constructing grand theories because of the worry of violence, for the Book and the Compendium lack their completed object and are ever incomplete trajectories.

### Notes

- 1 I would like extend thanks to Dr. Peter Schwenger of the University of Western Ontario for his comments on this paper and his hospitality as it was presented as a Theory Session at the Centre for Theory and Criticism on October 26th 2012. I would also like to thank Andrew Weiss for conversation and critique.
- 2 I should clarify my use of the term 'figure' at the outset. Given the use of the term by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure* (and also Gilles Deleuze in *Francis Bacon*), I should state clearly that my use of the term will not correspond to the term 'figure' understood as the representation of an object. Instead, my use of the term 'figure' and its variations ('figural', 'figurative', 'figuration') will refer to the illustrative or metaphorical use of the Compendium or the Book as models or ways of thinking about writing and discourse.
- 3 Cf. Revelations 20:12-15
- 4 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London & New York: Continuum Press, 1997)
- 5 Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London & New York: Verso, 1990), ix-x.
- 6 I have written about this concept of being-towards-totality elsewhere in two pieces of writing: the first is called *Notes on the Compendium* (an unfinished draft) which addresses some very wide theoretical concerns, being structured as a sort of itinerary or archive, and the second is *Dialectics Unbound* (Punctum Books, 2013) which outlines a concept of totality without the violence of totalization. While these works are more concerned with ontological totality, here I would like to focus on the idea of the Compendium as a textual totality.
- 7 Cf. Louis Morelle, "Speculative Realism: After Finitude and Beyond, A vade mecum" in *Speculations: Journal of Speculative Realism*. Issue 3 (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 241-272.
- 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Trans. John Matthews (London & New York: Verso, 1974), 9.
- 9 Cf. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006)
- 10 Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 65.
- 11 *Ibid*, 65.
- 12 *Ibid*, 71.
- 13 *Ibid*, 75.
- 14 *Ibid*, 76.
- 15 *Ibid*, 78.

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