IF IT BE NOT NOW

David Lichtenstein*

Then it goes, all goes, and I’m far again, with a far story again, I wait for me afar for my story to begin, to end, and again this voice cannot be mine. That’s where I’d go, if I could go, that’s who I’d be, if I could be.¹

There is an old joke in psychoanalysis that goes something like this: After several long years of psychoanalytic treatment an analysand has a moment of profound insight and proclaims that he finally sees what has been the unconscious meaning of his words. To which the analyst replies (usually with a Viennese accent): “Now we may perhaps begin?”

The truth is that beginning doesn’t come easily. In fact, you can’t count on it happening at all. In psychoanalytic work as in much else, there is a preliminary time that may be an opening act but is not yet and may never contain the act of an opening. Since one knows that one has actually begun only after the fact, it is impossible to choose to begin as an act of conscious will. The path of every analysis is strewn with abandoned resolutions to start anew. Regarding the possibility of beginning, one can only and occasionally recognize it once it has occurred. Since we live with the conviction of our own intentions, impossibility is the character of our discourse.

The analysand cannot begin, and, in fact, when the psychoanalysis actually begins the lineaments of its end are in sight. It is not nonsense to say: the end of analysis is to begin. To begin is to encounter the new; however, the new cannot be knowingly encountered as such. If it be new 'tis not known, and if it be known 'tis no longer new. As Hamlet put it, “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.”² Therefore to choose the end of analysis as with the beginning is impossible. However this does not mean it doesn’t happen. To

* Dr. David Lichtenstein is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. He is a founding member of the Apres-Coup Psychoanalytic Association, where he is a member of the faculty and a supervising analyst. Dr. Lichtenstein is also an adjunct professor of Psychology at the City University of New York.

¹ S AMUEL BECKETT, STORIES AND TEXTS FOR NOTHING 94 (1967).
² W ILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET act 5, sc. 2.
continue with Hamlet, “the readiness is all.”3

In a formal sense, people enter psychoanalysis because of some difficulty in relation to the new. This is often conveyed within the particular request for analysis: I think I’m going around in circles; I keep making the same mistake; there is a certain anguish or pain that recurs and will not cease . . . . In other words, people suffer from a certain form of repetition from which psychoanalysis is meant to release them. It is a fundamental psychoanalytic discovery that the possibility for that release may be found in the condition of repetition itself.

In his essay on philosophy and psychoanalysis, Alain Badiou suggests that while politics works toward the invention of new possibilities, psychoanalysis does not, focusing instead on an accommodation with the unknowable real.4 While this may be true insofar as we are speaking about the method or direction of analytic work it is false regarding its effects. In fact, the effects of the analytic act must entail the appearance of the new. There must indeed be a beginning in order for a clinical psychoanalysis to end.

And since the beginning is not there at the beginning it will have taken place at some point as an event in the analysis.

Although I state this view as though it is indisputable, as with all of the important principles of psychoanalysis, there is little agreement about this point. Freud is usually cited as rejecting the idea that psychoanalysis should be concerned with the new. Psychoanalysis is concerned with an uncovering of truths but not their creation. The principles of analytic neutrality and abstinence require that any new synthesis or invention remain outside the field of intention. This view is presented most clearly in Freud’s 1918 address to the Fifth International Congress.5

However writing elsewhere Freud had already begun exploring an alternative hypothesis.6 His barely traced notion of “working through,” Durcharbeiten, presented a few years before in the context of a discussion of repetition, indicates that this matter is not easily resolved in Freud’s thought. The “through” in “working through” introduces the idea of a passage to a new place or situation. It suggests a new subjective position occurring within the analytic frame. With its implication of a pass and the idea of fidelity to something that has taken place, it is entirely on the point. The concept of working through is Freud’s acknowledgement that through the gradual and necessarily

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3 Id.
4 ALAIN BADIOU, INFINITE THOUGHT (2005).
repetitive process of analysis something may take place that can constitute a beginning. Lacan’s work later in his career was deeply involved with this problematic. I would argue that in discovering and developing the idea of working through, Freud encountered a principle that is also at the heart of Badiou’s notions of the event and the emergence and fidelity of the subject in relation to the event.

Working through is only possible in the context of repetition, which makes the latter a *sine qua non*, of the psychoanalytic act. Freud directly links working through to the compulsion to repeat. When Badiou asserts that repetition is not a tool of psychoanalytic work he is comparing it to the scientist’s ideal of experimental replication. As he rightly observes psychoanalytic truth can come only in the singularity of the situation in which the scientist’s ideal of replicability has no part. Parenthetically this caveat is relevant to a highly charged debate currently taking place in the psychoanalytic field regarding its own legitimacy in which the principle of replicable scientific evidence—the very thing that Badiou correctly observes runs counter to the character of psychoanalytic truth—is yet again being invoked as the guarantor of efficacy.

Nevertheless, the mechanism of repetition occurs in other forms than that of intentional experimental replicability and there are aspects of repetition that are clearly indispensable to psychoanalytic truth and what it means to begin. I will take up three dimensions of psychoanalytic work that are concerned with repetition and the new and relate them to what takes place in the psychoanalytic act.

The first of these dimensions is the symptom. Impossibility as the real of the symptom appears in the psychoanalytic realm in the form of repetition. When Freud postulated a compulsion to repeat, *Wiederholungzwang*, he did so in the context of his speculation about the death drive, that is a fundamental factor in the structure of the human subject that originates outside of human life. Badiou refers to the “automatism of repetition” in his description of infinity. There is something of this automatism that is not only a tool of mathematical reason but also a determinant of subjective structure as organized around the symptom. It underlies the structure of the symptom and neurotic discourse as the impossibility to begin or the impossibility to stop not beginning, in a repetition of the same. Thus, paraphrasing Lacan, the impossible never ceases not to begin. The impossible real of the symptom is not a discrete entity, neither a pathogen nor syndrome that can be extirpated. It is rather an expression of the true conditions of

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8BADIOU, *INFINITE THOUGHT*, supra note 4, at 62.
the subject, conditions toward which a new subjective position can occur through the psychoanalytic act.

Since philosophers have repeatedly dipped their feet in this particular river since Heraclitus, I am sure that the history of the question of repetition is more familiar to many of you than to me. I’ll note a few highlights. Kierkegaard suggested that it is in the pursuit of repetition that its limit is encountered and the new appears.10 He thus privileges both repetition and its subversion in a way that prefigures the psychoanalytic stance. Deleuze invoking Zarathustra locates the possibility of difference at the limit of repetition and treats the latter as its necessary condition.11

Zizek12 recently suggested that Badiou’s position on the relation between repetition and the event is equivocal since, on the one hand, there is Badiou’s category of resurrection as one of the subjective destinations of the event but on the other he tends to view repetition only as a closing of possibility. While Zizek presents a persuasive critique, his depiction of Badiou’s thought on the matter seems at odds with the internal logic of the work. As I have noted, Badiou explicitly places repetition at the heart of the axiom of infinity. This being so, it is difficult to see how he could then treat it only as a limiting function.

What is relevant for this dialog between psychoanalysis and philosophy is that both Freud and Lacan held the idea that the compulsion to repeat takes psychoanalysis to the border of the subjective, the place beyond a certain homeostatic pleasure principle. At that place the distinction between the subject and being, a distinction that is important to Badiou as the basis both of his departure from psychoanalysis and the principle of repetition, would seem to be meaningless. Since it is at that place, seat of the automatism of repetition that the symptom originates and with it the truth of the subject, it would seem to follow that the axiom of infinity may well be linked to the axiom of the subject through the principle of repetition.

Lacan represented the neurotic form of repetitive circular movement through his topological models. This permitted him to present the analytic act as a cut in this circularity and therefore as an act made possible by circularity. The last point is crucial. Until there is a circular path there is no possibility of a transformative cut. In Freudian terms until there is a transference neurosis, that is, a repetitive impossibility involving the analysis itself, there is nothing to work through. As Beckett repeatedly presents, there is no beginning until there is an impasse to be followed again naturally only by the possibility

to begin again in the face of another impasse.

By the topological cut, Lacan meant to demonstrate how the new issues forth from repetition. The English verb, *to begin*, is etymologically related to the idea of cutting open. A beginning is thus quite literally an opening, a cut. Topologically, a cut in a ring creates a new surface. Through a cut, again speaking topologically, the surface of an interior space is made available and can be traversed as continuous with what had been exterior. It is traversed, however, as the path of a new circularity. There is no utopian release from circularity—or repetition—*per se*, there is “merely” the possibility of opening new paths. This illustrates the truth that while there is the illusion of depth in psychoanalysis, we are always in fact working on a surface and sometimes a new one. I take this whole matter of the opening to be an instance of the generic procedure as Badiou presents it. In which case, the cut in psychoanalysis is an instance of Badiou’s interventional nomination.

In personal communication Badiou suggested that in addition to the cut as a transformation of repetition, there is another phenomenon that stands outside of repetition. He described it as an “end point,” as a point beyond repetition. This end point presumably takes the form of a recapitulation which is different from repetition *per se*. Indeed it is instead a sort of repetition of repetition, a recapitulation that presents all prior repetitions and thus establishes a new point that is beyond them. Thus, according to this view it is in the character of repetition to arrive at a limit which is an infinite.

This is a notion reminiscent of the philosophical inquiries of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Deleuze. To the psychoanalyst it is the categorical distinction between the cut and this recapitulating end point that is problematic. It is not that the recapitulating end point has no meaning for the psychoanalyst. *Rather it is the very thing that is to be marked in the timing of the cut.* The psychoanalytic cut is already predicated on recapitulation and the end point. The very thing that the psychoanalyst listens for is an utterance of the other discourse that interrupts the conscious discourse in an act of recapitulation.

The analyst’s intervention at that point insofar as it is effective will have marked a break, and thus a beyond, in a cycle of repetitions. For the psychoanalyst this bears on the character of the psychoanalytic act. Is the end point to be simply waited for, with the analyst as witness affecting the scene only as witness or is there something in the analytic act that affects the character of repetition? That is, that the cut and the end point are in fact intricately related, indeed essentially the same thing. A cut can only work as such insofar as there is the possibility of

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13 Alain Badiou, Opening Remarks at the Cardozo Law Review Symposium: Law and Event (Nov. 11-12, 2007).
a moving beyond repetition, that is, that an end point is present, an end
point being, as I noted above, the place of a beginning.

The question that hovers here is how the discovery of the
unconscious affects the original philosophical question regarding
repetition and the new. The discovery is of another discourse, a
discourse of the Other and the fact that this other discourse is constantly
crossing the discourse of our conscious life. The compulsion to repeat
is a characteristic of the unconscious discourse. Its repetitive insistence
may operate as an interruption in the seeming coherence of conscious
thought and it is as interruption that the possibility of nomination occurs
through the cut. The specific eventful crossings of spoken discourse
and the unconscious happen largely by chance and cannot be predicted
since both make do with what is ready at hand known by Freud as the
residue of the day. Yet the outcome of the cut, i.e. that a beginning has
been made, is quite certain and knowable after the fact. We can
therefore say with Badiou: “The procedure is thus ruled in its effects but
entirely aleatory in its trajectory.”14

Althusser wrote about irruption in his second letter to the
psychoanalyst Diatkine where he discusses the problem of beginning or
the genesis of the unconscious.15 As in Badiou’s concept of the event,
the irruption of the unconscious may well go unnoticed. In that sense it
only occurs insofar as it is named. To put this more precisely, insofar as
a cut actually occurred it will have constituted a beginning. This is the
application of the future anterior to which Badiou is so finely sensitive.
The logic of infinite sets may also be relevant here since the neurotic’s
discourse constitutes an infinite set insofar as its repetition perpetually
crosses the indiscernible. From the standpoint of psychoanalysis, for
the new to appear it is necessary and sufficient that there be both an
unconscious and a cut.

The new is simultaneously primitive in the sense of a beginning
and atemporal as any beginning necessarily must be. In other words it
is in time but not of time. Only the effects get counted. I suppose one
question posed to the psychoanalyst by the title of this conference is
whether either the unconscious or the cut are governed by law.

The condition for the new is its impossibility. Certainly if the new
is taken as that which is already possible it is in no sense new. Freud
was forced therefore to think beyond the pleasure principle which
governs the realm of the possible. There is a repetition, an insistence, to
the symptom that demanded this step. It is in that beyond that the
unknowable taps a source of possibility. Indeed without that beyond,
psychoanalysis would ultimately be a therapeutic adjustment to what is
already known as the good life.

14 BADIOU, INFINITE THOUGHT, supra note 4, at 394.
In effect this is a restating of the familiar idea that the symptom that brings someone into analysis contains the conditions for the possibility of a cure with the precise understanding that it is the symptom in its repetitive and insistent impossibility that establishes the condition for the new.

Thus a consideration of the symptom leads to the second of our three dimensions regarding repetition, that of the psychoanalytic method. Repetition is not only the character of the neurotic discourse it is an essential part of the analytic method. The technique of psychoanalysis enacts a form of relentless repetition: its fixed time and place, the ritualistic constraints upon behavior, the insistence upon the fundamental rule, this is how it is done, how it has always been done. And more, the technique is the repetition of a form encountered in the analyst’s experience of analysis. The analyst takes up the place that had been occupied by his or her own analyst and holds relentlessly to that position through countless repetitions. It is more than sympathetic magic that the cure takes its form from the illness. It is rather based upon the idea that the conditions for the new are to be found in the logic of repetition. If this is so then the neurotic thus brings the conditions for the cure in the form of the disease and the psychoanalyst meets those conditions in kind in the form of the treatment, a sort of mimetic repetition, with the only difference being that the analyst has some experience of the cut and thus presumably some idea of what it means to begin and has ears to listen for that possibility. The analyst’s function is to hear the rupture in conscious discourse and to effectively punctuate it in some way that makes possible the nomination of the new.

This reliance upon a lawful orthodox technique has been seen either as a failure of imagination inviting the creative therapist to introduce new and livelier techniques or instead a profound and faithful recognition that a certain abstinent faith in repetition by the analyst is the condition for the new to appear on the side of the analysand. One should not be too quick to take sides in this debate. Lacan’s experiments with the disruptive cut of the short session must be placed in this context alongside his austere call for a return to Freud. This apparent contradiction reflects the fact that the analytic method draws its bearings simultaneously from repetition and rupture.

In addition to the symptom and the method, a third locus of repetition essential to the analytic endeavor is the central myth of psychoanalytic theory, that of Oedipus. Each subject enacts a repetition of the myth of a certain encounter which is the realization of a prophecy. It is only through his destined reenactment that a subject can emerge and yet a subject only emerges insofar as this destiny is ruptured and a beginning is made.
The function of myth in the discourse of psychoanalysis and the function of the oedipal myth in particular is to situate the subject in the time of repetition—that being the time of myth *par excellence*. As Badiou has argued, an effect of the event is to open a locus where the subject may appear. There is a certain displacement suggested by this view between the person of the given discourse and the subject of the event who appears in fidelity to that which ruptures that discourse. Oedipus is an instance of that displacement. His is the story of the subject coming to be in the place that ruptures the given discourse. For one thing, he comes to see that his destiny is that of enacting the prophecy, but in that seeing he discovers that that he is something else as well, something beyond that enactment. He not only enacts blindly but comes to see the truth of the enactment. He becomes the blind man that is seer. “For I am revealed to you as guide where formerly you used to guide your father.”16 The resurrection of Oedipus at the end of the cycle is about the subject coming to be at the place of loss and impossibility.

However, in addition to the epiphany and resurrection that ends the story, the tale of Oedipus begins as well with a displacement through repetition that allows the subject to appear. In answering the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus ruptures the repetitive enigma of the unanswerable question: the repetitive symptom that insists without end. That he answers the riddle with the signifier “Man” means that he, a man, now occupies the place of that enigma *qua* subject.17 Answering the riddle of the Sphinx is a cut in the repetition if the enigma that opens a new path along which Oedipus travels only, of course, to enact the repetition of a prophecy.

In the psychoanalytic act, the analyst first occupies the place of the sphinx and articulates for the analysand the question that is inherent in the symptom. As in the myth, the analyst is destroyed when the analysand *qua* subject takes up the place of that enigma. In actually conducting a psychoanalysis one never knows where the point of that turning may occur. A seemingly casual word or symptomatic elision will be noted and the analysand will come to see what it means to occupy the place that the analyst appeared to speak from and the analysand will speak from that place instead and like Oedipus become his own riddle.

Every analysis begins with a wager. Like Pascal’s there is no basis for a reasonable person to refuse it, and yet, if it is to have the character of a wager it must in fact be uncertain. There must be a serious risk. And this must be so for both parties. As soon as the outcome is certain the game is over.

16 SOPHOCLES, Oedipus at Colonus, in 2 SOPHOCLES 575 (Hugh Lloyd-Jones, ed.,1994).