Pigs, Stars, Gods and Alain Badiou’s Mathematical Language of Being

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Abstract

“If the one is not, nothing is.”
—Parmenides

“Plato’s Parmenides introduce[s] us to the singular joy of never seeing the moment of conclusion arrive.”
—Badiou (2007, 23)

In What is Philosophy? Deleuze and Guattari (1994) write the following: “Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure” (82). With the emphatic exception of the dismissal of the category of Truth, with these registers the philosophy of Alain Badiou may minimally be very successful, and beyond which, even a significant intervention into the thought of our time—as Slavoj Žižek rhapsodizes: “…a figure like Plato or Hegel walks here among us!” As might be expected, his thought is, both,
disquietingly foreign and strangely resonant; possessed of a canny timelessness of the sort that Wendy Brown (2005) argues is the métier of critique. If philosophy, risen from the disingenuous myth of its end—and here considered in relation to the vitality of its donations to educational thought—is to be taken up as Alenka Zupančič (2004) advises, it must “pull itself away from the immediate grip of its own conditions, while nevertheless remaining under the effect of these conditions” (190). Badiou accomplishes the deceptive difficulty of such sleight of thought with inventiveness, rigor, and ardency in ways that this paper hopes to show are new conditions of possibility for thought in education. As these very broadly concern the mathematical, they may be introduced here with the caveat of a novice’s enthusiasm as their guiding thread. My objective is to faithfully convey some key elements of Badiou’s oeuvre as new points of departure for the thinking of mathematics in education and, more broadly, in education newly of being, truth and the subject, his foremost preoccupations. That these might provoke and enrich educational thought is my curious hope. It is cautious as well, as if under the sign of Derrida’s (2003) relation to his masters (whom he names as Heidegger and Freud): “I betray them because I want to be true to them” (9). This necessary betrayal is not merely the usual impossible faithfulness of transmission, but more substantially, of modesty in inevitable invention; that the exegeses that follow would accord with the spirit that animates them, a spirit I welcome and perhaps introduce, and hereinafter indicate with the proper name Alain Badiou.

I

Ontology and Mathematics: The Operation of the Count-as-One

The first volume of Badiou’s magnum opus, Being and Event (2007), argues for two fundamental propositions: first that mathematics is ontology, and second, that the new happens in being under the name of the event. Beginning with the first, I must take up the question of ontology itself, in preparation for some broadly mathematical incitements to follow. Ontology is literally the logic of being, or thinking about what it is “to be,” in and of itself, in contrast to the clearly implicated yet still quite distinct matter of doing or knowing. For Badiou, ontology is itself necessarily what he calls a “situation,” which, as
with any other of that which might be said to exist, he calls a “structured presentation” (25). Badiou’s ontology is however completely opposed to something (a meaning or even a “presence”) being implied by or inferred from what apparently is, from situations as such—and thus is no existentialism, hermeneutics or phenomenology.

A situation in Badiou’s onto-logics is not a particularity, or even a collection of particularities (like his pigs, stars and gods), with some additionally presumed but unknowable “part”—whether existential nothing, hermeneutic horizon or phenomenal thing—by which to orient ethical aspirations or alternately prosecute its anxieties. A situation is rather the result of an “operation” that grants consistency to being—a consistency always forged of the “One” and its failure, an un-representable, but nonetheless mathematically demonstrable, void—a property unnameable, which Badiou signifies as “pure multiplicity.” Consistent multiplicity is constitutive of all that is presented, of everything in fact that appears to be. Ontology is thus the situation concerned with describing the “presentation of presentation,” whose logic (and here we first encounter the strictly mathematical) is a function of an operation, which Badiou calls the “count-as-one” (26). Ontology is thereby a way of thinking whose address is to the not-one that the one of being implies. Yet, for Badiou, this is accomplished in modern mathematics without positing or objectifying objects by which it would be governed—perhaps to many an unimaginable charge.

Inconsistent multiplicity is rendered ontologically consistent according to the one by which it is pluralized and composed, as structure. This Badiou calls “a kind of inert irreducibility…of the domain of the presented-multiple for which the operation of the count occurs” (28). By what Badiou calls his “meta-ontology” (which means a thinking about a thinking about being), thought, and thought alone, is summoned to its unique vocation to convey what we might consider the lacuna of the one. In this, what must be found are ways to deploy the unique capacity of (ontological) thought to “discern the multiple without having to make a one of it” (29). There are no criteria for this discernment, it is in fact unsayable, and its “object” must always elude the guarantee of the “brute inertia” of representation, its manifold of endowments, of passive epistemic immediacies. I shall shortly get to how this elusiveness in thought might be possible, but I first must deal in some halting fashion with the question of Badiou’s inevitably (and necessarily) quixotic-seeming conception of being.

As inconsistent multiplicity, for Badiou, “there is no structure of being” (26), thus one is left with what he calls the “axiomatic decision,” from which he says his entire discourse originates: “that of the non-being of the one” (31). It is a decision simply because no situation is structured such that it becomes apparent, no knowledge will ever support or justify it—being, or the not-one, is unmediated, un-definable, a-propositional, a-cultural. It occurs in the unfamiliar ubiquity of an entirely subjective domain, in which the distinction of subject and object is meaningless. This inaugural decision is also self-undermining as a self-delimiting “impasse” that does not possess determinations—and yet whose abandonment to the “dialectic of the one” leads to “the general ruin of thought” and, most provocatively, the absence of a basis on which to “infer justice” (31).

I hope this scant introduction to some of the central conceptual contours of Badiou’s thought indicates the breadth of the import of his engagement; it is one in the barely discernible, yet on which everything apparently hinges. His audacity in this is not what it may at first seem. He undertakes the effort, in part, in resistance to the abandonment of rationality from the task of confronting atavistic fanaticism, identitarian bigotry, and its various sophistries, superstitious religiosity, and certainly dogma of every kind, in reconstituting empowered and creative subjectivities, their logics and a-logics.
Plunging ahead then, one might well ask how we are to grapple with this elusive being of Badiou’s, within which emanates all that is, this nothing that ineluctably follows from the non-being of the one? Why is it a necessary predicate for thinking about (and not what, apparently in any way, simply is the) beginning (or the Event), truth (which constitutes the subject) and, indeed, what Badiou calls the “logic of change”? In the tradition of Socratic wisdom, I am compelled to begin an approach to this question with what Badiou argues being is not, in figures of the one’s hydra-like sophistications, its mythic pretensions to totality. That these might be figures that undergird many putatively emancipatory discourses in educational research is no accident, it is in fact part of the wager of bringing Badiou to educational thought. If the radicality of his thinking incites creative controversy, let it be of the sort that might contribute to democratic culture—even when the democratic culture’s pretensions (in, perhaps, figures like the Other, difference, and plurality) become subject to critique. Surely, democracy is a term that must be signified anew if it is to meet adequately what it will encounter and become (unless one is to assume the formula for justice is a settled matter). It is in fidelity to this renovating intimation that one may encounter thought like Badiou’s—and in a clear resistance to what Foucault (1994) names the “blackmail of the enlightenment” (53), by which one is compelled to provide alternatives to, or state a position for or against, the enlightenment itself (or democracy in this case) before being granted a welcome to one’s critique. With Badiou however, it is only by the conjectural engagements of critique, itself, that alternatives or (more importantly) their possibility may be evoked and invented. It is a path one can’t not tread and remain available, in and as thought, to what one must be available; to the nothing that declares the being of the singular.

The Other, Difference and Plurality

For Badiou, all that is presented and given to be represented in thought is the result of the count-as-one, which renders pure multiplicity consistent with what we may know of being, or anything else for that matter. As Hallward (2003) cogently observes: “only nothing, strictly speaking, can be presented as not one, or as pure multiplicity” (64). Nevertheless, it is tempting in some thought (often quasi-theological) to interpellate the one’s obverse as something existent, as a sort of radical alterity, as the Other. This “Great Temptation” (Badiou, 2007, 26) assigns to the “drama of the concept” the idea that “the other-than-one’s can be thought” (34) as a “lacunal abstraction” (38) or, worse, that it can be neither known nor thought. Either way, this godlike institution is reiterative for Badiou of “the One of being, torn from the multiple, and nameable exclusively as absolute Other.” In what he
calls a “romantic trembling of the Open,” Badiou decries a “mystical annihilation” by which a “presence is gained” of “the being of the One as non-being” (39). The Other is thus an exception, one whose ruse is the “annulment of all functions of the count of One” while instituting its effect under the sign of its absence (26)—most potently, for example, as the “myth of the painful absence of myth” (39). This “sabotage” of thought is accomplished by none other than the poetic resources of language, in “non-mathematical ontologies,” whereby grounding is accomplished in “the decision to declare that beyond the multiple, even in the metaphor of its inconsistent grandeur, the one is” (42). Badiou calls all this an effect of “the security of language,” the trajectory of proximity of a “poetic ontology” (“I admit, I barely escaped it” he allows at one point) and, most evocatively, the “folly of trying to save God” (46). He names Heidegger as “enslaved” by it, Plato as elevating this one over a no less reified all (an order which Aristotle insidiously inverts) and Deleuze, Badiou’s greatest contemporary interlocutor, invested in it as formal distinctions (the many of vitalizing rhizomic interrelations) masquerading as other than ontological ones—all of which for Badiou is an effacement of singularity, the foremost of philosophy’s present concerns.

For Badiou, the Other “cannot designate the gap between the one and the other-than-one’s, because the one is not,” the one has no being but is rather the result of an operation, and so he avers that surreptitiously “it is in regard to themselves that the others are Others” (33). Against the “inevitable inference” of the Other as foundational alterity, being for Badiou can never be an object as such: “Its representation…immediately corrupts the necessity, for any ontological operation, of de-objectification” (11). Pure multiplicity (the nothing) is by definition and of necessity inaccessible to presentation, its structures and thought, although only thought—that is, certain post-Cantorian mathematical thought—can thematize and demonstrate it. As Meillassoux (2008) argues, it is the implicated ancestral chaos of unreason—the Real that Lacan enjoined must not be objectified. The one (an effect of an operation) is not, and so, as it is for Parmenides, nothing is. The consequences and implications are significant, not the least of which is that ethics founded in the Other are a transitive, often pious, and certainly prejudicial destination.

If the Other is a dubious and even duplicitous formulation, a figure not uncommon in aspirations toward justice in educational discourse, what then of difference, another in the pantheon of “late” modern signposts to justice, meaning and democracy? For Badiou, difference is another instance of presented multiplicity, or discursive effect of the count-as-one. One quite direct way Badiou (2006a) bars the relational concept of difference as ontologically germane is arguing that “every elucidation of discontinuity serves to establish the idea of continuity” (33). To think under the ontological “law,” which Badiou asserts pure multiplicity implies, is “to know nothing apart from the multiple-without-one” (59, emphasis added). A radical instigation of creativity and its subjectivities, this knowledge forecloses “any index of difference within what it refers to,” it indicates “nothing other than the unpresentable as such” and is summoned for Badiou by the inaugural gesture of ontology: “the pure utterance of the arbitrariness of a proper name” (59). This follows from another of what he calls the “radical inaugural gesture and hallmarks of modern philosophy,” one well set against the variegated impulses in educational thought to supervise so many essentially empty circulations: “to decide upon an ontology of multiplicities” (104).

This enigmatic sign that “consumes itself” is a name only, and not a relation. Badiou calls the “proper name of being” the inert, ubiquitous (his word is generic) void. Its difference cannot be attested, because “nothing differentiates it” (68); it is a boundary without an edge. For Badiou the question of difference elides that of the same, which is a figure
neither consensual, ideological or identitarian, but rather a generic inconsistency that haunts all presentation, and destabilizes regimes of representation by which structures are governed or “imaginarized” (Chiesa, 2006, 74) in understanding. This occurs via the totalizing function of what Badiou calls a situation’s “second count,” the state—not foremost the sociopolitical configuration, however—which, as what Lacan called the “Name-of-the-Father” (90), relegates inconsistency to irrelevance with an assumed limitless power, and thus subsumes presentation to representation in conflation of ontological inclusion and belonging. For numerous reasons, ontology as Badiou specifies it is difficult to glimpse through the veils of liberal empirico-democratic cant (a concept, following Gitlin (2005), that is defined as the very opposite of curiosity: as truth in adequation of knowledge and object or as mysterious hermeneutic fusion or as incontrovertible consensual immediacy)—but it remains compelling inasmuch as, unlike difference, it resolutely (and indeed mathematically), if seemingly paradoxically, refuses thought a final destination. When it comes to Badiou’s ontology, the intuitive is indistinguishable from the normative, projective of what Lacan denoted as the Imaginary. For him, the world demands sterner stuff of philosophy, a different courage—which he regards as “exile without prospect of return.”

This impossible detour toward the void-as-being continues via a third concept that Badiou argues is its eclipse. This figure that also proposes to account for the plethora being (especially one adequate to democratic commitments), but which is in fact again its obscurity, is that of the plural. In many ways a precursor concept to that of difference, the plural can be found in Badiou’s ontologies as the ancient correspondent of the one: the many. Badiou (2006a) here contrasts his “analytic of the pure multiple” with the consistent multiple, or plurality, a many consisting of ones: “Only the operating “there is” of the one enables the many to be” (35). The many is the effect of the count, a fabric spun entirely of the “normative power of the One, whose name is principal” (47). A structured presentation that depends on the one, the many elides the Greek’s “dream” induced by the non-being of the one, as reconstituted by Badiou. To think the “philosopheme” of the many is to renounce the necessary subtractions (of presentation from representation, of being from presentation), of ontological thought as he elaborates it. It is to deny the resources of the non-being of the one to thought, to reinstall the truth-effacing finitude, which Badiou argues is disastrously characteristic of post-Kantian thought. In many ways, the least radical of these three ways of not thinking the non-being of the one, I consider it last because its condition as such may be its broader palatability, and thus its more ominous power in suppressing thought. This always and again—for Badiou (2006a) especially under current conditions (which he characterizes broadly as “the hermeneutics of finitude”)—in the name of the tepid but authoritative conviviality that issues under the sign of democracy (128).

At this moment then, we might say we find ourselves controversially confronted with being as some no-thing unthinkable (without certain deferred mathematics obscure to most) yet anterior and ubiquitous, accessible by a naming without object, by a thought which depends upon what cannot belong to a situation yet which it always includes—and not otherness, difference or plurality (and the relations they presuppose). Such for Alain Badiou (2007) is the errancy of the subtly unhinging “phantom” remainder that haunts every presentation from within, and indicates the void in the event it precipitates (53). It is also affirmed in the constitutive act of a “subject to truth” and thus the beginning of an active, committed and searching ethics. It is an ethics, however, elaborated in the condition of inconsistency, one that refuses its fetishization in transcendentals. These efficacious new Gods are seen in Badiou’s (2008) thought as the very pillars by which contemporary myths of progress and morality in all domains sustain “a horrible indifference” (80) to the dimensions of what we might call the challenge of being and its calls to justice and truth—a challenge that refuses
so many of the verifying moral romances through which education and its thought find uneasy, and thus vociferous, nourishment.

What Badiou reclaims initially from Plato and (by way of a sort of Cartesian refusal of the self-abnegation of thought and a singular Lacanian metaphysics) gives us to think of as the wellspring of this elusive ontological “truth process” is post-Cantorian mathematics. This is not explicitly because being is “mathematical” (an unfortunate suspicion that might befall one thinking of mathematics as a model of certainty, or by the historicism of it as concept) but rather because mathematics “accomplishes ontology,” it enacts being, wherein “the void is in truth the name of being” (72). As existence is presented in the effect of a count, a mathematical operation, being is decisively expressed axiomatically in mathematical lexica. This is how Badiou proposes to think of singularity—for how could the singular be otherwise, if not variously subordinated, and thus evacuated of singularity? From a problem Badiou (2006a) claims defines contemporary thought—“what exactly is a universal singularity?” (82)—the singular (and its ample problematics) becomes that by which everything of any importance is encountered. Perhaps because preoccupied in legitimating struggles to resemble a human science, it is somewhat surprisingly not a problem that is given as much notice as one might assume in education.

II

The Enactment of Set Theory: That the One is Not

Badiou demarcates the history of the relation between mathematics and philosophy as distinguishable between what he calls the “little” and the “grand” styles. In many ways, the “little” is what prevails, it is the familiar progenitor of math anxiety, and devolves from and is implicated in what Badiou (2006a) calls its “role to manage a personnel comprising teachers and researchers” (3). This is mathematics in the familiar discourse of the Master. It is taken up in a related “little” style philosophy as “scholasticism” whose goal is “to eliminate a frightening master-signifier” by way of the deployment of logic and language in the “compulsive labeling” of a “clarificatory approach” (4-7). Not much more than the
enforcement of pre-existing categories, the “little” style thinking of mathematics is probably the dominant mode of address to the mathematical in schools. By way of misguided procedural invocations of absolutes, it rarely moves beyond the programmatic it stages and sustains by virtue of its treatment of mathematics and mathematical entities as objects of philosophical (or, as we should say here, pedagogical) thought. Such a static and reductively instrumental snapshot effectuation of a discipline far stranger indeed prevents its implication within broadened conceptions of truth and its subjectivities as Badiou would have them. Perhaps analogically, one might compare the absence of scandal so conspicuous with respect to the teaching of mathematics adequate to accounting, to the one to be expected (one would hope) should language arts be taught sufficient only to journalism. “Little” style thinking of mathematics authorizes and perpetuates a broad acquiescence, one that Badiou reads against a substantial ontological and ethical counter-edifice.

Conversely, in the grand style of thought about the relation between mathematics and philosophy, “mathematics provides direct illumination of philosophy, rather than the opposite” (7). Here mathematics is “an absolutely indispensable condition for philosophy as such” (14) for it “expounds the thinkable without thematizing it” (46)—a crucial, if difficult, determination. Badiou traces the effects of the grand style through a number of eminent thinkers who share the proclivity of “giving thanks to ‘rigorous mathematics’” (14) for reasons completely disassociated with the field in most of its educational incarnations:

“It doesn’t matter whether philosophy is conceived of as a rationalism tied to transcendence, as it is from Descartes to Lacan; as a vitalist immanentism, as it is from Spinoza to Deleuze; as pious criticism, as it is from Kant to Ricoeur; as a dialectic of the absolute, as it is from Hegel to Mao Zedong; or as an aestheticist creationism, as it is from Lautréamont to Nietzsche. For the founders of each of these lineages, it still remains the case that the cold radicality of mathematics is the necessary exercise through which is forged a thinking subject adequate to the transformations he will be forced to undergo.” (14-15)

This “cold radicality,” while a chilly breeze indeed to the anxieties of education’s impossible charge, is however one proper to a condition, a being and its thinking, unsatisfied with its conceptual comforts, a diagnostic of what Paul Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (as cited in Benhabib, 2002), of thinking against thought. It is a thinking that logically requires itself to risk the vastness of the foreign terrain of the next moment sans papiers. There is no reason education is not obliged to submit its thinking to such difficulties, to such possibilities, although to do so is surely within what Deborah Britzman (2009, July 14) advises, that we will have to figuratively “destroy education to create education.”

As “the historical development of the theory of multiplicities” (Badiou, 2006b, para. 22), mathematics’ “unique prism of concepts” becomes for Badiou (2006a) “our obligation, our alteration” (15), one that he regards as scandalously neglected in contemporary thought, and about which he finds most astonishing that its power and novelty are not more routinely found astonishing. Philosophy, or its particular vocation for thinking about thinking, has no difficulty, especially since Heidegger, in deploying the poetic, in notable contrast to the scant mathematical, a mistake Badiou clearly crusades against. Thus he squarely locates himself within the grand style of thought, wherein for him “mathematics is always more or less equivalent to a bulldozer with which we remove the rubble that
prevents us from constructing edifices in the open air” (17)—although this metaphor is misleading, for, in contradistinction to Badiou’s subtractive ontological thought, is the “fundamental couple” of identity and destruction. Not one to decry the heroic gesture, or trifile needlessly with a modest one (though ultimately, we could say, his thought is self-sundering, removing itself from the position of arbitrator among thought and its worlds by laying no claims itself to the truth it speculatively reconstitutes the conditions of), Badiou declaims the project from which springs present considerations:

“...by donning the contemporary matheme like a coat of armor...I have undertaken, alone at first, to undo the disastrous consequences of philosophy’s ‘linguistic turn’; to demarcate philosophy from phenomenological religiosity; to re-found the metaphysical triad for being, event and subject; to take a stand against poetic prophesying; to identify generic multiplicities as the ontological form of the true; to assign a place to Lacanian formalism; and, more recently, to articulate the logic of appearing.” (17)

One wonders what he eats for breakfast. Regardless, we may say in concluding this preface to the kernel of Badiou’s contribution to the grand style of thinking this implication, that it clearly is not contemplating the mathematics most of us learn in school. There is no reason I can see, however, that that particular venue for mathematical thinking should be denied what Badiou calls these “luscious jungle flora” (6) that he retrieves from Plato—though its insinuation is surely via trajectories of a sort of Foucauldian resistance: Situated, local, dependent upon the one whose failure it declares and follows from. Unlike Foucault however, Badiou’s affirmation is not implicit.

That the mathematical thus conceived be coupled with, and even indispensable to, the philosophical, artistic, scientific, amorous, pedagogical and, finally, the democratic, could be considered a reason for celebration of new vistas to think from. This is undoubtedly a curious and most unaccustomed passage into the realm beyond the foreclosures of the arid instrumentality and orderly pragmatics of mathematics more commonly entertained. It is mathematics’ re-inscription with pertinence to questions of being and truth, as unique and authoritative access to inventive novelty. I would suggest that Badiou’s sweeping and re-historicizing reconsideration of mathematics and philosophy may herald the beginning of the end of the former’s exile as superordinate and obliquely authoritative curriculum outlier. No longer that familiar stranger of the apex and the middle, revered, feared and know to few, a dangerous knowledge effaced via reductive pedagogical recapitulations and indulgent prejudices against thought itself, this is mathematics that belongs, and invariably locates its subjects within, a sort of eternity. This reconsideration also forcibly redirects mathematics toward a fruitful conversation with other instances of pedagogical thought with which fresh dialogues become possible. Perhaps intimated by many whose education may not have been entirely subverted by schooling in the “little” style, this mathematical philosophy, this ontology, is something Alain Badiou is at pains to elaborate in some considerable and systematic precision.

Pursuing it in some further detail, as outlined above, for Badiou the impossible (in that it is in- or non-sensible) figure of the pure multiple, and the proper name of being, is the void. It is a domain of objects as numerical constituents of sets (a real actuation and not a mythic instantiation) rather than of concepts, one not accessible through the “ruinous image [of] mere calculation or technique” (36) imagined by the “little” style, but instead through a rigorous thinking’s “evacuation of every tutelary figure of the One” (39). Its incision is...
enacted (or thought, more properly) by way of axiomatic decision (of immanent infinities) as in the modern set theory of Cantor—“the greatest effort of thought ever yet accomplished by humanity” (Badiou, 2007, 536)—and as elaborated thereafter by Zermelo and Fraenkel, Von Neumann, Gödel and Cohen, working from the late nineteenth century through beyond the middle of the twentieth. As what Badiou (2006a) calls the “laicization of infinity” in approaching the void’s “grace,” the choices with which we are presented—and sides must be taken (see Hallward, 2003)—lie among “definition and axiom, principle and decision, unification and dissemination” (Badiou, 2006a, 50). The delocalization of set theoretical ontology presents an approach that remains “fluid and indecisive” (50) and, to sustain “the movement of thought,” its intuition (the axiomatic decision) must periodically be re-decided (55). It is an agentic happening, not a passive reception. It, and the ceaseless processes of fidelity it inspires, must always be thought anew. Badiou calls it a “wager,” from Mallarmé, this fidelity to thinking without object.

Perhaps surprisingly given set theory’s rigorous formulaics, this asceticism, this instance of “philosophy humbling itself, against its own latent wishes” (50) is also the liberation of thought. Subsisting at the rift between thought and the freedom of thought, Badiou’s invocation of set theory’s “subtraction from the metaphorical register of the tendency, the horizon, becoming” (38) is the precise movement of thought’s liberation from its own self-imprisonment, the breaking of its own mirror. A curious aside to so many fields of contemporary thought (hermeneutic, analytic, postmodern) which all differently proclaim an end of philosophy, in mathematics we rediscover no less than “the human history of eternity” (40). The hallmark question thought asks in Badiou’s grand style is: Do we notice it (21)?

But again one must ask: What is there to notice? To briefly illustrate, I will confine myself (in no small measure on account of mathematical incapacity, or perhaps “little stylization”) to the matter of the ubiquity of the null set, by which set theory in Badiou’s argument “thinks” being’s inclusion—as the unpresentable void—in every situation. Beginning, as I myself had hoped to, with “the expulsion of any presentifying assumption of being” (Badiou, 2007, 67) and the rejection of what Chiesa (2006) calls the foundational mistaken falsification of a knowledge predicated on entities, we find with the null or void set what Badiou (2007) calls a “subtractive suture to being” (66). This by way of that which never belongs, but is always included, void of all totality, a multiple which is not under the idea of the multiple (as we have seen as any of the Other, difference or the plural), an exclusion always included. For Badiou this is decisively not a metaphor that might allegorically be applied to, for example, a democratic ethics. It is rather the situation from which such ethics may be thought and re-thought (as what Badiou calls a “truth process” and a matter of a fidelity from which is founded a subject). This is a key distinction in Badiou’s thought; one indicated in what he calls “our maxim,” that “philosophy must enter into logic via mathematics, not into mathematics via logic” (2006a, 16). Some of what Badiou calls the “welcome consequences” of this trajectory of thought—through its own axiomatic subtraction—are a new entrée into the freedom of thought (“beyond finitude”), new and infinite intimations of subjectivity, and a new concept of the new itself. In these venues a great deal is at stake. Will education notice?
III

The Void and the New

With this verse, Salman Rushdie, in his Satanic Verses (1988), evokes germane questions by which to proceed:

*How does newness come into the world? How is it born?*

*Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?*

*How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?*

*Is a birth always a fall?*

*Do angels have wings? Can men fly? (8)*

At this point, it may be useful to consider how, in the thought of Alain Badiou, one is to consider the question of the new as indicated by the earlier allusion to his preoccupation with a “logic of change.” Certainly for education it may be seen as a very central question to the aspirations of an educative sensibility.

I have touched on the matter of the void to some extent already, and here again could characterize it as immanent infinity, a multiplicity that is pure, in that it consists only in ever more multiples, and as a constitutive exclusion in every situation (making clear some of Badiou’s debt to Lacan). For Badiou, the void, while certainly obtaining the “suture” of being’s omnipresent situational subtraction, also occasions what he calls a situation’s “evental site.” This is the “place where something decisive can happen in a situation, in which an event can take place” (Hallward, 2004, 8)—it is the waning of particularity as the weakness of the situation’s state (which one may recall is its implicate meta-order, its totalization function in ideological rejection of the excess of presentation over representation, and even the failure of the totality of presentation itself). An event reveals the insufficiency of categorizations and forever defies obsessive attempts to codify newness as knowledge. The void is the vanishing point in every configuration (every set or “one” as we have seen) that introjects an interruption—tantamount to the genesis of its transformation—from within the subsistence of the chaos of pure multiplicity. This is both the “new” and the commencement of a “truth”: “truth is, first of all, something new” (Badiou, 2005, 45); it cannot be thought “as one linkage within a larger unified machinery
such as ‘evolution’ or ‘complexity’ or ‘chaos’ (14); “it,” as what Cohen identified as universal generic subsets, is “non-constructible” and “anobjective” (Badiou, 2006a, 127 & 145). Badiou argues that a fidelity to truth, which he conceives of as a process founded by an event, requires from within the circulation of language and thought a “principal of interruption,” one pointedly opposed to the “mere polyvalence of meaning” (Badiou, 2005, 50)—which, as the “religious concept par excellence” (Hallward, 2003, 18), is for Badiou Capital’s insouciant accomplice in figures of narrative (Michel de Certeau (1988) is also incisive on this point). This principal’s rebellion—Badiou (2008) calls “a priest” anyone for whom “rebellion is no longer an unconditional value” (144-145)—incites and affirms a disposition toward truth, it in fact is the first order of a subject to truth, or a new subjectivity, a subjectivity to the new. An event at once indicates that things do not need to be the way they are (Fiskin, 2005) while compelling us to decide a new way of being, as a decision of the undecidable, or the wager of a truth:

“For the process of truth to begin, something must happen. What there already is—the situation of knowledge as such—generates nothing other than repetition. For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a supplement. This supplement is committed to chance. It is unpredictable, incalculable. It is beyond what is. I call it an event. A truth thus appears, in its newness, because an evental supplement interrupts repetition” (Badiou, 2005, 46)

As an address from within a situation, nothing in a sense (and certainly in a word) could be easier to miss than an event—whose “nature” it is to defy intelligibility. It is undecidable, that is, not recognizable to any given order, it subsists, or in-sists, in disappearing ephemera:

“an event itself is always a perfect weakness. It is such because the being of an event is to disappear; the being of an event is disappearing. The event is nothing—just sort of illumination” (140).

I am reminded of how black holes are detected—by inference from the implication of effects on nearby bodies—and by how the laws of the quanta are deduced. What is illuminated for Badiou is twofold: that the situation is in a sense made of the void, and that it consists also in an operator—the state—which exists to conceal this fact, to quell the anxiety of the void, one might say. These illuminations, in turn—and by virtue of the de-localization of the implication of void, event and subject—indicate and make possible new processes (of truth) within the existent: “the implications of an event...make it impossible for those who affirm them to carry on as before” (Hallward, 2004, 3). This “carrying on” differently is the very call by which philosophy responds to the world, by way of a decision “uniquely to be faithful to the transformation” (Badiou, 2005, 130) instigated by the event. I might add, by way of a biographic aside, that Badiou identifies the event of the Paris spring of 1968 as one to which he owes or pledges his subjectivity’s fidelity: of the singular, momentary conjoining of workers and students in a new configuration of resistance, and all that this irruption spawned, and continues to spawn: new political and ethical commitments and investigations, both in “situation” France and beyond. His sharpest rebuke is reserved for those who revoke truth and its unforgiving demands—“obscure” subjects of truth he calls them—who sequester in the remove of consolatory rationalizations that which had once seized them. It is interesting to see how the new for Badiou presents itself as a problem to be affirmed, and thus a truth process to be embarked
upon:

“I have had a living experiment of what is something absolutely new and a vivid experience of when something happens, the very nature of which is novelty, you have something like the birth of a new subject. And I experiment first this point in my life and only after I had to create the concepts to justify and clarify this point. So I go to the concept of an event by thinking that when something really happens you always have a real rupture. You have the creation of a new subject and you have the process of continuation of the subject as such. Finally, we have in fact three fundamental concepts: event, subject and fidelity, fidelity being the name for the continuation of the existence of the process of the new subject” (Badiou, 2006b, para. 25)

The important movement for educative purposes here is from void to event to new subject. An explication of Badiou’s (2005) mathematical meta-ontology leads us to a sort of fidelity always “leaking into infinity” as it resituates itself in the language it is compelled to convene. Always innovating within and against its own innovation, fidelity to an event creates a subject anew, in the re-decision of the being of the events from which it arose—which always for Badiou (2006a) takes the form of the “axiom of truth,” that “this took place, which I can neither calculate nor demonstrate” (165). There is certainly militancy, and even a sort of violence to Badiou’s truth process. It is a conceptual violence, a dangerous thinking—for Badiou (2006c) “not to resist is not to think” (17)—in this subtraction toward (but never attaining) pure multiplicity and not, as we have seen, to the hopeless tangles of purificatory totality’s myriad “meaningful” instantiations, barely distinguishable at times from any other moralizing discourse. This thinking, this ethics one might say, obtains similarly (for the void is generic) in each of what Badiou identifies as the domains of truth procedures, art, science, politics and love, whose elaboration may only be intimated here, in consideration of the new evental “who” Badiou’s conception of the new summons each to be.
Subjectivities

Approaching a tentative conclusion, I find myself at a moment when the question of the educative sensibility may most explicitly arise. What are moments in the life of an educator, or in the historicity of the concept of education, or in the orders of schooling that might be evental? Despite the fact that the void from which they sprang is, for none of us, providing the same answers, immanent as “it” is to what Hallward calls “onefied” situations. However, perhaps there are similarities to how an educator can profess an ethics inspired by Alain Badiou.

Again, we clearly find in this profession a different conception of mathematics than the one to which most of us were introduced. It is rather one that thinks, which thinks our condition in its widest remit in fact, instead of the other way around. To notice this is to be thought by it, to be a subject to that truth, as Badiou might say. Next, we surely have the ceaseless imperative to always reinvent how we describe our world, to find new logics adequate to its motile boundlessness and immanent schism. The inclusion of the void’s subtraction in every situation exposes each unique and immanent contingency. There can be no repetition that escapes the void, for all is constituted in part by it. This obtains even if it subsists on the void’s denial (as indeed does the state), wherein its evental vanishing point indicates its contingency—a denial (typically in the figure of a necessity) ever more fierce the more it is threatened (Badiou calls this denial terror). I would add that this enclosure, whether by the presumed adequation of knowledge to object, by implied completion of all that may be said, or even by disavowal of the precarious resources of language, is what Badiou terms evil.

To the educative sensibility one must also admit from Badiou’s oeuvre a commitment to foster a sort of creative messianism without image. This flows from an abandonment to and seizure of subjectivities coordinated by the indiscernible, those issuing from an unnameable rupture that must thence always be re-affirmed in the form of a wager on the credit of the future anterior. This is a conception of a being that forces the conjecture that “this is what I will have been.” In affirming the singularity of the evental supplement, one is double as such, or doubled. This self-splitting may be thought to be the nexus of conscience. This ethics certainly cannot be taught (“look, the void!”) but it likely can be indicated, proclaimed, exemplified as implicate if never presumed known. It is a condition of risk whose grace is being, vector truth, and possibility itself. Democracy is thought in perpetual renewal of itself, heterodox in the chasm between what belongs and what may be included, and thus becomes an affirmation that forever needs new words and the words of the new—and always an astute distancing from all forms of dogma. Art is the faithful companion who indicates but cannot contain in expression that to which it alludes (Badiou (2005) argues extensively against Heidegger and with Lacoue-Labarthe for the retraction of the mytheme as ontologically authoritative (71), and also, without contradiction, for the indispensability of the poem to philosophy). Science is its frontier again (and not their technicization), disappearing in a joyous and severe convocation before its own majestic concept and tatterdemalion formalities. And love remains its own artesian enigma, the frail isthmus where the one becomes two (and not the other way around!). Marquez (1989) recalls to us simply the perils of the truth of love’s fidelity: “nothing in this world is more difficult than love” (270). Fidelity is no stranger to difficulty, wherever truth is to be found.

Finally we are left, fatigued perhaps, but I hope not exhausted, with exhortations, incitements of a profession not lost to the qualifications of its romantic obscurity, one in search always of a new vocabulary of possibility. There is something distinctly Promethean
in the challenge: “Do all you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you” (Dews, 2004, 117). The question nevertheless always remains: Of what may we consist adequate to that we undergo, as we fly from darkness to darkness following what precedes us. Badiou remains optimistic—“everything remains to be invented” (as cited in Toscano, 2004, 149)—as, in responding to the world’s demand of it, he enjoins philosophy to “Get up and walk!” (Badiou, 2005, 42).

I hope it has become apparent that one can go a long way from nowhere, for it indeed is what determines and instigates any departure. It is, in fact, what permits one to follow Parmenides without destination or conclusion, to be, in a very real sense, what one must. This is an ethic that carries no fare for a great elsewhere, but is one which, after the “joint disappearances of Man and God” (Badiou, 2008, 165), insists always and again on the renewed immanence of an infinity nearby, decided within what Badiou (2006a) calls the “twofold perspective of power and powerlessness” (136), and propelled by “the only maxim required in ethics,” and with which I draw these considerations to a rousing, but tentative, conclusion: “Keep going!” (17).

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Works Cited


About the Author

Graham Giles teaches in the North Vancouver School District and is pursuing his doctoral research at the Centre for Cross Faculty Inquiry at the University of British Columbia. He is elaborating a method of conceptual or philosophical inquiry in educational research that engages various conversations about speculative critique, inspired by thorough readings of important thinkers. In 2007 he completed a MA thesis at the Centre for Cross Faculty Inquiry entitled *A Taste for Meaning: Hannah Arendt and Educational Thought*. Graham’s PhD thesis, tentatively entitled *To Take a Position in One’s Own Name: The Search for the Ethical in Education*, works with the ideas of Alain Badiou. Graham gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support of his research. Please forward comments/questions/responses to grahamgiles@shaw.ca