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Main streams and fine rivers: Thinking the aporetics of edge

Abstract:

This paper takes up the question (reframed by Deleuze and Guattari) of where expansion takes place: at the ends or from the centre. Despite the connotations of mediocrity that can be attributed to the term ‘mainstream’, it is possible to rethink what happens at close range as the space of radical openings. Writers can often believe that what is most abnormal or fringe will produce the highest probability of creative ‘event’. The question, however, can be posed – framed by the lineage of deconstruction – whether the key to unlocking any system of totality or closed possibility may lie in a very *central* (although physically peripheral) location. If, instead of the classical image, expansion may occur from re-imagined ‘middles’ rather than conventional ‘margins’, this reading of where potential can arise may offer a more resilient model than that of fragile peripheries, forever exposed to being amputated from staid centres of status and restricted participation. Drawing on the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and Badiou, this paper seeks to unsettle any simplistic approach to the notion of edge, reinscribing it *within* the repetitiveness of our situations, to argue that right in the middle of the so-called mainstream, there might be the fine rivers of aporia that when encountered in thought can constitute gates to that which is most radical in writing and other creative practices.

Biographical note:

Antonia Pont is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, Australia, where she also teaches in the School of Culture and Communication. Her doctoral thesis is an inquiry into grief, writing and violence: *How to do Things with Sadness*. She writes both theoretically and creatively (and is still deciding where the edges of these voices lie), performs, collaborates, and is generally grateful for opportunities to engage with others who engage – as makers or appreciators – with words, bodies, colour, and thinking. Recent projects include a novel, *The Best Thing About Snow*; an on-line image-text collaboration, *The Post Project*, with artist Emma Cowan; and her own practice via her website *The Metabolism of Travel*.

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It is not uncommon for questions to be viewed as that mechanism which will usher us towards a comfortable sense of closure. There would be something out of kilter, some might call it a problem, and one wishes that it would go away. The strategic know that a reliable first step on the way to a solution can be finding a sound and perspicacious question. It is as if the question itself would already be half-way towards the answer or that it almost constitutes the answer itself, albeit in an embryonic form.

A solution in such cases is generally seen to be that which will reestablish order or right what is out-of-kilter. One might say that the *kilter* (a term considered to derive from Scottish or English dialect, where ‘kelter’ means good health, spirits, or order (see Quinion 2009)) corresponds to things being as they should be, in balance, correct, obeying laws of nature, etc. How might one approach the notion of the question, however, in cases where the out-of-kilter-ness is, in fact, the kilter itself? When the systems of order, of claimed naturalness and unshakably stable, but not necessarily just, laws have become so gridlocked, questions would be needed which will not bring about closure, harmony and further securing of the already-established order, but a kind of opening, a crack in the corrupt but steady normality.

In an analogous way, the question, with which I would like to begin this paper would also not seek to make things tidier. It is a mess-making question.

‘Is it ever possible to begin in the middle?’ or counter-intuitively framed (like Alice through the mirror), ‘is it possible to begin anywhere other than the middle?’

The adjacency of beginning and middle beckon to the third term of the trio – end – and land us quickly in something like a linear landscape, (spatial or temporal perhaps, at this point we cannot be sure). The trio, in any case, is not foreign to apprentices of writing. Years of coaching might have it that one starts a written task unquestionably with an introduction. The assumed structure of the secondary-school essay teaches us early an expectation about the architectures of text-artifacts. Beginnings, middles and ends.

The middle is where everyone drifts off.

The beginning is where you might still have them.

The end is where you hope to wake them up again.

In terms of a classical narrative arc, the middle is also likely to be the space where there will be some kind of catastrophe, problem, or happening that demands a response from key protagonists. In other words, stuff happens in the middle of things. Doesn’t it? To tie us back to the themes for this conference, we can ask whether it *is* in the realm of the mainstream that the most fertile ground for creativity is found, or rather if it is at the margins, or periphery that newness and possibilities will emerge. It may then be necessary to ask whether the ‘stuff’ that happens in the middle constitutes inventiveness, or whether it’s just the same old stuff shuffling itself around?

If we can tentatively agree that the middle is where things will have already gotten under way, then what definitionally constitutes a beginning? How would one find the

edge where the beginning begins? Or is the beginning not an edge at all, but a phase with a certain duration, that is to say, another mode of ‘things happening’?

But are we speaking spatially, temporally, or somehow ontologically, when we ask about beginnings? Does it make a difference whether we mean things beginning in time, embarking across a kind of spatial plane, or in terms of a formalised definition?

Let us take up initially the idea of the ‘beginning’ as something in time (knowing that we know so little about this (non)thing called *time*), that is to say: let us treat *beginning* as a temporally inflected noun, rather than a spatial one.

I propose that the thinking of a temporal beginning dovetails somewhat with the notion of a threshold, or an edge. The beginning would be a kind of line-in-the-sand that is either breached or not. Beginning-as-threshold implies a lack of thickness. The threshold *isn't*, rather it signals that to either side of it, one finds other states or qualities, in this case, other modalities of time. Analogously, for example, the colloquial notion of the temporal present may fail to render explicit enough the fact that the present *isn't*, and can have no substance, since it is a conceptual exercise that thinks the movement of *différance*, as Derrida has intimated it – that which can be opposed to nothing, since it is that ~~non-thing~~ from which category, or distinction emerges (1997, 62). The colloquial ‘present’ for time is simply that which *does/is the action of distinguishing* – hence it is perhaps better conceptualised as verb rather than noun. It distinguishes between what is past and finished from what is to come. If anything, this present can be nothing other than the space left after the cut of the temporal knife, the knife of distinction, *différance*, or even the *cutting* itself, an action that cannot be folded into nominality.

It is as if the term beginning can only make sense negated, or as a possibility already past. A beginning, rigorously observed (and not treated as a duration which would be a mode of the middle) is, like the present, never actual. ‘Beginning’, as notion, then would teeter dangerously on the edge of being a non-sense term, or more elegantly stated: an aporia. In his book by the same name, Derrida has this to say about aporias:

... the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed the nonpassage, which can in fact be something else, the event of a coming or of a future advent which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting. (1993, 8)

We would seem to have a strange convergence here, of meaning and contradiction. Just earlier, I wrote that beginning can be understood simply as that which is crossed, never inhabited, *passed-through*, whereas I suggest soon after, by means of the above quote, that this very quality would give one to think the aporetic, that which, according to one definition, is precisely that which cannot be passed through. The aporia in a philosophical sense can also be approached as that which cannot be *thought* through. It is a kind of node, perhaps, that refuses a linear and orderly crossing. The mind cannot easily place an aporia in a series of terms that behave in an obedient and predictable fashion. The clash, within the very attempt to speak of the ‘beginning’ at all, between its nature as aporetic, and its other qualities that speak directly *against the content* of aporia’s definition, would seem to confirm that this

quotidian notion – beginning – is at least trickier to handle than its prolific employment as a word of regular life would have one believe.

There are some other terms that may help with the thinking of threshold. The liminal, as an example, would be, in lay parlance, that space which is somehow in-between, suggesting (again aporetically) dwelling in a place of non-dwelling. When someone says that they have had a liminal experience, it tends to suggest they have experienced something that language will not easily contain, and for which the encyclopaedia of concepts does not have a match. (Derrida will then go on to ask: ‘Is an experience possible that would *not* be the experience of an aporia?’ (1993, 15) my emphasis.) The liminal brings with it the idea of inhabiting the uninhabitable – a concept that due to its oxymoronic nature leaves us conceptually adrift, but nevertheless compelled. Edgy, if you like. At the threshold one is technically nowhere. Being prior to arrival, the liminal will still most likely fold itself obediently and immediately to being underway. In other words, how long can the outset hover outside that which is going on?

We might say that the beginning wouldn’t *be*, since perhaps there is no gradation between stuff happening and not-happening. In other words, we always wake up to find that we have already begun. This reminds us of the Heideggerian notion of being-thrown, in which Dasein recognises itself as thrown within an already-existing situation not of its making or choosing, but with which it must come to terms and to which it must respond (see Heidegger 1962, 321). We are not able, therefore, to have consciously attended our origination. We long for the beginning of things, other things, while we inhabit the so-called middle of something else.

(It would seem, however, that despite my intention to ditch the writerly convention of beginning-with-a-beginning, by attempting instead to start in the middle, I found myself, in what’s just gone, speaking of beginnings anyway. This is a curious slide, indeed, however I notice it only when we are well under way.)

Let us turn our discussion now towards a more spatially inflected notion of the beginning. The term ‘edge’ may be of assistance as we ask about ‘beginnings’ in this way. By space, I must ask myself if I am thinking more in terms of something two-dimensional, that is: a plane, where the beginning would be a frontier, of sorts; or whether, visualising something that has a depth in three dimensions, beginning is akin to a skin or membrane (the breaching of which would take one from a so-called *outside* to a so-called *inside*).

Perhaps the depth analogy assists best in unpacking terms ‘margins’ and ‘mainstream’. Is the margin, by definition, a conceptual site whereby inclusion would be as yet undecided? Is the mainstream, by contrast, that which is constituted by secured or guaranteed membership? To be part of the mainstream would suggest an unqualified belonging. To what, however? This is an interesting question.

To assist us here, the mathematical approach of Alain Badiou can be called upon analogously. In his foundational work *Being and Event* (2007), Badiou makes use of a reading of Cantorian and Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory which clarifies (for the purposes of our discussion) something about notions of exclusion and inclusion. Set-theory, as it has developed over the course of the twentieth century, is purportedly

able to inscribe all other mathematical operations purely using the basic distinction of inclusion and exclusion (or in the language of set theory belonging or membership, shown by the symbol \in .) This simplicity is not to be underestimated. From the concept of membership all else may be derived and more complex notions turn out merely to be a kind of short-hand for various combinations of membership or non-membership. The answer ‘to what?’ the elements of the set belong is simply the ‘set of those elements’.

If the mainstream may imply definite membership, and the margin refer to an uncertain status of membership or none at all, then Badiou’s use of set theory responds to our needs, and brings the question ‘to what?’ into a clearer, but unsettling, view. ‘Mainstream’ means simply belonging as the result of being counted *within*, as opposed to being excluded from that status of membership. The set has no original or essential quality of which to speak. *What it is* is determined only by what belongs to it.

In relation to our industry as writers and to our practice as thinkers and artists, being part of the mainstream refers to a status based on belonging, and one doesn’t need to examine the mainstream as a kind of *topos* with a descriptive predicate. To be mainstream implies only a definite membership in the current Australasian market or further afield, it implies that the tools required for reading your work are available and presently in use by reading audiences. It implies that the writing produced reflects, in some ways, prevailing norms and tastes. Not to be part of the mainstream would, on the other hand, suggest – a little like our discussion of the liminal earlier on – that one is almost *nowhere*. Nowhere comforting, in any case. One could say that it is impossible to ‘write at the margins’ since it is a non-space, always before the membrane which would be the edge or the beginning, and that what might be produced ‘there’ would not be named writing in any colloquial sense, since the encyclopaedia would not even have the means for identifying it as such. It might get called ‘poor’ writing, but would be denied the coveted title of ‘Writing’. Such writing-that-isn’t-writing might instead fall into the chasm of nonsense, waffle, trash or wordy-indulgence. Evading the filters that would permit it to be categorised, it will almost be relegated, erroneously, to something akin to non-being.

But let me now, really, introduce this paper, since I decided to skip over such chronological conventions at the start (with a varying degree of success, as was noted). My initial interest in writing this paper, was to revisit the often unquestioned assumption that the margins are the most likely site of creativity, newness or evolution. Aware of the attraction of the easy interpretation of ‘mainstream-as-stifled and margin-as-fresh’, I was curious to question the blatant polarity and to see if, in fact, such a delineation would hold under scrutiny. By taking up the notion of margin as either beginning (in time) or as membrane (in three-dimensional space), the discussion until now works to confirm, rather than to displace, the common-sense reading. That is, the mainstream is a big repository for the established and the sleepy, and that the margins do constitute the so-called cutting-edge, unreadable as it might be, prior to its being ushered into ‘membership’ of the somniferous centre.

As a possible counter-argument, or alternative vision to the model just sketched, we can refer to the renowned introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) concerning the rhizome. The latter, to summarise briefly, would be a kind of structure (or even growth choreography) that is not dominated by, or which constantly escapes, the so-called Western arborescent structuring. This tree or tap-root model either gathers itself around a central axis or root, thereby succumbing to an inescapable hierarchising. The arborescent, and its close cousin the fascicle, operate either according to an explicit notion of unity, or a concealed but longed for one. The rhizome, on the other hand, would be about the thinking of multiplicities (the kind that aren't accumulations of 'ones'), with the only place where the 'one' might feature in their formulation being in the simple matheme $n-1$. In other words, the rhizome can be understood as that from which the notion of the one, or of union, has been subtracted (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 3-6). However we saw above, that it is the very notion of grouping which would allow the categories, or topoi of insides/outside, beginnings/middles, belonging/exclusion, and so on, to function in the first place. Prior to any binary, there is the thinking, or *the operation*, of the One.

When we take up, playfully, a divided but united structure like margin/mainstream, the most enjoyable part of it is noticing what kinds of assumptions, landscapes of imagination and conceptual geometries permit the notion to either function or, when put under pressure, to buckle and complain at unexpected aporetic junctions.

If we map the creative landscape via such a binary, we bend our thinking to the dominance of the *one* and of law of *reflection* (book-as-imitation in the example of the root-book (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 5)), and may find ourselves deciding – hierarchically – either that the mainstream is more fertile, or that the margins are, shoring up our argumentative arsenal accordingly, but ultimately in both cases saying the same thing. Reversal, in other words, is not change.

Badiou, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari offer tectonic-like interruptions to the stolidity of such a reading. For example, Badiou's decision, at the beginning of *Being and Event*, countering Parmenides, that *the one isn't*, would immediately constitute an intervention into any assumption that the very division of inside and outside is 'natural', or ontologically prior. Rather Badiou, admits that *there is* the reign of the One and of the count, but that this has nothing to do with Being, and is not original in the ways previously thought (2007, 23ff). The categories of margin and mainstream are intrinsically linked to the function of the count, which *generates* presentation purely on the basis of belonging or exclusion. The thought of unicity does indeed have much to do with all that *there is* (what 'there is' in presentation being opposed to what 'is' in Being for Badiou as 'inconsistent multiplicity' (2007, 25)), however this 'there is' would be ontologically linked to the stable state of the situation and has no space within it for anything *evental*.

Derrida, similarly, but not in the same way at all, gives us much to think about centres, and that which would be deemed structurally peripheral. In *Memoires for Paul de Mann* (1989, 72), while writing about the architectonics of deconstruction, he clarifies the image of the cornerstone – a building element that is physically situated at the edge of a building, but nevertheless, is the precise place where pressure should

be levered – deconstructive pressure, no less – in order to make an intervention into the system’s apparently total and seamless durability. The cornerstone, then, can be read spatially as something pertaining to margins and their potential to disrupt and render unstable particular power grids controlling the centre. However, recalling our third mode of reading beginnings and middles – that is the formalised, or definitional mode – the cornerstone (despite not being so spatially) is *functionally* central in terms of its force. Derrida goes on to explain:

...deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes *afterwards*, from outside, one fine day; it is always already at work in the work; one must just know how to identify the right or wrong element, the right or wrong stone – the right one, of course, always turning out to be the wrong one. (1989, 73)

As we know from post-structural thought, systems will conceal that element which renders them internally contradictory, and thereby unsettled. To observe such an element is – in itself – the beginning of the end of any such totality. Movement may again then be able to enter the equation and the possibility for change may open.

Conclusion

The mere positing of margin/mainstream as a natural categorical division may – if left to operate unchecked – tend to reinforce a conceptual split entrenched in established ways of perceiving space, time or other concepts, which restrains possibilities for freshness and the event of thought (artistic, political or others).

Apparently simple notions like *beginning*, when placed under scrutiny, turn out less to be situated temporally-early or spatially at-the-outset, but rather function aporetically as a kind of non-space and non-time that interrupt the thinkable, and are therefore impossible within conventional categories. However, an audacious encountering of the very aporia of beginnings or thresholds may emerge as a decisive manoeuvre which itself enacts the (im)possibility of the present, or the beginning. Derrida would refer to this kind of *beginning*, paradoxically, as that which is *to-come*, an expression which resembles the writing of the word ‘future’ in French, but is to be distinguished from its colloquial sense. This ‘beginning’ would not so much be at the edge, but rather within landscapes, better understood as an ontological edge without substance and imperceptible to reason, but which nevertheless may sometimes haunt the situation.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the arborescent model (an example of which would be a binarised approach to the categories margin and mainstream) must be destabilised, since the arborescent has:

... made us suffer too much... Nothing is beautiful, loving or political aside from underground stems, aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes. (1987, 15)

If we were to assume for a minute, that these growths, of which they speak, were peripheral in the traditional sense, we stand corrected. Deleuze and Guattari’s edge also finds itself always in the middle. Growth, or newness, emerges from somewhere unpredictable but *within* (1987, 23). Following them, the old notion of the edge or the

margin is one that remains too vulnerable, since if we believe in anatomies divided into appendage margins and trunk-like centres, then the fresh, free things that might grow from such edges, are too easily amputated, leaving the ‘centre’ guarded and unchanged.

If we challenge our own presumptions about textual architectures, about bodies, about structures, then what arises is a reading wherein edges – so fine as to be not within what is called ‘presentation’ – would be ubiquitous and spontaneously generating, and where ‘mainstream’ (in the sense of being an unresponsive normality) constitutes not a location, but rather the submission to pervasive dogmas claiming that nothing new is possible. To end, allow me to refer to *A Thousand Plateaus* once more, a simple but beautiful quote, linking the rhizome with a reimagined notion of ‘middle’: ‘A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end. A rhizome is made of plateaus.’ (1989, 21.)

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