

Love in a time of events: Badiou, Deleuze and Whitehead on Chesil Beach [draft for decision and event talk]

The McEwan event

She had nothing left to say, and she came away from the washed-up tree. To set off towards the hotel she had to pass by him, and as she did so she stopped right in front of him and said in little more than a whisper, 'I am sorry Edward. I am most terribly sorry.'

She paused a moment, she lingered there, waiting for his reply, then she went on her way. (Ian McEwan, On Chesil Beach, 157)

On Chesil Beach is the latest of a long line of Ian McEwan's novels tracing the effects of an event through human relations. The short novel tracks a love story up to a painful and bewildering break-up and then beyond to a rapid survey of its divergent consequences. On a first reading, the split played out on the beach is the event organising the plot of the novel, sealing the fate of its characters, and setting down the meaning of other events, actions and phrases. Similar events, often violent and with tragic consequences run through McEwan's other works, such as a death – more than one death - in Amsterdam, or a car crash in Saturday. As bounded happenings, these events would fit into the commonsense analytical interpretation of events as gerunds that happen to things and to objects (*the irreversible splitting of A and B at time to on Chesil Beach*) [Davidson reference and Events collection]. Yet any subtle reader will have picked up on a flaw in this thesis not only in terms of an interpretation of the novel, but also in terms of an understanding of events. What are the boundaries of the event – of its time and space? Are such boundaries just a matter of convention, or are there principles for determining them in a secure manner? Does an event really happen to someone? Or should we instead see it as something that happens with or in them, transforming them such that it is impossible to detach event or gerund and its objects? Can an event be finally identified at all? And if not are we left with a peculiarly un-writerly [Barthes reference] appeal to the facts and the facts alone, or an equally destabilising thesis that all is event and nothing object or subject?

All these questions have already been debated in analytic philosophies of the event. Indeed, these debates have probably run their course, not because they arrived at resolutions but due to the tendency of that tradition to exhaust itself in technical refinements and to lose its first intuitions in their knots and frayed ends. Nonetheless, as the disputations unfolded a number of interesting and fruitful points were made and some of these illuminate the problem of the event of Chesil Beach. Perhaps the best way of drawing them out is through a paradigmatic example of the kind of case raising difficulties for the analytic approach: death and murder [Judith Jarvis Thomson reference]. When and where does a murder occur, if the act leading to it is separated over

a significant period of time from the death itself (for instance if a slow poison is used or, even more problematically, if a poison is administered requiring a later catalyst which might or might not occur and trigger the death)? This latter case can be generalised through the thought that the conditions and chains of cause and effect in a murder have to be artificially curtailed, if we are to circumscribe it as an event and thereby also identify murderers once and for all. For example, the parenting of the murderer can be included into the event and parenting can come in virtuous and vicious chains of parent and child relations damning or saving each other back through time and forward into the future. Are we to identify one particular link as the worst and, if so, how? Of course, there are solutions to such puzzles in legal and moral theory, for instance through the connection drawn between free-will and responsibility. The event of the murder would then begin with the free decision to kill and end with the death. Yet, although this is a useful legal expedient, philosophically it depends greatly on a view of free-will sitting uneasily with our knowledge of causes and decision-making processes. Freedom is without doubt a strong pragmatic move to make and is born out by many common sense approaches to acts and to behaviour. Nonetheless, once we use it to set boundaries to the event it seems pragmatically unsatisfactory, since events do not always include decisions. Even when they do include them, responsibility is only one facet of an event and, if we turn to others, different limits appear, or no limits at all.

McEwan generates the event of the break-up through series of physical drives, desires and repulsions, through engulfing emotions of fear, affection and shame, and through long chains of inner and lonely reflection in different circumstances and in different times. This physical and psychical entanglement of the two lovers is itself set against a background of accidents and happenstance that sometimes appeases the power of desires and emotions and at other time takes them to greater and more destructive heights. These accidents and the play of chance allows for inflection according to further dynamic effects played by natural and human settings, apparently far removed from the lovers and their struggle, yet capable of changing the direction of their lives along divergent and distant lines:

He lay on his side, propped on the elbow of that same arm, looking down at her. The bed squeaked mournfully when they moved, a reminder of other honeymoon couples who had passed through, all surely more adept than they were. He held down a sudden impulse to laugh at the idea of them, a solemn queue stretching out into the corridor, downstairs to reception, back through time. It was important not to think about them; comedy was an erotic poison. He also had to hold off the thought that she might be terrified of him. (OCB, 97)

Reflection, memories and sensations therefore mix in the event. Though the squeaking bed might seem irrelevant in the momentous preparations for a honeymoon coupling, the sounds are capable of triggering and halting the lovers' bodies and minds, of leading to a catastrophic curtailing of promising beginning, and of accelerating a rise in foreboding and dread. The gentle sea-side breeze also appears, with tragic timing, to activate, alternately, pleasure and disgust. None of these factors allow for easy limits and borders. Where does the pertinence of suggested recollection and memory naturally cease? Which

physical and natural causes should take precedence, and why? Even if we could find a perfect order for them, could we ever know that no different perspective or discovery could arrive to undo the frontiers we had set for the event?

Translating the physical problems of the event to the failed marriage and love portrayed by McEwan we see that the event of the break-up is something prepared for by a complex web of emotional, physical and unconscious causes and influences. We also see that though a marriage can easily be situated at the point of its legal dissolution, this is much harder for a love affair and even harder for love itself. When does love end? Where does it end? Has it ended if it can be teased out again much later? And if we allow that as a possibility, then so long as two people are alive – and maybe even if they are dead – love seems to endure as a latent potentiality. Could we say, for example, that the love of Romeo and Juliet has ended at the end of a performance, when it is replayed on later nights, in later works, in the hearts of readers and audience? In some sense, thanks to McEwan's novel its central love-event endures; that is the magic and attraction of the novel. Yet perhaps the reverse is also true: maybe there is never love, since it is foreshadowed by the possibility of a break-up, or by the more subtle idea of grades and shades of love, none of which is the real thing? In the Symposium, Plato has one of the deepest insights as to a possible solution to this conundrum. Love is only truly found in the Form and never in actuality, where it remains a mere appearance to be judged against the elevated Idea [Symposium reference]. So there is no true love among us mortals, but at least we can approach it and participate in the Idea, even if we can have no concept of it or trap it in a representation. The unfortunate aspect of this view is that it draws us away from the truth portrayed in McEwan's novel, not a truth referred to a disembodied ideal but one capturing the actual wounds, desires and pleasure of love's physical sweeps and mental delights, as well as anguish and pain. To refer outside this material and mental chaos to a form of perfection seems a betrayal and loss. McEwan's art is built around veracity with no second-hand or illusory quality to it. His sparse style takes us into events as they are lived and as if they are lived alongside our own physical and emotional events. The prop of an external Idea emerging out of the gaps between different events of love and marriage therefore seems at best unnecessary, at worst a detrimental imposition.

In order to chart a different way through the problem of the event in the novel, one avoiding both the spatio-temporal limitation of the analytic approach, yet also refusing the falsifying effect of Plato's abstraction, I will turn to three related recent philosophies of the event from different traditions: Badiou, Deleuze and Whitehead. Though it can be argued that all owe something to Plato, if only through the strategy of reversing his model, where the event is concerned, they share commitments to its importance and to its distance from commonsensical boundaries. Yet once we move beyond these similarities of concern, we encounter contrasts in execution, ones that lead to commentaries by Deleuze on Whitehead and by Badiou on Deleuze. I want to return to these precise commentaries in a reading of McEwan's work on love. Not in order to settle question about the event and decision once and for all. I do not think this is either possible or desirable. Instead, my aim is to highlight a new romanticism in Badiou's reading of Deleuze and a more fruitful and richer approach to real event in Deleuze. In the

conclusion, I expand on one of Deleuze's main points by following connections to Whitehead's discussion of the event in Science and the Modern World.

Badiou's reading of Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*

'All right. Because you stopped in the doorway and looked at everyone as though you owned the place. Proud. No, I mean, bold.'  
He laughed at this. 'But I was annoyed with myself.'  
'Then you saw me,' Florence said. 'And you decided to stare me out.'  
'Not true. You glanced at me and decided I was not worth a second look.'  
She kissed him, not deeply, but teasingly, or so he thought.' (OCB, 58-9)

The events of love in On Chesil Beach are chance-driven; lovers happen upon one another after chains of aleatory turning points, mishaps and coincidences. These events are also internally fragmented, paradoxical, fragile and multiple. Uncertainty reigns and if there are decisions, they invite opposed interpretations, not only from different view points, but changeable through time and within a single character. Each event is set against a background of shifting weather, light, warmth, sound, wind currents, spaces, materials, plans, architecture, phrases, family relations, bystanders and bit part players. Bodily sensations and instinctive moves do not so much determine the event as add further layers of complexity and magnetic influence, not on causal chains, but rather on the patterns drawing paths for chancy bifurcations and encounters:

But in fact, outside, the glorious city was exploding with the foliage of early summer, the sub was warming the treacle-coloured Cotswold stone, Christ Church Meadow would be in full splendour. Here in the hall she could see over the young man's narrow shoulder murmuring figures moving about in the gloom, setting out the chairs, and then she saw Edward, coming towards her. (OCB, 56)

McEwan's art lies partly in this combination of information and pared down style. We are given multiplicity at real speed, not unfolding according to a rich and convoluted style, but rather where different settings, events, causes and effects lie across one another without losing their independence, but only gaining full individual depth if we return to them, or of the book returns to them, with greater concentration and a search for significance. Reality is maze-like, not only in its puzzling multiplicity, but in the endless paths running through it, as different individuals trace their singular tracks. It is more than any representation or formal image of a maze, though, because each new track recreates the maze, turning it into layers on intersecting but irreducible planes: labyrinth and palimpsest in one – or, better, in the many. This complex multiplicity resists not only the imposition of a single unifying interpretation, but also the romantic image of truth in a singular path, played out through the two lovers. Each path, each interpretation, each relation of event and decision is internally multiple because it communicates with others.

No romantic presentation of the Love and the Event resists falsification by the ever-returning patchwork of interfering components, colour washes and arrangements.

Against the romantic cliché of the certainty of the love-event and of the struggle of the loving couple against external forces threatening their pure affect, we are given the loving couple as a multiple and complex microcosm, where the turbulence of the external world is mirrored in an insecure but nonetheless intense and exciting series of relations. Again, McEwan's writing is adapted to the demands of this inner series of tensions. He never allows external judgements, comparisons and the mundane linguistic versions of theoretical structures to qualify or sanctify the events at hand. Nothing is 'perfect', 'incomparable', 'infinite', 'true' or 'eternal' because every occurrence and every thought is a member of many ongoing series, none of which can claim authority over the others, except through later realisations. Even these post-fact notices resist any elevation into Lesson and Law and the reader is allowed the same latitude as the lovers in their frequent reflections and self-examinations:

The anxieties she would face were still far off, though occasionally she wondered what she was heading towards. A month ago they had told each other they were in love, and that was both a thrill and, afterwards, for her, a cause of one night of half waking, of vague dread that she had been impetuous and let go of something important, given something away that was not hers to give. But it was too interesting, too new, too flattering, too deeply comforting to resist, it was a liberation to be in love and to say so, and she could only let herself go deeper.  
(OCB)

It would be false to infer a lack of sensual intensity or of truthfulness from this resistance to romance in its absolutes, in its zeal and in the tragedies that both confirm it and destroy it. The everyday becomes a many-sided sensual and emotional provocation thanks to its fraying and its instability. The oscillations and beats of love follow the rhythms of McEwan's ultra short phrases; these concatenate but do not dominate one another, allowing each one to contain a world yet not to say everything about it, nor fix its domain and participants according to an ideal or under the stamp of an image of perfection. This syntax banishes truth in the event, in the naming of the shared affect and in the decisions trailing after the first intimations. This is not to lose the delight and manifold values of love and decisions, but to hold off from the temptation to confirm them in a political act aimed at holding reality to the higher authority of pure events and faithful decision.

The authority of love and fidelity has often been claimed by the neo-romantic Alain Badiou for his philosophy of the event (See 'La scène du Deux' in De l'amour, L'Être et l'événement and Logiques des mondes; see also Zizek's commentary on Badiou on love in 'From purification to subtraction: Badiou and the real'). Badiou's claim is doubly political because love is frequently marshalled as the most accessible everyday example of why Badiou's logic of the event should convince us and be followed, but also because loves are policed as to which are true and which mere appearances. Perhaps then McEwan's lovers never were in the truth of love, failing the test of fidelity. Perhaps indeed their failing is of the worst kind: love fails in its essence as a supplement to a lack

of sexual rapport. A first sign of the claims to theoretical dominance over events of love occurs in Badiou's discussion of fidelity in L'Être et l'événement. Fidelity is a procedure where an event, a multiple resistant to inclusion in an established state, is made to run through a situation of that state through a naming, a setting into circulation and discernment. The event of love occurs by chance, but is then named by two asymmetrical decisions when two lovers say 'I love you'. Their love can then circulate in the situation their lives as singular within the state. The asymmetry is necessary for there to be two rather than a repeated one. This might have serious repercussions for Badiou's model when in Logiques des mondes this two-ness is organised around heterosexuality, not only in terms of rather unfortunate remarks about homosexuality and heterosexuality in Ancient Greece, but also in the more general restriction of loving and sexual differences, to a particular difference [LdM reference]. In seeking to escape problems of narcissism and projection where the other is reduced to the self, Badiou restricts the relation of self to other to an arbitrary and highly traditional duality (another sign of his romanticism and its narrowness).

The deep problem in Badiou's imposition of his mathematical and ontological model on love stands out in these claims:

The word "fidelity" clearly refers to the loving relation, but I'd rather say that it is the loving relation that refers, at the most sensitive point of individual experience, to the dialectic of being and event, the fidelity of which proposes a temporal ordination. It is indeed beyond doubt that love, that which is called love, is founded on an intervention, and thus a nomination, on the borders of an emptiness called up by an encounter. (EE, 257)

Many aspects of these claims are troubling. Let's focus first on its structural impositions: an order of reference is insisted upon; the word 'fidelity' is restricted in its concept and not allowed to vary in its applications; 'intervention', 'nomination' and 'encounter' are all restricted to an identified unit ('an intervention', 'a nomination', 'an encounter'). So though the basic blocks of Badiou's ontology are multiples or sets, in the procedure of fidelity and its imposition on love these sets are placed in fixed relations or single discernments. However, if we return to On Chesil Beach, we find a love that evolves in a multiple manner without the necessity of this nomination, in a criss-cross of statements, acts, decisions, narratives, chances, sensations and affects forming a multiple that vanishes in its real relations when a line is drawn through them. Even in a declaration such as 'I want to marry you' McEwan shows a profusion of tangled and highly tensed desires and thoughts such that Badiou's ontology must either judge that these are not lovers, or be shown to be insensitive to the real because it demands truth and certainty where there is only flux and becoming:

She kept that hand in place for as long as she could, until she felt a stirring or hardening beneath the grey flannel of his trousers. She experienced a living thing, quite separate from her Edward – and she recoiled. Then he blurted out his proposal, and in the rush of emotion, the delight hilarity and relief, the sudden embraces, she momentarily forget her little shock. And he was so astonished by

his own decisiveness, as well as mentally cramped by unresolved desire, that he could have had little idea of the contradiction she began to live with from that day on, the secret affair between disgust and joy. (OCB, 23)

McEwan's realism shows the falsification of Badiou's romantic imposition of situated event and decided upon and constructed fidelity. We never give or receive a simple declaration, but rather a proposition, which itself may well be ambiguous and involuntary, against a sexual and affective background (stirring and recoil) and with different and contradictory stretches through time (decisiveness and unresolved desire; disgust and joy). So there is no event within a site, but instead many interweaved series which can be named as an event, but only if we also express the insufficiency of that naming as an identification of decision and event.

The opposition between the break and construction form of Badiou's event and the continuity and genetic paradox of Deleuze's event and series comes out most strongly in Badiou's somewhat narrow and reductive reading of the 'of the event' series in Logic of Sense. The strategy of this interpretation is brusque - as Badiou's readings often are - in reading the series in a vacuum, when in fact it must be connected to the other series in order to be understood, but also in the imposition of 'axioms of the event' on a philosophy that is explicitly arguing against the sufficiency of axioms with regard to the concept of sense. Deleuze's work on language is associated with the linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy and with the idea of sense as meaning, when Deleuze is careful to provide a new definition of language that goes beyond the denotation, meaning or structure, saying or manifestation triad of the linguistic turn. So when Deleuze states that the event is sense this must not be seen as saying the event is the effect of meaning on denotation and on the act of saying. On the contrary, he is instead claiming that changes in the intensities of relations of infinitives (such as 'to love', to 'to hate') have transforming relations to denotation, meaning and saying. The nature of these relations is crucial and completely misunderstood by Badiou. Put simply, actual relations of cause to cause are generated in their determinations, that is, in the form of their relations by relations of effect to effect in terms of sense, or relations of infinitives. In return the relations of effect to effect are similarly generated and determined (though not in exactly the same way, for they are not the same relations). Moreover, the nature of genesis is that it is produced by creative transformations of paradoxes and problems. The paradoxes and problems give rise to actual creative and necessarily temporary attempts at their solutions, and to parallel alterations relations of sense. Actual series and series in sense are then two inseparable sides of the event - you do not have an event if you focus on one or the other (for example on a denoted occurrence, or on an alteration in relations between abstract infinitives: *the rise in the intensity of the to love-to hate relation on Chesil beach taken as independent of the actual love and hatred of the lovers*).

Deleuze's complicated structure, built around two connected sides of reality that determine one another differently through creative genesis arising out of paradox, can be illustrated according to one such creative effort in McEwan's novel. The lovers are trapped between Edward's desire for Florence's body and her revulsion of sex. Their story is an ongoing edging along the line of the paradox that for one loving attraction

must be consummated, but for the other it cannot. Almost each moment of the book teeters on a possible evaporation of the paradox, when she nearly manages to take pleasure in her body and his, or when his love grows without sex, or with an awareness of her physical restraint. Yet, their disastrous wedding night falls on to the side of a block; she cannot let him enter her and his realisation that her love cannot go that far leaves him with a swarm of humiliations, frustrations and puzzlement. Here, she allows a last desperate move to come to the fore, one she had thought of before and one that opens up a possible future and transformation of their paradox – love without sex. She proposes an open marriage, where his physical desire will be outside their relation, and she will love him still, perhaps even more. Deleuze's actual series of related causes is their actual desire, their wounds and their attractions. His series in sense is the paradox presented by a great intensity in the infinitives to love and to penetrate, yet an equally great one in the infinitives, to resist and to disgust.

For Deleuze any verb can have these tense relations and Florence attempts to determine these in a new and creative. This attempt is not idealist or abstract but practical with bi-directional determinations of the infinitives by the act and the act by the tense problems set by the infinitives:

And we can make our own rules too. It's because I know you love me that I can actually say this. What I mean, it's this – Edward, I love you, and we don't have to be like everyone, I mean, no one, no one at all... No one could know what we did or didn't do. We could be together, live together, and if you wanted, really wanted, that's to say, whenever it happened, and of course it would happen, I would understand, more than that, I'd want it, I would because I want you to be happy and free. (OCB, 155)

To understand the limitations of Badiou's reading of Deleuze, and thereby the romanticism of Badiou's position, it is important to observe the way this act in the present works back and forward in time on the two sides of the event. In the actual, past and future are compressed into the urgency of the present and Florence's attempt to heal the growing and painful split between the two lovers. This split is itself conditioned by the problem, an ideal problem not restricted to them but potentially there for all lovers, as the dissymmetry of love and sex changes its configurations through time and according to actual and virtual shifts. Florence's invitation of freedom into the actual situation conditions the virtual problem, since it alters its relation to all other past and future actual events (for instance, when the love-sex, exclusivity and marriage configuration is loosened as a potential for other actual relations).

The event is therefore a reciprocally determining open and bifurcating process along two parallel but irreducible sides of reality. It moves back and forward in time in different ways but by doing so it also allows those ways to condition each other and yet keep all series open for new events and different bifurcations. All is matter of degree here: a tightening or loosening of relations between infinitives and a deepening or alleviation of actual wounds and desires. These degrees are the intensities connecting the two sides of reality without confusing them or allowing unified logical or causal lines in any

neighbourhood. So when Badiou sees the event as arriving ex nihilo, he misses these long chains of mutual determination through the fiction of undetermined new beginning we can then be faithful to. More seriously, this faithfulness itself misses the work of bifurcating events along all its points and when Badiou reduces faithfulness to a logical exercise he misses both the paradoxical and problematic nature of the event and the fact that these paradoxes haunt all events. Life is then an ongoing creativity in relation to multiple and ubiquitous events, rather than rare events and well determined logical paths from through sites. Here is the fatal error in Badiou's reading:

The event is not that which happens to a life, but that which is in what happens, or that which happens in what happens. Such that there can be but one Event. The Event is precisely in the disparate material of a life, the eternal Return of the identical, the undifferentiated power of the Same: "the powerful organic life". (Logiques des mondes, 406)

Badiou has missed the genetic role of paradox and problem in Deleuze's account of the event, as well as the related role of disjunction. There is only one Event on one side of reality (the infinitives changing relations but remaining related to all other infinitives back and forward in time). This Event is then determined by and determining of events, which do happen as an event and as a bifurcation demanding a counter-actualisation – rather than a fidelity, because only this continuous creativity can account for the return of events and further bifurcations in their succession. It is simply false of Badiou to conclude that Deleuze selects destiny above chance. He does not, but instead sets destiny and chance in a productive paradox, such that a life is both destiny and chance: destiny, not in the return of the same, but in the return of difference; chance not in events that surge out of nothing, but in the bifurcations and their genetic determinations through actual and virtual series.

#### Conclusion: what is an event, again?

To conclude I want draw attention to the following passage on the event in Whitehead's Science and the Modern World to show how close he is to Deleuze's conception and how distant from Badiou's:

An event has contemporaries. This means that an event mirrors within itself the modes of its contemporaries as a display of immediate achievement. An event has a past. This means that mirrors within itself the modes of its predecessors, as memories which are fused into its own content. An event has a future. This means that an event mirrors within itself such aspects as the future throws back on to the present, or, in other words, as the present has determined concerning the future. Thus an event has anticipation:

The prophetic soul  
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come

These conditions are essential for any form of realism. (SMW, 90-1)

Like Deleuze, Whitehead projects the event back and forward in time without reducing time to a causal line. This is the significance of the mirroring in Whitehead, a more gently and accessible way of thinking about Deleuze's bifurcations. The anticipation of the event is then more flexible and has more turning points than Badiou would allow, because the event is a hinge between the past and the future, not caused by them, but in the same vocabulary as Deleuze, 'determined' by them, that is, to take another word from Whitehead, 'shaped' by its past and future, yet also shaping them. It is important to take the reference to realism here very seriously, as it is throughout Science and the Modern World. Whitehead allows us to understand the realist metaphysics behind Deleuze's more baroque and oddly engineered structures, because both thinkers share the view that it is the real that is double, or a concatenation of overlapping mirroring. When Badiou observes love, he brings a romantic baggage of miraculous events and implausible linear fidelity to a real event that I have followed here in McEwan's fiction. This real event resists breaks in its continuity, but equally it does not support theories reducing the profusion of events in any event and its capacity to determine all other events, as they determine it. The event does not turn on the empty set, but rather on the endless and endlessly bifurcations of paths and mirrors remaking each other back and forward in time and calling us to decide how to participate in that remaking, not as if we could be finally true to the real, but rather become part of it and make it better.

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