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BADIOU AND THE NECESSITY OF FABLES: OR, THEOLOGY
AS FABULATION

My goal in what follows is twofold. First, I endeavor to outline a place for theology in Badiou's system, but not, I must stress, along the usual lines. It is by now commonplace to criticize Badiou's self-described desire to distance himself from religion in terms of a sort of return of the repressed. Although Badiou delimits events and truths along four domains (science, art, politics, and love), religion continues to play a significant role in Badiou's system, as his book on *Saint Paul* eminently shows. Many well-established readers of Badiou have, then, sought to locate religion as a "fifth" domain or quasi-domain in addition to his required four of art, science, politics, and love.¹ Although there is something to this line of thought, I want to take a different approach, focusing on how theology as a form of fabulation constitutes a vital form for the construction of truths. Religion is not, on my reading, a more or less concealed domain but, rather, an essential ingredient for the construction of truths in the form of theology. On my account, then, all truths, if they are to get off the ground and maintain themselves, require at some point a theological conceptuality. This is the case, I suggest, in Badiou's philosophy itself, even if he does not acknowledge as much, and it is grounded in his varied use of narrative elements, notably fable, myth, poetry, and fiction more generally.² Nevertheless, as a way to avoid importing a foreign framework onto Badiou's system (one could define theology in any number of ways, and then proceed to apply it), I develop this notion of theology immanently, based on Badiou's own, sometimes disparate understanding of theology. Theology is, I argue, a type of fabulation, and it is this that remains essential for the articulation of truths. Second, I hope that this understanding of theology can be applied beyond Badiou's system itself, so my goal is to contribute to the development of a Badiouian theology, in both senses of the term: a theology within Badiou and the development of a theology based on Badiou's system.

Since any attempt to outline a theological conceptuality at work in Badiou's philosophy must wrestle with his attempt to distance himself from theological forms of thought, the first section of this

¹ See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999), 127-70.

² Throughout this paper, I do not make a distinction between these linguistic forms, although a more detailed account would be enriched by doing so.

paper discusses the way in his mathematical ontology functions as an anti-theology. Drawing on this background, I then discuss Badiou's reading of Paul in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. I do not so much provide a reading of the content of this book as focus on how it is situated around the notion of the resurrection as a fable. Against Badiou's dismissal of the resurrection along these lines, I suggest that the fable and other narrative elements are actually essential for the production of truths, a point that I discuss in more detail in the third section, where I discuss the way in which Badiou's notion of intervention implies that truth has the structure of a fiction, to loosely borrow Jacques Lacan's claim.³ I then show in the final section of this paper a few ways in which this fictional structure, which I refer to as fabulation, remains essential to Badiou's own philosophy, which suggests a theological component to the latter. I conclude by suggesting that this notion of theology at work in Badiou's philosophy helps us to revision theology as a form of fabulation.

Mathematical Anti-Theology

Any attempt to grapple with the development of a Badiouian theology must take account of his attempt to distance his thought from all forms of theological reflection. Indeed, although Badiou's philosophy can be characterized in numerous ways, I think it is best characterized as an anti-theological project.⁴ The anti-theological bent of his philosophy should not be understood as ancillary but is, rather, grounded in the decision to entangle ontology with mathematics: "mathematics is ontology—the science of being qua being," Badiou infamously states *Being and Event*.⁵ Badiou is clear that the onto-mathematical grounding of philosophy is far from a neutral position. Mathematics, to be sure, provides an abstract, a-subjective language in which to articulate being and its various ontic compositions, even if being itself is not mathematical.⁶ Nevertheless, this essential feature of mathematics should not be confused with impartiality, both in general but also on Badiou's part. Although multifaceted, Badiou's decision to deploy mathematics as ontology is at least in part a decision on the substance of mathematics and one taken against theology and quasi-theological forms of reflection, in the sense that mathematics cleanses thought of all unnecessary mystification. Mathematics, Badiou states, is "warlike, polemical, fearsome"; it is "always more or less equivalent to the bulldozer with which we remove the rubble that prevents us from constructing new

³ Jacques Lacan, "Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching," *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 376.

⁴ I have developed this notion at length in Hollis Phelps, *Alain Badiou: Between Theology and Anti-Theology* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 4.

⁶ Badiou states in *Ibid.*, 8, that to designate mathematics as ontology is "not a thesis about the world but about discourse."

edifices in the open air.”⁷ The “rubble” that Badiou has in mind is any form of myth or superstition. For Badiou mathematics – and mathematics alone – allows for “the inaugural break with superstition and ignorance. Mathematics is . . . that singular form of thinking which has *interrupted the sovereignty of myth*. We owe to it the first form of self-sufficient thinking, independent of any sacred posture of enunciation; in other words, the first form of entirely secularized thinking.”⁸

Badiou means this in general terms, but specific to his concerns is the way in which mathematics allows for a rationalization of the infinite, for a disentangling of the relationship between the infinite and the one. Badiou refers to such “unbinding” as a “desecration of thought:” “The infinite must be submitted to the matheme’s simple and transparent deductive chains, subtracted from all jurisdiction by the One, stripped of its horizontal function as the correlate of finitude and released from the metaphor of the Open.”⁹ Another way to put the matter is to say that a properly mathematical deployment of the infinite, which has been possible since Georg Cantor’s articulation of transfinite numbers, represents an “immanentization of the infinite, separating it from the One of theology.”¹⁰

Mathematics, then, from Badiou’s perspective certainly undercuts what is often called the God of metaphysics, which understands the name “God” conceptually, as a placeholder for thought.¹¹ As Badiou argues in *Being and Event*, a demonstrable, secularized notion of the infinite, which conceives an infinity of infinities unbound from any one, has no need of a metaphysical God. Badiou claims that his thesis regarding the infinite is “post-Christian, or, if you like, post-Galilean.”¹² Rather than subsumable under “the punctuality of the substantial infinity of a supreme being,” being qua desacralized infinite is essentially void, based on “the un-being of the one.”¹³ In good warlike fashion, mathematics does not propose an alternative, but perhaps complimentary, way of conceptualizing being to theology but posits a rival, whose promise finds fulfillment in the cold language of deduction.¹⁴

⁷ Alain Badiou, “Mathematics and Philosophy,” in *Theoretical Writings*, edited and translated by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2005), 16, 17.

⁸ Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and Mathematics,” in *Theoretical Writings*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰ Badiou, “Mathematics and Philosophy,” 18.

¹¹ See Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, edited and translated by Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 21-32.

¹² Badiou, *Being and Event*, 143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 69, for the conceptualization of rivalry in relation to the void as the proper name of being.

But it is important to emphasize that Badiou's disdain for theology is not just metaphysical, is if we could side-step his critique by focusing on the so-called God of religion against the God of metaphysics.¹⁵ Badiou is absolutely clear on this point. The desacralization of the infinite is metaphysical but also existential: to say that "God is dead means that He is no longer the living being who can be encountered when existence breaks the ice of its own transparency."¹⁶ "God is finished. And religion is finished, too," Badiou stresses.¹⁷ As if to cover his bases, so to speak, Badiou even includes an additional God that is dead, the God of the poets, which grounds itself in the desire to re-enchant the world. Such a desire goes under the philosophical name "Heidegger," who famously entangled philosophy with the poem.¹⁸ Hence Badiou's call for a "contemporary atheism," one that "breaks with this disposition. It is no longer entrusting the nostalgic God of the return with the joint balance consisting of the death of the living God and the deconstruction of the metaphysical God. All in all, it is about finishing up with promises."¹⁹ Otherwise put, Badiou's ontology as anti-theology comes out against any conceptual, experiential, or linguistic attempt to posit being qua being at or beyond the limits of thought.²⁰

Badiou and Saint Paul

Badiou's understanding of mathematics as anti-theology provides a general backdrop for understanding his reading of Paul in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.²¹ The basic parameters of Badiou's reading of Paul, along with the major components of his philosophy as a whole, are by now well-known, so there is no reason to provide a copious overview here. Suffice it to say that Badiou reads Paul's central claim concerning the resurrection of the crucified as an event that founds a new subject, the Christian subject, which shapes itself and its truth equidistant from the governing discourses of its situation (Jewish and Greek) and subtracted from the state (Roman Empire). This is why, Badiou claims, Paul is a "subjective figure of primary importance."²²

Nevertheless, Badiou makes it clear that when it comes to Paul, he cares "nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult

¹⁵ This distinction goes at least as far back as Tertullian, who famously declared, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?" See his *Prescription Against Heretics*, Chapter 7.

¹⁶ Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, translated by Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 69-77.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, 29.

²⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 26-27.

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, translated by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

dedicated to him.”²³ Paul remains, for Badiou, essential for thinking the relationship between truth and the subject, but only so long as we can detach him and his discourse from religion and faith. Paul’s letters, in this sense, are not for Badiou scripture, as they are for the Christian theological tradition but, rather, subjective archives that can and should be read just as any other text. He writes, “I have always read the epistles the way one returns to those classic texts with which one is familiar; their paths well worn, their details abolished, their power preserved. No transcendence, nothing sacred, perfect equality of this work with every other, the moment it touches me personally. A man emphatically inscribed these phrases, these vehement and tender addresses, and we may draw upon them freely, without devotion or repulsion.”²⁴

It is no surprise, then, that Badiou treats the resurrection as pure fable. Indeed, although Christianity as a whole rests on the resurrection, Paul’s discourse, we could say, out-fables the fable itself, in that he reduces the truth of Christianity to this one element. Badiou notes that many of the historical aspects of Jesus’ life, including the weight of his teachings, might be upheld without any essential problem, in that they touch on something real, something tangible. Paul, however, jettisons all of this – his letters, as is well known, contain precious little to go on with regard to Jesus’ life, mission, and teachings – opting instead for a strictly theological discourse, one that is, moreover, unbelievable *tout court*. Paul’s central claim, in this sense, “fails to touch on any Real, unless it be by virtue of that invisible and indirectly accessible residue sticking to every obvious imaginary.”²⁵ Badiou is unequivocal on this point: “let us say that so far as we are concerned it is rigorously impossible to believe in the resurrection of the crucified.”²⁶

This is why although Badiou praises Paul for interrogating the relationship between truth and the subject, a task that is central to Badiou’s own project, the material efficacy of his discourse remains limited. Badiou’s four truth procedures – science, art, politics, and love – are, he insists, ultimately grounded in reality, which is another way of saying that they can become universal, available to and for all. Indeed, when it comes down to it, the latter is the simplest definition of a truth for Badiou, no matter the domain in which it falls: its idea has a universal import. Although Paul’s discourse contains many of the formal elements that constitute truths, which is why Badiou is interested in him as a thinker in the first place, its context is wholly mythological: it can only function as a general theory rather than in terms of a specific, real practice. Badiou writes, “Thus, unlike effective truth procedures (science, art, politics, love), the Pauline break does not

²³ Ibid., 1.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

base itself upon the production of a universal. Its bearing, in a mythological context implacably reduced to a single point, a single statement (Christ is resurrected), pertains rather to the laws of universality in general. This is why it can be called a *theoretical* break, it being understood that in this instance 'theoretical' is not being opposed to 'practical,' but to real."²⁷ Badiou thus insists that "the fictitious dimension of this event repudiates its pretension to real truth."²⁸

Yet the irony is that it is precisely the weak point in Paul's discourse—i.e. that it is based on a fable—that is also its greatest strength. Badiou himself seems to indicate as much, when he praises Paul for sticking militantly to the irreducibility of his claim, despite potential and real criticism based on the governing knowledge of the situation. Badiou notes, for instance, "Paul firmly holds to the militant discourse of weakness. The declaration will have no other force than the one it declares and will not presume to convince through the apparel of prophetic reckoning, of the miraculous exception, or of the ineffable personal revelation. It is not the singularity of the subject that validates what the subject says; it is what he says that founds the singularity of the subject."²⁹ Roland Boer has also pointed out the irony at work here, noting that the "resurrection is not merely a fable, but a *necessary* fable."³⁰ Indeed, as Boer points out, the fact that the resurrection is unverifiable in terms of established canons of inquiry, including those that Badiou takes for granted, is exactly what attracts Badiou to Paul and drives his reading of the latter. For Boer, this is not just a feature of Badiou's reading of Paul, as if we could bracket *Saint Paul* from his oeuvre as an anomaly, as some critics are wont to do.³¹ Rather, for Boer, it "reveals the truth of his position as a whole."³² What it shows, in other words, is the way in which Badiou's theory of the event, truth, and the subject relies heavily on elements from which he otherwise tries to achieve distance. For Boer, "it seems that narration, fiction, image, poem, and myth, all of these are as necessary for dealing with the Truth of an event as are argument, formula, and matheme."³³

I am in basic agreement with Boer here, and the argument that follows is indebted to his insights, although I will use them to argue along slightly different lines. If the resurrection is,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁰ Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 12.

³¹ Many of the best known introductions to Badiou's philosophy hardly discuss Saint Paul at all. See, for instance, Peter Hallward's *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 108-110, where the book is relegated to a two-page discussion of Paul as an example of the relationship between subject and event.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

according to Boer, a necessary fable for Badiou, this is because, generally speaking, fable is necessary. Insofar as fable, along with its counterparts mentioned by Boer, constitutes an essential feature of theological discourse for Badiou, isolating its function in his philosophy provides a way for conceiving of a Badiouian theology.

Before proceeding, however, let me be absolutely clear. My point is not an apologetic one, in the sense that my argument is ultimately designed to defend the historical actuality of the resurrection against Badiou's flat out dismissal. I am perfectly fine with Badiou's claim that the resurrection is a fable. My point, rather, is to defend the fable as an essential, ultimately theological feature of the construction of truths. Whether the resurrection happened or not is beside the point, as I will suggest below; the point, rather, is in how the notion of resurrection – and theology more generally – functions, what it allows one to think and do.

Necessary Fables

In drawing out the fabulous element at work in the production of truths, it is necessary to understand how an event enters into circulation in its situation. In a way, all events contain a fabulous element, at least initially, in that the status of an event is, by definition, undecidable from the perspective of the situation in which it occurs. Another way to put the matter is to say that an event is not susceptible to the norms, rules, and standards of knowledge governing its situation, as mentioned above. Because the status of an event is undecidable, fidelity to it is never direct, in the sense that it corresponds with the event in and of itself. There is, in other words, no immediate, unbroken link between an event and fidelity to it; to assume that there is to deny the event's undecidability and, thus, delineate its contours with respect to established paradigms. Undecidability, in this sense, means that there is a gap, or minimal difference, between event and fidelity, which can only be bridged through a wager. As Badiou puts it:

Since it is of the very essence of the event to be a multiple whose belonging to the situation is undecidable, deciding that it belongs to the situation is a wager: one can only hope that this wager never becomes legitimate, inasmuch as any legitimacy refers back to the structure of the situation. No doubt, the consequences of the decision will become known, but it will not be possible to return back prior to the event in order to tie those consequences to some founded origin.³⁴

³⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 201.

Undecidability is another way of marking the foundation of the event as void rather than full and its trajectory as aleatory rather than stable and set in advance.

Badiou refers to this wager, through which a multiple in a situation is recognized as eventual, as intervention. Crucial to intervention, moreover, is nomination. As said above, there remains a gap between an event and fidelity to it, that is, the event's passage into a procedure of truth. Because the site of an event is, as Badiou says, situated on the edge of the void of the situation, its belonging to its situation is subject to decision alone. This does not mean that the event itself is constituted through decision, as if it were the result subjective fiat. Events, for Badiou, do happen, do actually occur, and in this sense, can be said to be real. But the passage from the occurrence of an event to its incorporation in a truth procedure is an entirely different matter. The event can only become an event *for* the situation so long as it is named as belonging to the situation. Nomination, in this sense, plays a crucial role:

The act of nomination of the event is what constitutes it, not as real – we will always posit that this multiple has occurred – but as susceptible to a decision concerning its belonging to the situation. The essence of the intervention consists – within the filed opened up by an interpretative hypothesis, whose *presented* object is the site (a multiple on the edge of the void), and which concerns the 'there is' of an event – in naming this 'there is' and in unfolding the consequences of this nomination in the space of the situation to which the site belongs.³⁵

Although the event is real, its status as event – or, to put it another way, its sense with regard to its situation – is a retroactive occurrence, the result of nomination and the procedure that nomination makes possible. Without nomination, without naming the event as such, an event is just a random happening, an ultimately insignificant something that occurs in a situation, or nothing at all. Nomination, then, literally constitutes an event as event:

It is certain that the event alone, aleatory figure of non-being, founds the possibility of intervention. It is just as certain that if no intervention puts it into circulation within the situation on the basis of the extraction of elements from the site, then, lacking any being, radically subtracted from the count-as-one, the event does not exist.³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

According to Badiou, the event is necessary for intervention, but it is intervention that actually puts it into circulation. But if this is the case, then the intervention is, in some sense, primary, because without it there would be no event at all (“the event does not exist”). An event is always constituted as an event retroactively, which means that it and the truth it makes possible has the structure of the future anterior: the event will have taken place according to its naming it as such in the situation.³⁷

I will suggest below that what the particular structure of the relationship between event and intervention implies is that there need be no “event” at all, at least in terms of an actual happening; a fable may, in this sense, function qua event, which renders the distinction between fact and fiction unstable or, perhaps better said, undecidable. Before proceeding in that direction, however, it is worth noting that the actuality of an event does not figure in the various deviations that Badiou outlines in respect to events and fidelity to them.

Take Badiou’s discussion of the notion of evil in relation to an event as found in *Ethics*, for instance. First, Badiou notes that fidelity to an event can result in terror when “a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth-processes, convokes not the void but the ‘full’ particularity or presumed substance of that situation.”³⁸ Although all the formal characteristics of an event and its subsequent fidelity may be present, in such cases any pretension to truth runs aground on its closed, communitarian focus rather than universality. At its extreme, we can see this, for instance, in Nazism, which invokes a narrative of “blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community” toward terroristic and genocidal ends.³⁹ For Badiou, fidelity so understood can only be what he calls a *simulacrum of truth*, rather than the real thing. Second, evil can result through betrayal of a truth. Here, the issue is not so much a formal difference in relation to the void of a situation but, rather, a crisis of fidelity. The ethics of truths demands that its subjects “keep going,” even in the midst of certain difficulties that would appear to obviate the truth of an event. Badiou notes that the issue with this, what he terms *betrayal*, is not so much renunciation but, rather, a retroactive denial of the event itself and its truth. Turning away, in other words, takes the form of an active questioning of whether anything ever happened at all. As Badiou puts it, “I must betray the becoming-subject in myself, I must become the enemy of that truth whose subject the ‘some-one’ that I am (accompanied,

³⁷ Although a key factor throughout his work, perhaps the most pertinent discussions for grasping the nature of the future anterior for Badiou are *Being and Event*, 391-435, where he discusses forcing and the theory of the subject. Boer, 14-18 also discusses the role of the future anterior, as a means of grasping the role of fable in Badiou’s thought.

³⁸ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

perhaps, by others) composed."⁴⁰ The final way that a truth can result in evil is if it adopts a totalizing perspective. Badiou notes that this totalizing approach implies "the ability to name and evaluate *all* the elements from the objective situation from the perspective of the truth-process. Rigid and dogmatic (or 'blinded'), the subject-language would claim the power, based on its own axioms, to name the whole of the real, and thus to change the world."⁴¹ If betrayal involves claiming too little on behalf of truths, to the point of denying that an event ever occurred, the problem here is with claiming too much on behalf of a truth, which can result in *disaster*.

Badiou formalizes the discussion of evil that we find in *Ethics* along slightly different lines in *Logics of Worlds*, where he treats fidelity and infidelity to an event in terms of different subjective postures and destinations of an event. From the position of the *faithful* subject, which for Badiou provides the paradigm for subjectivity itself, he deduces two other, deviant subjectivities, the *reactive* subject and the *obscure* subject. The reactive subject, according to Badiou, resists the "call of the new" in the eventual appearance of truths. As its name suggests, the reactive subject "reacts" to the novelty implied in an event, but in the form of negation: it says "no" to the event, as a means of tempering, and thereby ultimately denying, that anything has happened, or even needs to. In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou uses the example of the *nouveaux philosophes*, who "concocted an intellectual apparatus destined to legitimate the brutal reactionary reversal which followed the red sequence that had begun in the middle of the sixties, a sequence whose name in China was 'Cultural Revolution,' in the USA refusal of the Vietnam war and in France 'May 68.'"⁴² One could say that, insofar as it opts for weak version of the present rather than a revolutionary one, the reactionary subject is the subject of neoliberalism, or what Badiou elsewhere calls "capitalist parliamentarianism," "democratic materialism," or simply "democracy."⁴³

Although the faithful subject remains, as Badiou says, the "unconscious of the reactive subject," this is not the case with the obscure subject, which seeks not to attenuate the present but, rather, to extinguish or abolish it. Against the advent of the new, the obscure subject "systematically resorts to the invocation of a full and pure transcendent Body, an ahistorical or anti-evental body," as a means of occulting the truth of an eventual situation. Badiou notes that the obscure subject opposes the present with an "atemporal fetish: the incorruptible and invisible over-body, be it

⁴⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁴¹ Ibid., 83.

⁴² Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, translated by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 54.

⁴³ Ibid., 1-9. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, translated by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 78-95.

City, God or Race.”⁴⁴ Badiou cities theo-political fundamentalisms as an example of the obscure subject, but it remains a contemporary phenomenon, even if it adopts the form of the past to counteract the present.

The faithful subject thus produces truths, the reactive subject denies them, and the obscure subject occults them. The faithful subject, however, not only produces new truths but can also reactive prior ones, as a means of making them available again in the present. Curiously, Badiou refers to the destination of this latter form of the faithful subject, as *resurrection*. He writes, “We will call this destination, which reactivates a subject in another logic of its appearing-in-truth, resurrection. Of course, a resurrection presupposes a new world, which generates the context for a new event, a new trace, a new body—in short, a truth-procedure under whose rule the occulted fragment places itself after having been extracted from its occultation.”⁴⁵

I will return to this notion of resurrection below, but in none of these cases does fabulation, that is, the event as fable, come into play. One could argue, perhaps, that the fabulous is what is at issue in a simulacrum of truth, which in the case of Nazism manifests itself in the form of a regressive, racist, and murderous fiction. The latter is no doubt the case, but Badiou does not mark the distinction between simulacrum and event in terms of right or wrong, true or false, veridical or not but, rather, in terms of the difference between emptiness and fullness, which is also the difference between universality (the void) and particularity. One could also, perhaps, criticize theological fabulation—say, the resurrection—as a totalizing discourse, one that claims a monopoly on truths, in the plural. Badiou seems to indicate that Paul is susceptible to such criticism, when he notes that Paul “assigns his thought to a singular event, rather than a set of conceptual generalities.”⁴⁶ Paul certainly claims to preach nothing “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2.2), but for Paul doing so does not take the form of power but weakness (see I Corinthians 2.3, 12.9). In pointing this out, I am not importing an external criticism on Badiou based on a different reading of Paul but, rather, stressing Badiou’s own claim: central to Badiou’s reading of Paul is that Christian discourse represents a “decline of the figure of the Master.”⁴⁷

The fabulous, then, is not necessarily opposed to the real in terms of the ethics of truths. It is a different question altogether, though, as to whether it can function qua event, as a vehicle for the production of truths. Badiou claims that it cannot so function; that, at least, is part of the problem with Paul and his foundational use of the resurrection: it marks Paul’s discourse as theological,

⁴⁴ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 60.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶ Badiou, *Saint Paul: Foundations of Universalism*, 108.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

outside the purview of truth proper. The issue with Paul, in other words, is not that his discourse deviates from the form of faithful truth procedures, as it does for the reactive and obscure subjects. Rather, since Paul's discourse is largely indistinguishable from fidelity at a formal level, the problem is with its content, which is why his is not among the effective truth procedures.

But that distinction is shaky at best, at least in terms of the effectiveness of the event in question. Badiou maintains, as mentioned above, that intervention is what brings an event into circulation through the act of nomination. In this sense, one always acts on the basis of nomination rather than the event itself. On the one hand, insofar as it is a fundamentally linguistic act, nomination in its basic structure has the elements of a fiction, at least minimally. To put it in terms of Badiou's truth procedures, nomination maintains a specific relationship with the artistic domain qua poetic.⁴⁸ This is an essential point, in that nomination is not descriptive of a state of affairs but is, rather, creative, in that it literally creates a truth out of the event's emergence from the void.⁴⁹ Badiou emphasizes in *Being and Event* that nomination "is essentially illegal in that it cannot conform to any *law* of representation."⁵⁰ Although nomination may rely on established language, it does not repeat the latter's sense but rather twists it, charting a novel path from existing resources. Badiou notes, for instance:

What is most explicitly attached to the proper names which designate a subjectivization is an arsenal of words which make up the deployed matrix of faithful marking-out. Think of 'faith,' 'charity,' 'sacrifice,' 'salvation' (Saint Paul); or of 'party,' 'revolution,' 'politics,' (Lenin); or of 'sets,' 'ordinals,' 'cardinals' (Cantor), and of everything which then articulates, stratifies and ramifies these terms. What is the exact function of these terms? Do they solely designate elements presented in the situation? They would then be redundant with regard to the established language of the situation. Besides, one can distinguish an ideological enclosure from the generic procedure of a truth insofar as the terms of the former, via displacements devoid of any signification, do no more than substitute for those already declared appropriate by the situation. In contrast, the names used by a subject – who supports the local configuration of a general procedure – *do not in general have a referent in the situation*. Therefore, they do not double the

⁴⁸ I develop this notion at length in *Alain Badiou: Between Theology and Anti-Theology*, 87-120.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the creative aspect of the linguistic act, particularly as it relates to the poem, see Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 1-27.

⁵⁰ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 205.

established language. But then what use are they? These are terms which do designate terms, but terms which 'will have been' presented in a *new* situation: the one which results from the addition to the situation of a truth (an indiscernible) of that situation.⁵¹

But if the sense of these terms *will have been presented*, this means that in their initial use they are, essentially, fabrications, devoid of a representative target. It is only retroactively that a truth and the series of names that make it up can correspond to its situation.

On the other hand, if it is nomination that brings an event into circulation, then it is nomination that bears the force of the event, rather than the event itself. Such a distinction is necessary if Badiou is to maintain the event's aleatory nature; indeed, to assign any sort of self-externalizing, auto-telic substance to the event would land us squarely in Hegel's camp, at least on Badiou's reading of him.⁵² As mentioned above, Badiou still maintains that something has to happen, but we should push him further: in line with what I have outlined above, what Badiou's reading of the resurrection teaches is that the event itself is inessential, at least in terms of a sheer happening. Otherwise put, an evental sequence can rely just as easily on a fiction, on a fable. Indeed, grounding the notion of the future anterior, an event itself is only an event retroactively, in light of the various nominations that construct it. Truth, then, has the structure of a fiction, and what grounds it is really the result of that fiction. Such is the reason that Badiou can maintain with respect to Christianity that "[a]ll the parameters of the doctrine of the event are thus disposed within Christianity," meaning that, as far as religions go, it comes "closest to the question of truth."⁵³ Setting aside Badiou's problematic privileging of Christianity over-against other religions, Christianity can only function this way if at a formal level the difference between fact and fiction is nil.

Badiouian Theology

The fabulous, or acts of fabrication, is thus essential for the construction of truths. Badiou, moreover, relies on it himself, even if he claims to avoid doing so from within the context of his ontology. Take the example of the resurrection, for instance. This constitutes the mythological core of Paul's discourse, and it is ultimately what disqualifies it from consideration as an effective truth procedure. Yet Badiou deploys the notion of resurrection in other contexts, for his own purposes. I mentioned above that one of the destinations of the faithful subject is the *resurrection* of truths, an operation that takes a prior evental sequence and

⁵¹ Ibid., 397-398.

⁵² See, for instance, Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, 65-74.

⁵³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 212.

rearticulates it within a different logic. If we stick with Badiou's critique of the fable as a form of theological reflection, it is an odd choice of language. Indeed, from within the context of Badiou's formal system, the term *reactivation*, which he also uses in places, works just fine.

Even if the formal function is the same (resurrection and reactivation ostensibly describe the same thing), the use of *resurrection* enlivens an operation that could be viewed in more anemic terms. Whereas *reactivation* functions as a relatively sterile term that indicates the incorporation of a truth into another logic of appearing, *resurrection* marks that process differently: it literally signifies the raising of truth from the dead. The difference, here, is aesthetic and affective, which is all-important when considering the relationship between a subject and truth. Subjects, in other words, do not act on the basis of formalism but, rather, with passion, meaning that how a subject grasps an event and the truth which proceeds from it matters.⁵⁴

The notion of resurrection, in this sense, does important work in and for Badiou's system, and this seems to be what Boer means when he refers to it as a necessary fable. The resurrection is, of course, a fable for Badiou, completely out of the realm of possibility. Nevertheless, it constitutes a damn good story, so much so that it is the engine that drives not only Paul's discourse but also Badiou's reading of that discourse. Something like "resurrection" in other words, is needed for Badiou's system as a whole, since that system relies on the conversion of impossibility to possibility, death to life. Resurrection, for this reason, carries in addition to its formal meaning an affective one, one that, moreover, is resolutely theological.

Such a connection may no doubt appear tenuous, especially if it hinges itself only on the use of one word. But this reliance on fabulation goes deeper. Although I cannot here provide a copious list of examples, consider for a moment the way in which Badiou narrates the function of the "proper name" in the history of revolutionary political sequences:

Why is there this long series of proper names? Why this glorious Pantheon of revolutionary heroes? Why Spartacus, Thomas Muntzer, Robespierre, Toussaint Louverture, Blanqui, Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Mao, Che Guevara and so many others? The reason is that all these proper names symbolize historically—in the guise of an individual, of a pure singularity of body and thought—the rare and precious network of ephemeral sequences of politics as truth. The elusive formalism of bodies-of-truth is legible here

⁵⁴ See Alain Badiou, *The Century*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), translated by 48-67

as empirical existence. In these proper names, the ordinary individual discovers glorious, distinctive individuals as the mediation of his or her own individuality, as the proof that he or she can force its finitude. The anonymous action of millions of militants, rebels, fighters, unrepresentable as such, is combined and counted as one in the simple, powerful symbol of the proper name.⁵⁵

Badiou is surely not alone in his veneration of such figures as bearers of the revolutionary idea, but his discussion takes on an almost “religious” hue. Taken singularly, these “glorious, distinctive individuals” sound very much like saints, and together they function as sort of a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12.1) for militants. Indeed, Badiou himself acknowledges his “unabashed” use of religious metaphor, here.⁵⁶

But the issue goes deeper than metaphor, as we see with Badiou’s deployment of the figure of Spartacus, whom he cites above. Badiou is not the only leftist thinker to praise Spartacus’s role as leader of the massive slave revolt against the Roman Empire during the Third Servile War (73-71 BCE). In a letter to Engels, Marx, for instance, referred to Spartacus as “the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history. Great general (no Garibaldi), noble character, real representative of the ancient proletariat.”⁵⁷ Spartacus plays an important role in Badiou’s discussion of his formal theory of the subject in *Logics of Worlds*. There, Badiou discusses the way in which the figure of Spartacus functions as a model of the faithful subject, both historically and in the present, through the later sequences he has inspired. Indeed, in *Logics of Worlds*, Spartacus is Badiou’s prime example of the way in which truths get reactivated or resurrected in a different historical situation. The name “Spartacus” and the truth which corresponds to it (“Slavery is not natural”) thus “travels from world to world through the centuries. Ancient Spartacus, black Spartacus, red Spartacus.”⁵⁸ The name “Spartacus” is, in this sense, an example of the resurrection of truths but also their eternity: “every truth is eternal; of no truth can it be said, under the pretext that its historical world has disintegrated, that it is lost forever.”⁵⁹

When it comes to Spartacus, however, it is virtually impossible to separate fact from fiction, the reality from the myth. Commenting on various appropriations of the figure Spartacus, Alan Woods notes:

⁵⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, translated by David Macey and Steve Cocoran (London: Verso, 2010), 250.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, “Letter from Marx to Engels in Manchester,” in *Gesamtausgabe* (International Publishers, 1942).

⁵⁸ Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

What little we know about this great man we know from what his enemies wrote about him. What do we know? We know sufficient to deduce that Spartacus was a brilliant commander and a skillful battlefield tactician. Probably, he was the greatest general of all antiquity. But he was probably not . . . the revolutionary leader of a disciplined fighting force. If he possessed a clearly defined political strategy, we do not know of it. Little united his army except the goal of continued survival and in the end, internal dissent and sheer confusion sealed its fate as surely as Rome's superior forces.⁶⁰

In drawing attention to some of the ambiguities that surround Spartacus as an historical figure, my point is not to cast doubt on Badiou's appropriation of him, or anyone else's for that matter. My point, rather, is to say that that appropriation – which, like his reading of Paul, is really a resurrection – relies on the construction of a certain mythology that blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Indeed, it is only through that blurring that the name "Spartacus" can function as it does for Badiou: as the symbolization of a "pure singularity of body and thought."

That goes for any other of the names in Badiou's list but also, I would say, for truths in general. One could, perhaps, argue that the case of Spartacus and Badiou's appropriation of him is resolutely different than Paul and the resurrection of the crucified. Badiou would no doubt agree that the name "Spartacus" contains in its idea no small amount of mythology, but at least the mythology present remains within the realm of the possible, at least theoretically. This is not the case with something like the resurrection, which hinges on the impossible, not just in terms of the knowledge of the situation but absolutely. Fair enough, but the problem is not unique to the resurrection but to truths themselves, precisely because they fall outside of the governing knowledge of the situation.

And here it is important to emphasize one's position with respect to truths. Truths appear differently depending on whether they are viewed from the perspective of their construction or retroactively. From the position of the former, all truths appear impossible, because one does not have the advantage of hindsight. Indeed, that is just what it means to construct a truth diagonally to its situation: it is an act of fidelity, whose ethical maxim is "keep going!," despite all odds to the contrary.⁶¹ If one knew in advance its outcome, that is, its possibility, then it would not constitute an aleatory trajectory, which is central to Badiou's entire system. Badiou, of course, criticizes Paul for hinging his

⁶⁰ Alan Woods, "Spartacus: A Real Representative of the Proletariat of Ancient Times," In *Defence of Marxism*, 03 April 2009; <http://www.marxist.com/spartacus-representative-of-proletariat.htm>.

⁶¹ Badiou, *Ethics*, 79.

discourse on the inherently unbelievable, but we must insist that it is just as unbelievable for Paul as it is for Badiou. That is the whole point of Paul's conversion: if it were believable prior, then there would have been no need for it.

One could, again, say that it is precisely retroactively that its truth is obviated, but we should focus more on the work that such a concept does, rather than its literal value. Badiou does exactly this with Spartacus: he does not question the veracity of the narrative elements he deploys but, rather, puts them to use and in so doing erases the necessity of the line that normally divides fact and fiction. He relies on and, in turn constructs, a myth or a fable, but it is this that has the force of a truth, rather than a base appeal to history. My point, again, is not to rescue the resurrection from the clutches of fable but, rather, to assert the necessity of fable. Moreover, if the fable is, on Badiou's account, essentially theological in form, then Badiou's use of it, myth, and various other narrative devices means that a certain theology is lodged at the heart of his system. Theology, as fabulation, bears the force of truths.

Such an identification allows us to chart the ways in which theology remains active in Badiou's philosophy but also provides a resource for rethinking theology itself and the role that it plays in thought and practice more generally. Theology is commonly understood as a second-order reflection on primary data. It is, as Anselm famously remarked, "faith seeking understanding." What that looks like, that is, how understanding is articulated, can and does vary significantly, but to generalize a bit, even across variations it is still often assumed to be secondary to primary religious facts. Another way to put the matter is to say that theology is often understood as primarily descriptive, no matter how constructive or speculative its form.

If we, however, dissolve the distinction between event and nomination, throwing the force of truths on the latter, and ground the importance of fabulation for the construction of truths, theology may take on a different hue. Theology, so understood, is not the articulation of primary data but is, rather, the thing itself: it constructs the event and the truth that follows to which it refers. So understood, theology is not so much faith seeking understanding but *understanding seeking faith*. Moreover, if we take seriously the way in which theology entangles itself as fabulation across Badiou's philosophy and the truth procedures more generally, theology cannot be confined merely to a so-called religious domain or impulse but is, rather, a component feature of thought and practice as such. Theology, that is, shows that fables are necessary, but this is because it is a vehicle for the creation of necessary fables.

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