

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

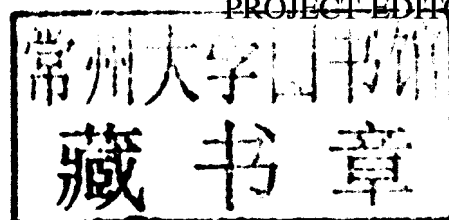
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Volume 326

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Alain Badiou

1937-

Moroccan-born French philosopher, critic, nonfiction writer, and novelist.

The following entry presents criticism on Badiou's career through 2010.

INTRODUCTION

One of France's most prominent twentieth-century philosophers, Badiou is recognized for urging political, psychological, and ethical transformation on a global scale. Often mentioned alongside Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek as an acolyte of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, Badiou has been an outspoken opponent of the strain of postmodernism that has marked French academia since the 1970s. Although his complex ideas can be difficult to penetrate, his concerns reach beyond the realm of philosophy and into the everyday lives of modern-world citizens.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Badiou was born in Rabat, Morocco. He studied at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, becoming politically active at a young age. For example, he was a founding member of the Unified Socialist Party and spoke out in support of the decolonization of French Algeria. He published his first novel, *Almagestes*, in 1964. The student uprisings in France in May 1968 galvanized his leftist political views, prompting him to become increasingly involved in militant socialist organizations. During this time, he also became active in a study group led by Althusser, while simultaneously immersing himself in the works of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In 1969 he took a teaching position at the University of Paris VIII. Along with Natacha Michel and Sylvain Lazarus, Badiou formed L'Organisation Politique, a radical group that focuses on issues of social ethics, in 1985. He gained international recognition with the publication of his philosophical opus *L'être et l'événement* (*Being and Event*) in 1988. He currently holds the Rene Descartes Chair in Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Switzerland.

MAJOR WORKS

Badiou's training as a mathematician and his long-standing interest in the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan provide his political and ethical outlook with a clinical, structuralist backdrop. His revolutionary attitude toward social and cultural analysis presents history as a lens through which one may catch sight of truth. *Being and Event* uses mathematical set theory to examine the history of philosophical thought from Plato to Lacan, with a view toward seizing upon moments of meaning, or "events," and submitting them to rigorous investigation. To this end Badiou endorses Lacan's idea of the *matheme*—the non-linguistic, quasi-mathematical symbolic signifier—as a technically concise means of communication. A critique of modern ethical perspectives, *L'éthique* (1993; *Ethics*) challenges prescribed notions of good and evil, decries the impasse of multicultural relativism, and pinpoints the hypocrisy of the ongoing debate over human rights. The essays collected in *Infinite Thought* (2003) tackle such issues as terrorism, art, and politics, while *Saint Paul* (1997) provides a unique, atheistic interpretation of the revolutionary nature of one of Christianity's most important figures.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Badiou's work came to be hailed as an invigorating, though often difficult, alternative to postmodern relativism. In particular, critics have been drawn to his prevailing emphasis on the ability of mathematics to accurately convey the true reality that remains just out of the reach of ordinary language. According to scholar Gabriel Riera, Badiou "conceives philosophy as a process of rigorous deduction inflected by mathematics." "For Badiou," Riera continued, "the *matheme* is the writing of the real; it is a pure writing because it does not maintain a rapport to the real; it subtracts itself from any type of relation. Insofar as it 'touches' the real, any other type of writing becomes impure." Critics have also praised Badiou's ideas on the nature of knowledge and education; some have noted his emphasis on the feminine quality of the open-ended quest for information, while others have contrasted his thoughts on state education with those of Althusser. Furthermore, scholars have

analyzed the religious undertones in Badiou's work, especially with regard to his interest in the figure of St. Paul. Yet this interest is largely attributed to the philosophical and activist qualities of Paul's life, especially his opposition to sophistic or relativistic thinking, rather than any religious inclination. Insofar as Badiou's philosophy seems to point toward an idea of God, scholars have claimed that his proximal theism rests on ethical grounds as opposed to the romantic and nostalgic notion of an agnostic God perpetuated by philosopher Martin Heidegger. Moreover, commentators have studied Badiou's political theories extensively. In his analysis of Badiou's perspective on the tension between theory and practice in anarchism, critic Benjamin Noys claimed that "Badiou's work poses important questions about revolutionary change, and his criticisms of anarchism allow us to sharpen what anarchist thought and practice might have to offer and what resources it might have to develop."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Almagestes* (novel) 1964
Théorie du sujet [Theory of the Subject] (philosophy) 1982
L'être et l'événement [Being and Event] (philosophy) 1988
Manifeste pour la philosophie [Manifesto for Philosophy] (philosophy) 1989
Conditions (philosophy) 1992
L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal [Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil] (philosophy) 1993
Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme [Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism] (nonfiction) 1997
Abrégé de métapolitique [Metapolitics] (nonfiction) 1998
Court traité d'ontologie transitoire [Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology] (philosophy) 1998
Petit manuel d'inesthétique [Handbook of Inaesthetics] (philosophy) 1998
Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy (essays) 2003
Theoretical Writings (philosophy) 2004
Le siècle [The Century] (nonfiction) 2005
Logiques des mondes: l'être et l'événement, 2 [Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2] (philosophy) 2006
Polemics (nonfiction) 2006
Éloge de l'amour (nonfiction) 2009

CRITICISM

A. J. Bartlett (essay date March 2006)

SOURCE: Bartlett, A. J. "The Pedagogical Theme: Alain Badiou and an Event-Less Education." *antiTHESIS* 16 (March 2006): 129-47.

[In the following essay, Bartlett contends that Badiou's concept of the ideology and ethics of state education moves away from Louis Althusser's structural approach toward a more nuanced vision of pedagogical truth.]

You invent nothing. You think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a penumbral one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears as it is wept.

Samuel Beckett (*Malloy*)

In 1969 Louis Althusser wrote an important but all too soon 'un-remembered' essay in which he gave a powerfully accurate description of the ideological functioning of the 'school' within bourgeois-democracy.¹ The description still applies even though the terminology might need to be re-worked for contemporary ears. Effectively, Althusser's central structural argument is that the school within bourgeois-democracy has taken the place of the church as the dominant 'ideological state apparatus' (ISA).²

The central role of an ISA is to disseminate the ideological requirements of the regime it supports—in our case the capitalist-parliamentarian regime (to update the terminology). Given Althusser's chronology here, it is then intriguing to find as an introductory epigraph to *Meditation 21* of Alain Badiou's *L'être et l'événement (Being and Event)* this maxim from Pascal's *Thoughts*. "The history of the Church should, properly speaking, be called the history of truth". We are intrigued because the obvious extrapolation here, following Louis Althusser, is to replace the church with the school. We then have the strange assertion that 'the history of the school should, properly speaking, be the history of truth'.

THE STATE OF IDEOLOGY

For Althusser, ideology is always realised through its material effects. What is to be taught, how and for what 'purpose', all expose the material functioning of ideology: "[F]or it is clear that it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection [church, family law, military, school] that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power".³ Althusser's analysis relies on the theory of the state

developed by Marx and reformulated by Lenin. In such an understanding, the masses and the state, *which is always a class state*, cannot be identified in any sort of transitive or substantial way. This theory has it that at a *certain stage of development* characterised by an irreconcilable antagonism, a power arises, which alienates itself from the society in order to 'keep order'. This power cannot be neutral; it rules, and thus the state Lenin says, does not reconcile class antagonism but is "a product of the *irreconcilability* of class antagonism".⁴ Notions commonly formulated by bourgeois or, to speak in contemporary language, parliamentary politics such as 'our national interest' or, 'our way of life' are seen here as clearly ideological. Obviously, in order to continue to function, parliamentary-capitalism must be able to reproduce (and represent) the structural inequality—between wage labour and surplus value—upon which it is based. Althusser says, echoing Gramsci, "no class can hold state power over a long period without also exercising its hegemony over and in the ideological state apparatuses".⁵

Slavoj Žižek gives Althusser's remarks on ideology a very important Lacanian induced re-formulation. Starting with Marx's remarks in *The German Ideology* Žižek argues that the ruling ideas are not those of the ruling class *per se* but "in order for the dominant ideology to be operative it . . . incorporate[s] a series of features in which the exploited majority . . . recognise their authentic longing".⁶ The success of any hegemonic (false) universality Žižek continues, depends on "incorporat[ing] at least two particular contents: the authentic popular content and its distortion by the relations of domination and exploitation".⁷ Gramsci argues a similar point, positing that the bourgeois class pursuing a "will to conform" presents itself as that "organism capable of absorbing the entire society assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level". Thus "the whole function of the state is transformed. The state has become an 'educator'."⁸ Using Žižek's terms, the desire of the 'exploited majority' for the perceived benefits of education is used as a 'lure' by the state to catch the consent of the exploited classes in the continuing of that exploitation. It proffers education as the way out of exploitation (from *being* exploited at least), reflecting an authentic non-ideological longing, but as Žižek makes plain, the process requires a subjective affirmation of the state ideology by consensually engaging in and endorsing its material relations. In an essay otherwise engaged in setting the groundwork for thinking the relation between art and philosophy—a relation properly pedagogical for the Greeks prior to the Platonic intervention—Badiou declares that "the only educa-

tion is an education by truths," and thus "the entire insistent problem is that there be truths".⁹ For there to be truths, according to Badiou, something must happen and to this happening he gives the name 'event'. The event that intervenes between the epoch of the church and that of the school, I will suggest below, is the 'French Revolution'. It is the French Revolution that authorises for the first time the immanent and singular concept of the 'for all' (i.e., democracy proper, or the "general will" to use Rousseau's terms) as an existing political Real of the post-evental situation (and, as such, the immanent void of the pre-evental situation). In *Being and Event*, Alain Badiou provides a unique conceptual deployment of the classical philosophical motifs: being, subject, event and truth. The remainder of this essay will attempt to follow Badiou's 'conceptual deployment' in a consideration of some aspects of the ideological, ethical and practical situation of contemporary state education, allowing us to move beyond the 'structural' ideology of Althusser and mobilise, with an ontological precision, the more nuanced version that Žižek describes. Exegeses of Badiou's complex but not necessarily complicated system will be kept to a minimum.

ONTOLOGY AND THE SUBJECT

The process by which truths come to be is what forms the core of Alain Badiou's philosophical system. And a system it unapologetically is; one that attempts to 're-begin' a process of thought that draws the philosophical consequences of, and its methodological consistency from, recent events in mathematics. This re-beginning—Badiou makes it explicit he is not 'founding' anything¹⁰—is conditioned by a 'philosophical' decision in regard to ontology. Badiou claims "ontology, the science of being *qua* being is nothing other than mathematics itself".¹¹ For Badiou, mathematics is that discourse capable of providing a certain index of existence to what he terms, after Cantor, the pure inconsistency of being. Mathematics, or more precisely Set Theory, does this in the first instance by its deployment of a consistent and coherent set of marks and letters that are both extensively transmissible and indifferent in their address. The particular model of set theory that Badiou employs and deploys is that axiomatised by Zermelo and Fraenkel (ZF) post-Cantor (transfinite numbers, continuum hypothesis) and developed in the work of Gödel, Easton and Cohen.¹² These 'marks and letters' establish an elaborate set of formal inscriptions, wherein the very acts of inscription render being consistent, as 'thought'. A thought as such, whose establishment and transmission will constitute the practical work of the subject in

any 'truth procedure'. This subject neither represents nor identifies being, but is engaged in the praxis of its unfolding—from nothing, or 'pure inconsistency', to something.¹³

For Badiou the axioms and operations of set theory provide the methodological model for any contemporary, genuinely philosophical process of thinking the being of that which appears. Badiou avoids the accusation that his philosophy proceeds by mere analogy due to his central concern with that for which ontology cannot account—the irruption of the 'new' in being. For Badiou, set theory can inscribe the 'place of a place'. That is to say, it can mark a site of inconsistency within the formal consistency of appearance from which the *new* might emerge, and that it can provide the deductive consistency for a thought of this new appearing; however it is prohibited by its own axioms from explaining (discerning the 'how,' the 'when' or the 'why') of any eventual emergence. Ontology therefore cannot think that which fractures the presented consistency of any situation. What set-theory ontology can demonstrate, or 'mark,' is that in any structured situation there 'will have been' a site of this fracture. Set theory marks this place by the axiom of foundation; "If *a* is a non-empty set then this set possesses an element *x* whose intersection with that same set is void".¹⁴ Within any situation there exists an event-site alternately articulated as a localisation, a point of punctuality, or a place of occurring, whose connection with the situation itself is void. It is included (as the void is included in every set) in the situation, yet its being is not presented. As such, any situation—a situation being simply Badiou's name for how being 'appears,' or how a pure multiple is structured into a knowable 'one'—will include within it as uncounted a not 'one'—the void.¹⁵ As we can see the void is also the name of pure inconsistency or multiplicity (axiom of the void or 'null-set')¹⁶ and indeed Badiou's entire project maintains a rigorous fidelity to the Parmenidean axiom which states that 'the one is not'.

Whereas the ontological relation of a situation is that of belonging or 'pure presentation', the relation that dominates the operations of the state (of the situation) is the logical imperative of inclusion. Ontologically speaking, the set of all subsets exceeds that of the original set (situation) and the state is exactly that operation which 'orders' the appearing of these subsets.¹⁷ This means that the multiple that an element is, is not represented as one-multiple, but is represented only as a part, as *included* in the well ordering of the state of the situation. Elements, in their originary relation of belonging—unrepresented singularities which

mark a multiple being—represent the limit of the state's knowledge. They present at the point of the state's void insofar as this void, so named, marks the ontological limit of the states ability to order the entirety of the situation. An event is that which comes to supplement the void, or the *being* of *these* elements, occurring at, but not confined to, this very site. The event mobilises and lends support to these previously unrepresented yet immanently situated elements; elements that may in fact be dispersed in their belonging across the entirety of the 'state of the situation', and which are 'collected,' in their extension, under the name 'void.' Such a becoming multiple is subject, in this instance, only to the event itself. The event initiates the creation of a new set of multiples, a *generic* set—the coming to be of a new *situation*. This process is subject only to the ontological law of generic structure and not to the representational logic of the state. Badiou says, "the event establishes the authority of a new subjective path".¹⁸

For Badiou the subject is always a divided subject; a product of the 'tension between the being of the subject and being in general.'¹⁹ The problem for Badiou is to think what it is that at once admits this division as constitutive of every subject to be, and that at the same time declares that the subject exists as something new in being, as neither an objective fact of being, nor an effect of the state, nor a production of philosophical discourse. For Badiou, the 'subject' names, and thus 'counts into one' that which is divided (and so 'multiple') in its very being. The subject is thus the product—and not the synthesis—of disjunction and as such is of the order of what happens and not of what is.²⁰ While at first glance Badiou's subject resembles that figure which Althusser renders as subject to the state, that is the figure of interpellation, they are effectively very different. In Badiou's words "*le sujet, au sens d'Althusser, est une fonction de l'État*",²¹ therefore the subject is (for Althusser) a figure of ideology and as such cannot belong to the procedures of the properly political. Consequently, for Althusser, the 'subject' cannot be a concept for philosophy.²² For Badiou, such a (state) entity, as Althusser invokes it, is never more than an 'inhabitant of a situation'—an object of general being void of all singularity. Indeed Badiou's subject has no 'knowing' relation to the state at all, convoked as it is by that very event which ruptures the 'knowledge of the state'. Badiou's subject is possible precisely because of the division the event makes real in the heart of the state of the situation. Badiou's subject is convoked at a distance from the state, constituted by this rare, singular yet 'double' process; the occurrence of the event and a subsequent praxiological fidelity to that

event.²³ Such praxis involves the subject continually forcing ‘the Real’ of that distance. For Badiou, it is this subject(ivity) that philosophy must think.

The relation between ontology in general and this subject is contingent. Indeed it is doubly so, in that an event is by definition ‘unknowable,’ and the subsequent declaration for this event is taken in the form of a wager. It is a wager on the chance that an event did in fact occur. Thus the subject begins its series of enquiries into what the consequences of such an event might be, on the basis of the undecidability of the event and pursuing an indiscernible trajectory. The subject remains such only so long as it continues in this process of ‘indiscernment’. For Badiou, the exceptional ‘value’ of set theory—and here, the work of Paul Cohen—is that it “can speak of what is strictly indiscernible *without* discerning it”.²⁴ These enquiries therefore follow no predicated order but are nevertheless subject to the formal discipline imposed upon them by the decision that an event has taken place *and* by the force of a language ordered by the tense of the future anterior: that ‘it will have been true’.

As we will see the educational discourse of the state is pre-eminently concerned with producing a ‘type of subject’. This subject is one whose very being as a subject is wholly circumscribed by the already existing and operative logic of the state, demanding as it does the generalised reproduction of its operating conditions. In a type of masterly honesty the state, through its prescription and policy, is engaged in a process of confronting the ‘subject’ with the substantial requirements for any legitimate subjectivity (an element of sadism that shouldn’t be overlooked).²⁵ We will see below how these requirements are represented ideologically and politically by the state. It is the basis of our argument that a state education, implicated as it is in the processes of reproduction and repetition, must work to foreclose not only the possibility of a subject in Badiou’s sense but must also work at each stage to deny the existence of the ontological conditions for such an existence: To deny the existence of the void and its immanent capacity to limit the state, and therefore, to deny an event its very punctuality.

SUBJECT TO TRUTHS

The subjective procedure that this essay follows is a political procedure. The singular difference between a ‘political’ event and any other, whether it be scientific, artistic or amorous, is that for the political event universality is *intrinsic*. The event in its occurring is within the regime of the collective. Its intrinsic declaration is that the thought that it is, *is* the thought of all.²⁶ ‘Truths’ for Badiou, address the collective as

an anonymity, as an infinite series of singular multiples. As such, contemporary ethical conceptions such as identity or difference have no *a priori* claim on the content of truth. What we *can know* about truths as Badiou considers them—subject to an ontological thesis on infinity—is *to say* we cannot know the extent of the interruption these truth procedures will constitute and nor can we know the identity of their subject. Truths are in fact the generic procedures which, collectively mobilised in the event, traverse via the subject, the entirety of the knowledge situation for which they are truths. It is through the work of the subject, who faithfully constitutes the consequences convoked by this event as a praxis, that knowledge—as that which circulates and is reproduced within the ‘state’ of the situation—will have its very circulation and reproduction interrupted.

A subject is what might become of the collected elements mobilised by the event. This subject—which is, ontologically speaking, any element belonging to this generic multiple—declares that an event took place by giving the event a proper name. This necessarily retroactive declaration ties the event to its site and therefore to the situation in which it occurred. It is a mark of its singularity and of its immanence. If, for example, the subject as its constitutive act offers what has occurred the name ‘revolution’, then this name will suture the being of what happened to the procedure of its appearing in the situation. The subject’s declaration uses common language to mark this new movement of being from nothing, to something. Under the name of revolution, what was marked as nothing—as void—threatens, in the words of the *Internationale*, ‘to become everything’.

Thus the ‘French Revolution’ is the linguistic mark of what was not but which came to be. It names the void immanent to the logic of the previous situation, the *ancien regime*, as well as the ‘what will have been’ of the becoming situation. A subject, at every stage of its enquiry, affirms the non-relation between the established knowledge of what was—in this instance, the *ancien regime*—and this ‘something’ that is becoming true. The subject is that which pursues the consequences of this non-relation, faithful to the event which is its ‘disappeared’ support. As such, any element of the situation may become a faithful subject of the event or, finite carrier of the infinite procedure of truth, regardless of its apparent difference; “circumcised *and* uncircumcised” as St. Paul put it.²⁷

Let us return now to our earlier extrapolation: ‘The history of the school should, properly speaking, be called the history of truth’. What is this ‘properly