

## BETWEEN RUPTURE AND REPETITION: INTERVENTION AND EVENTAL RECURRENCE IN THE THOUGHT OF ALAIN BADIOU

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Critics of Badiou's theory of the event, such as Daniel W. Smith, Simon Critchley, Slavoj Žižek, Oliver Marchart, Peter Osborne, Daniel Bensaïd, and Kenneth Surin, often associate it with the idea of complete break with the past, as the irruption of the absolutely new in any given situation. Starting from this assumption, Badiou is then taken to task for associating the event with heroism, voluntarism, absolutism, romanticism, quasi-religious fervor, and so on. However, as I argue in this paper, such criticisms of Badiou's theory of the event fail to account for the fact that Badiou is constantly critical of the positions with which these interpreters associate him. Indeed, Badiou criticizes the idea as nothing more than an example of speculative leftism, which Badiou defines as "any thought of being which bases itself upon the theme of an absolute commencement."<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, these criticisms fail to attend to the distinction Badiou makes between militant and ontological claims and to the doctrines of intervention and evental recurrence. Taking seriously these aspects of Badiou's philosophy, however, results in an understanding of the event that situates the thought of the latter between militancy and ontology, that is, between rupture and repetition or discontinuity and continuity.

In order to make these claims, the first section of this paper discusses some of the common criticisms made of Badiou's theory of the event, which I associate with the persons mentioned above. The second section attempts to provide a corrective to such interpretations of the event by focusing on Badiou's reading of Saint Paul in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*<sup>2</sup> and the doctrines of intervention and evental recurrence found in Meditations 20 and 21 of *Being and Event*. As I show, the distinction made between militant and ontological claims in the former work and the doctrines intervention and evental recurrence in the latter serve to undercut the association of Badiou's theory of the event with speculative leftism, even if Badiou often uses rhetoric that recalls the latter. What results from this discussion is an understanding of Badiou's event as situated between rupture and repetition, which means that the novelty of the event always maintains a certain connection with the past. The final section of this paper discusses these matters in relation to Badiou's philosophy as a whole, and indicates, albeit in a preliminary fashion, how Badiou utilizes militant rhetoric without falling into the trap of speculative leftism.

### ABSOLUTE BEGINNINGS

To sum up the common criticism of Badiou's theory of the event and the subject that emerges from the process of truth made possible by the latter: the event and the subjective fidelity required for the construction of a novel truth are nothing more than a species of heroic voluntarism combined with a quasi-religious fervor; at best, Badiou's theory of the event represents a naïve and impossible romanticism, at worst a dangerous doctrine that

tends toward absolutism, especially when transposed into the realm of politics.

More often than not, such criticisms tend to rest on Badiou's references to the event as something absolutely novel that completely breaks with the past. Such references are, of course, scattered throughout Badiou's writings. The idea that the event introduces something radically new, however, is usually expressed most forcefully in polemical contexts, where Badiou attempts to distinguish his position from that of others. Take Badiou's reading of Deleuze, for example. At the end of his discussion of novelty and folding in *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, Badiou attempts to drive a wedge between his thought and Deleuze's in the following manner:

As for myself, however, I cannot bring myself to think that the new is a fold of the past, or that thinking can be reduced to philosophy or a single configuration of its act. This is why I conceptualize absolute beginnings (which requires a theory of the void) and singularities of thought that are incomparable in their constitutive gestures (which requires a theory—Cantorian, to be precise—of the plurality of the types of infinity).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the same work, Badiou notes that his theory of the event implies that “every truth is the end of memory, the unfolding of a commencement.”<sup>4</sup>

Or as Badiou has put it more recently in *Logiques des mondes* in the context of a discussion of the relationship becoming and the One in Deleuze's philosophy, the event “is never coextensive with becoming. It is, on the contrary, on the side of a pure break with the becoming of an object in the world, through the auto-appearance of this object.”<sup>5</sup> If we read Badiou to the letter in these statements, and numerous others like them, an event proper accomplishes a total rupture with the past, an unbreachable scission between what went before and what will come after in its eventual wake. Whether the event is referred to as an “absolute beginning,” as “the end of memory,” or as “a pure break with the becoming of an object in the world,” it would seem that the advent of an event does not allow for any connection with a previous state of affairs.

Indeed, this is how many of Badiou's critics have interpreted his notion of the event—and it is from such an interpretation that certain problems begin to arise. Hence according to Deleuze, despite his attempt to erect an ontology of immanent multiplicity founded only on the void, by combining the latter with the separation of the event from being qua becoming, Badiou reintroduces transcendence into his own thought.<sup>6</sup> Although Badiou rejects this characterization, the problem still remains for many of his critics. Thus following Deleuze, Daniel W. Smith notes that, no matter how much emphasis Badiou places on the necessity of immanence, the very notion that something can be thought in addition to being harbors “an inevitable appeal to transcendence: the eruption, within Being itself, of a supplemental event that is *not* Being-as-being.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Badiou's putative transcendence has a quasi-religious ring to it, insofar as the event seems eerily similar to, if not a complete secularization of, divine fiat. In Smith's words, “Though Badiou is determined to expel God and the One from his philosophy, he winds up reassigning the event, as if through the back door, the very characteristics of transcendence that were formerly assigned to the divine (as Badiou declares triumphantly, ‘I conceptualize absolute beginnings’).”<sup>8</sup>

Assigning to Badiou's work a religious element seems practically inevitable, given Badiou's praise for the apostle Paul and the associations that immediately come to mind, and are sometimes used by Badiou himself, between the event and theological concepts such as creation, grace, miracle, and redemption.<sup>9</sup> And Smith is not alone in doing so. Simon Critchley, Slavoj Žižek, Oliver Marchart, and Peter Osborne have all argued that, despite his attempt to distance himself from theological modes of thought, religion remains fundamental to Badiou's thinking concerning the event, if not the disavowed model of the latter. According to Critchley, it is not too much to suggest that “precisely because of the exemplary way in which the logic of the event plays itself out in relation to Paul, namely, that Paul's notion of grace shows most clearly the subjectivity of the event, religion is perhaps the paradigm of ethical action, a paradigm upon which the other four conditions [of truth] should be modeled.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Žižek argues that religion, or more specifically Christianity, functions paradigmatically in Badiou's philosophy as the “symptomatic torsion” that makes possible the four effective truth procedures of art, science, politics, and love.<sup>11</sup> Marchart makes a similar claim. The concepts of fidelity, truth, infinity, and

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universality, all of which are key to Badiou's theory of evental truth, rely on an unacknowledged "Christian paradigm."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, according to Osborne, "*Being and Event* provides the onto-theology of a religious conception of political practice."<sup>13</sup>

The problem for critics of Badiou, here, does not really seem to be the use of religious metaphor as such.<sup>14</sup> The problem is, as the quotation from Osborne suggests, the way in which this supposed religious impulse at the heart of Badiou's philosophy combines with other elements of his thought, particularly when the latter are associated with politics as a truth procedure. According to Daniel Bensaïd, a "new danger" emerges at this point in Badiou's philosophy: "that of a philosophy haunted by the sacralization of the evental miracle."<sup>15</sup> The rarity of the event, its exceptional and indeterminate character, its pure break with the past, the voluntarism of decision, and the apparent dogmatism which Badiou seems to associate with the resulting process of truth all coincide to produce "a philosophy of majestic sovereignty, whose decision seems to be founded upon a nothing that commands a whole."<sup>16</sup> To quote Bensaïd at length:

If the future of truth 'is decided by those who carry on' and who hold to this faithful decision to carry on, the militant summoned by the 'rare' if not exceptional idea of politics seems to be haunted by the Pauline ideal of saintliness, which constantly threatens to turn into a bureaucratic priesthood of Church, State or Party. The absolute incompatibility between truth and opinion, between philosopher and sophist, between event and history, leads to a practical impasse. The refusal to work within the equivocal contradiction and tension which bind them together ultimately leads to a pure voluntarism, which oscillates between a broadly leftist form of politics and its philosophical circumvention. In either case, the combination of theoretical elitism and practical moralism can indicate a haughty withdrawal from the public domain, sandwiched between the philosopher's evental truth and the masses' subaltern resistance to the world's misery.<sup>17</sup>

Echoing Bensaïd's concerns, Simon Critchley worries that "the idea of the rarity of the political event...makes politics into this heroic act, which we await. It worries me because of its Heideggerian and national aesthetic connotations in the German tradition."<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, if these are adequate descriptions of Badiou's philosophy, then the concern is legitimate. Badiou's emphasis on the event as a radical reorientation of being, as an interruption with and complete break from the past, would seem, from this perspective, hopelessly naïve, if not a bit dangerous. The subject which results from such an event would, in turn, depend upon a sheer act of will, a certain heroic voluntarism that revels in the moment of decision and elevates the event to the status of a sacred object. Ontologically, historically, and politically, this seems neither possible nor desirable. According to Marchart, such an "uncompromising ethics of the unconditional is entirely at odds with our political reality," in that the vertical link between subject and event completely obviates the necessity to articulate a horizontal politics "between a multiplicity of struggling actors (or subjects), all placed at different positions on an uneven, intransparent and power-ridden terrain."<sup>19</sup> Or, following Kenneth Surin, who criticizes Badiou's truth-event for being too "august and rather splendid," Badiou's theory displays a little too much "political romanticism," a longing for the extraordinary that does not touch upon the way in which "the multitude directs itself according to its own powers and its own history."<sup>20</sup> However, there is much evidence to the contrary that these portrayals of Badiou's philosophy are not entirely accurate, in that they conflate his theory of the event with what Badiou refers to as "speculative leftism," the latter being a position of which Badiou is constantly critical. This much becomes clear by paying careful attention to Badiou's reading of Saint Paul and the notions of intervention and evental recurrence as found in *Being and Event*.

## INTERVENTION AND EVENTAL RECURRENCE

Badiou's reading of Saint Paul is by now well known. From the beginning of his engagement with the apostle's writings, Badiou is, of course, quick to dissociate himself from the explicitly religious dimensions of Paul's thought.<sup>21</sup> Although Badiou credits Paul with establishing the "laws of universality in general," the mythological status of the resurrection separates Paul's truth from the "effective truth procedures" of art, science, love, and politics.<sup>22</sup> Since Paul's procedure does not touch on any of the material truth processes, his intervention in light of the resurrection-event remains for Badiou only a "theoretical break."<sup>23</sup> In the end, Paul's suturing of truth to a mythical religious event limits the application of Paul's thought to actual truths and confines the apostle to anti-philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Badiou finds in Paul an important ally. According to Badiou, Paul is a "subjective figure of primary importance."<sup>25</sup> That is to say, "[Paul] brings forth the entirely human connection, whose destiny fascinates me, between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice that is this rupture's subjective materiality."<sup>26</sup> Paul's thought, in this sense, exhibits at a formal level the conditions required for the emergence of a truth.<sup>27</sup> The resurrection-event, on Badiou's reading, induces an entirely new subject, the Christian subject, which does not depend upon extrinsic modes of identification. The resurrection-event immediately prescribes a subjective disposition available to all, irrespective of the established differences and particularities that mark individuals. In Paul's famous words from Galatians 3.28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." This new subjective disposition—indeed, the process of truth itself—depends upon an unswerving proclamation of and fidelity to the resurrection-event in the absence of concrete, verifiable evidence. The advent of Christian truth completely subtracts itself from the state of the situation and the two regimes of discourse, the Greek cosmos and Jewish law, which had hitherto determined knowledge. In Badiou's words, the resurrection-event is "a-cosmic and illegal, refusing integration into any totality and signifying nothing."<sup>28</sup> The resurrection-event delineates "a third figure, equidistant from Jewish prophecy and the Greek logos."<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the resurrection-event is a "radical novelty," something "absolutely new," a "pure beginning."<sup>30</sup>

To describe the resurrection-event in such terms immediately calls to mind the criticisms of Badiou mentioned above. However, what often seems to go unnoticed in his reading of Paul is the way in which Badiou qualifies Paul's understanding of the novelty of the resurrection-event by contrasting the latter with the theology of Marcion, the heterodox theologian of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. As Badiou points out, Marcion posits the evental break between Christianity and Judaism "as absolute in the precise sense: *it is not the same God who is in question in these two religions.*"<sup>31</sup> For Marcion there is an absolute disjunction between the old and the new, between what he saw as the malevolent creator God of Judaism and the benevolent, fatherly God of Christianity, who is known exclusively through the coming of the son. Although Marcion took Paul as his guide in positing this ultimately Manichean rupture, Badiou notes that he pushed too far in thinking that "the new gospel is an absolute beginning."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, according to Badiou, Marcion's position is a "manipulation" of the Pauline doctrine of the resurrection-event:

There is no text of Paul's from which one could draw anything resembling Marcion's doctrine. That the God whose son is Jesus Christ is the God spoken of in the Old Testament, the God of the Jews, is, for Paul, a ceaselessly reiterated and obvious fact. If there is a figure with whom Paul feels an affinity, and one whom he subtly uses to his own ends, it is that of Abraham. That Paul emphasizes rupture rather than continuity is not in doubt. *But this is a militant, and not an ontological thesis.* Divine unicity bridges the two situations separated by the Christ event, and at no moment is it cast into doubt.<sup>33</sup>

Paul certainly holds that the resurrection-event constitutes a break in the situation; however, Badiou notes that this break is not absolute—divine unicity provides a link between past and present. Marcion's error, in this sense, is to mistake the militant features of Paul's discourse for an ontological claim.

I will return to this distinction between militancy and ontology below. Suffice it to say at this point that Badiou's qualification of the notion of an "absolute beginning" is not unique to his discussion of Paul and the resurrection-event. Indeed, what in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* is labeled as Marcionism is often referred to elsewhere as "speculative leftism," the critique of which, as Bosteels observes, remains a constant feature throughout Badiou's philosophy.<sup>34</sup> In Meditation 20 of *Being and Event*, Badiou defines speculative leftism as "any thought of being which bases itself upon the theme of an absolute commencement. Speculative leftism imagines that intervention authorizes itself on the basis of itself alone; that it breaks with the situation without any other support than its own negative will."<sup>35</sup> Speculative leftism holds on to the idea of a "primal event" or a "radical beginning," ultimately leading to a "Manichean hypostasis" of the event.<sup>36</sup> Speculative leftism represents what Badiou calls in one of his discussions of Nietzsche an "archi-political act," which looks to an anti-philosophical event so as "to break in two the history of the world."<sup>37</sup> Speculative leftism substitutes voluntarism, heroism, and nostalgia for the sober work of fidelity and, as such, often ends in terror.<sup>38</sup>

Although many of Badiou's critics often suture his theory of the event to speculative leftism, he is careful to note that a speculative leftist relationship to the event is prohibited at the level of intervention and eventual recurrence. Intervention, according to Badiou in Meditation 20 of *Being and Event*, is "the procedure by which a multiple is recognized as an event."<sup>39</sup> Intervention, of course, is not -to be identified with the event; however, the two are inseparable. Insofar as the belonging of an event to a situation remains properly undecidable, an intervention in the situation is necessary in order to decide on the event's undecidability, to decide that the event does indeed belong to the situation. In *Being and Event*, such a decision depends upon an act of nomination, the attachment of a signifier to the event. Badiou writes:

The act of nomination of the event is what constitutes it, not as real—we will always posit that this multiple has occurred—but susceptible to a decision concerning its belonging to a situation. The essence of the intervention consists—within the field opened up by an alternative 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.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, Badiou has been criticized on this point, in that intervention here seems to depend on a type of decisionism, in which the status of the event relies solely on a pure volitional act of transcendent nomination.<sup>41</sup> Badiou has attempted to shore up this problem in *Logiques des mondes* by economizing the role that nomination plays in his theory of the event, thereby erasing the implication that the nomination of the event depends upon reference to a transcendent agency.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, intervention is the means through which the event is submitted to thought, to a "discipline of time, which controls from beginning to end the consequences of the introduction into circulation of the paradoxical multiple, and at any moment knows how to discern its connection to chance."<sup>43</sup>

Important here, however, is Badiou's claim that the link between intervention and event is not immediate or direct. If it were, Badiou would run the risk of sacralizing the event through some sort of heroic gesture in which, to refer back to Badiou's definition of speculative leftism, "intervention authorizes itself on the basis of itself alone."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, positing a direct identification between intervention and event seems to be the point at which Osborne's critique of Badiou falters. Osborne is right to point out that the event is in some sense "the *product* of 'post-evental' intervention and can only be sustained by it."<sup>45</sup> From this observation, Osborne goes on to associate fidelity to the event with "pure belief," an ultimately arbitrary assertion that amounts to a "Maoism *without* the self-criticism."<sup>46</sup> However, he fails to take into consideration the fact that intervention depends upon what Badiou calls "evental recurrence."<sup>47</sup> Intervention is always situated between events as "an evental between-two":

In order to avoid this curious mirroring of the event and the intervention—of the fact and the interpretation—the *possibility of the intervention must be assigned to the consequences of another event*. It is evental recurrence which founds intervention. In other words, there is no interventional capacity, constitutive for the belonging of an evental multiple to a situation, save within the network of a previously decided belonging. An intervention is what presents an event for the occurrence of another.<sup>48</sup>

That is to say, the interventional presentation of a new event always depends upon its being placed in relation to another, previous event. According to Badiou, “[F]or there to be an event, one must be able to situate oneself within the consequences of another.”<sup>49</sup> Intervention, in this sense, does not rest upon the opposition between vertical and horizontal, as Marchart assumes. To quote Badiou again, “The intervention is a line drawn from one paradoxical multiple, which is already circulating, to the circulation of another, a line which scratches out. It is a *diagonal* of the situation.”<sup>50</sup> Intervention in a previous evental multiple makes that multiple available for the production of another evental multiple. Neither a matter of mere repetition nor an absolute rupture, the between-two of intervention “evokes the previous situations and uses them precisely to create its own rationality.”<sup>51</sup>

Badiou illustrates this process in reference to Pascalian Christianity in Meditation 21 of *Being and Event*. According to Badiou, Christianity, even if it remains caught up in a metaphysics of presence, bears the formal marks of a truth-event and is structured through and through by intervention and evental recurrence. To quote Badiou at length:

The intervention is based upon the circulation, within the Jewish milieu, of another event, Adam’s original sin, of which the death of Christ is the relay. The connection between original sin and redemption definitively founds the time of Christianity as a time of exile and salvation. There is an essential historicity to Christianity which is tied to the intervention of the apostles as the placement-into-circulation of the event of the death of God; itself reinforced by the promise of a Messiah which organized the fidelity to the initial exile. Christianity is structured from beginning to end by evental recurrence; moreover, it prepares itself for the divine hazard of the third event, the Last Judgement, in which the ruin of the terrestrial situation will be accomplished, and a new regime of existence will be established.<sup>52</sup>

To be sure, according to Christian doctrine the incarnation of God in Christ and his subsequent death constitute an event, in the sense that it introduces something new into the situation through the intervention of the apostles. However, the possibility of this event depends upon evental recurrence. The eventness of the event of Christ is only possible in light of original sin, the former providing redemption from the latter. Thus the meaning of the Christian event is only “legitimated by exploring the diagonal of fidelity which unites the first event (the fall, origin of our misery) to the second (redemption, as a cruel and humiliating reminder of our greatness).”<sup>53</sup> Fidelity to the second event, moreover, anticipates the third event, the Last Judgement, which will in turn render a full account of the meaning of redemption. As Badiou points out, however, the link between these events is not necessary; the diagonal of intervention and fidelity, precisely because the event remains undecidable, only shows the truth of the connection between these events retroactively. That is to say, although the intervention in and fidelity to the incarnation and death of God takes place in light of original sin, the diagonal connecting the latter with the Christian event is only legible after the fact. According to Badiou, “The intervention wagers upon a discontinuity with the previous fidelity solely in order to install an unequivocal continuity.”<sup>54</sup>

To be sure, in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* Badiou criticizes Pascal for using prophecy and miracle, which construct the diagonal of the evental between-two, as proof of the resurrection-event, the latter of which he contrasts favorably with Paul’s refusal to suture Christianity to knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, such criticism does not obviate the formal features of intervention and evental recurrence, which latter are also found in Paul. I have already noted above that, in contrast to Marcion, Paul bridges the two testaments with divine unicity, which implies a connection between the past and the present for Paul, between prior events and the

resurrection-event. Among other things, decisive for Paul is the affinity between the resurrection-event and Abraham. Abraham, of course, represents the covenant with Israel and the particularity of the Jewish site. Insofar as Abraham “was elected by God solely by virtue of his faith, before the law,” which, combined with the promise that his election extends to all peoples, “anticipates what could be called a universalism of the Jewish site,” Abraham “anticipates Paul.”<sup>56</sup> In Paul’s words from Galatians 3.6, which Badiou quotes, “Thus Abraham ‘believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed. So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.’”<sup>57</sup> Thus through the resurrection-event, Paul is able to see retroactively the truth of Abraham, who from that point on becomes part of the diagonal of the resurrection-event.

The important point in all of this is that the notions of intervention and evental recurrence assume a relationship between the present of an event and its past, which in effect qualifies the extent to which there can be an “absolute beginning” in Badiou’s philosophy. Unlike speculative leftism and other forms of Marcionism, which assume a complete disjunction between the past and the present, the doctrine of evental recurrence recognizes that “the real of the conditions of possibility of intervention is always the circulation of an already decided event.”<sup>58</sup> The introduction of novelty in any situation, the interruption of becoming for the sake of the new is, in this sense, always relative, relative to the situation in which the new occurs *and* to past evental sequences that reverberate in the present through intervention. Far from sacralizing the event or relegating its instantiation to an heroic gesture, the notions of intervention and evental recurrence require the careful and disciplined submission of the event to thought. In Badiou’s word, “[T]he event itself only exists insofar as it is *submitted*, by an intervention whose possibility requires recurrence...to the ruled structure of the situation; as such, any novelty is relative, being legible after the fact as the hazard of an order. What the doctrine of the event teaches us is rather that the entire effort lies in following the event’s consequences, not in glorifying its occurrence. There is no more angelic herald of the event than there is a hero.”<sup>59</sup>

If, as I have argued, the notions intervention and evental recurrence assume that evental novelty depends upon some relationship to the past, thereby limiting the extent to which Badiou’s theory of the event can be associated with species of speculative leftism, as many of the various criticisms of his work assume, then what are we to do with claims that suggest the contrary? As I have argued, it is wrong to associate Badiou’s theory of the event with an absolute disjunction between the past and the present, but this does not erase the fact that Badiou often uses the language of speculative leftism to describe the event—the event is a “radical novelty,” something “absolutely new,” a “pure beginning,” and so on. I want to suggest that this apparent problem or contradiction in Badiou’s thought should be understood along the lines of the distinction mentioned above in reference to Saint Paul between a militant claim and an ontological claim.

## RUPTURE AND REPETITION: MILITANCY, ONTOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy has for some time been too concerned with its own history, with the history of its own decline. According to Badiou, the major currents of contemporary philosophy—hermeneutic, analytic, and post-modern—all assume in one way or another that philosophy is at an end, that, with the collapse of metaphysics, philosophy can only concern itself with meaning rather than truth. Philosophy, once it assumes this historicist posture as its own, becomes a victim of its own history—a sophism that claims there is no truth. In order to combat such a conception of “philosophy,” Badiou proposes that philosophy must “break with historicism” by “initially determin[ing] itself without reference to its own history.”<sup>60</sup> He goes on to write:

I shall propose for my part a violent *forgetting of the history of philosophy*, thus a violent forgetting of the whole historical montage of the oblivion of being. A ‘forgetting of the forgetting’. This forgetting is a method, and, or course, in no way is it an ignoring. To forget history—this at first means to make *decisions of thinking* without returning to a supposed historical sense prescribed by these decisions. It is a question of breaking with historicism to enter, as someone like Descartes or Spinoza did,

into an autonomous legitimating discourse. Philosophy must take on axioms of thinking and draw consequences from them. It is only then, and from its immanent determination, that it will summon its history.<sup>61</sup>

Philosophy, if it is to assume its proper role as concerned with the category of Truth as found in the material truths of art, science, politics, and love, must initially break with its own history, insofar as the latter has determined philosophy to be impossible. “Philosophy,” Badiou writes, “must determine itself in such a way as to judge its history *itself*, and not have its history judge it.”<sup>62</sup>

However, this stance towards its own history is only an initial determination of philosophy. Or, rather, it is a moment in philosophical thinking itself. On the one hand, as Badiou notes elsewhere, philosophy proper always takes the “form of a decision, a separation, a clear distinction.”<sup>63</sup> The refusal to identify philosophy with its history, with history itself, means that philosophy takes the form of revolt from “some muted discontent of thinking as it confronts the world as it is.”<sup>64</sup> Yet on the other hand, even if philosophy revolts from its own history, breaking with its past to form a new present, it simultaneously remains connected to its own history as a “creative repetition” of the past in a new present. Indeed, philosophy, when it is looked at as a repetition of its past, “is in some sense always the same thing.”

Naturally, every philosopher thinks that his or her work is completely new. That’s only human. And many historians of philosophy have introduced absolute ruptures. For instance, after Kant, classical metaphysics was said to be impossible. Or, after Wittgenstein, it was no longer possible to forget that the study of language is the core of philosophy. So we have a rationalist turn, a critical turn, a linguistic turn...But in fact, nothing in philosophy is irreversible. There is no absolute turn. Many philosophers can find today, in Plato or in Leibniz, some points which are for them more interesting, more active than similar points in Heidegger or Wittgenstein. It is because their own matrix is largely identical to that of Plato or Leibniz. The fact that philosophy is largely a repetition of its own act clarifies the immanent affinities between philosophers. Deleuze with Leibniz and Spinoza; Sartre with Descartes and Hegel; Slavoj Žižek with Kant and Schelling...And maybe, for almost three thousand years, everybody with everybody.<sup>65</sup>

To be sure, when confronted with a new event in one of the four domains of effective truth-procedures—art, science, politics, love—philosophy must account for the novelty present in the situation. Philosophy, then, as conditioned by events and truth-procedures, changes accordingly, so as to reflect adequately the novelty introduced in a situation. However, at a formal level, philosophy itself remains invariant, since it is always the thought of its conditions, irrespective of changes in historical context.<sup>66</sup> It is this invariant aspect of philosophy, its determination as concerned with and conditioned by art, science, politics, and love, that connects all philosophies together, allowing for intramural conflicts, dialogues, and repetitions. In a description that sounds almost Deleuzian, Badiou suggests understanding the play between formal invariance and historical context along the lines of a “musical image”: “The development of philosophy is in the classical form of theme and variations. Repetition, the theme, and constant novelty, the variations.”<sup>67</sup>

Taking these two aspects together, philosophy is situated between rupture and repetition or, to put it in the language that Badiou uses to describe Saint Paul’s project, between militant claims and ontological claims. In its militant aspect, philosophy focuses on the necessity of a complete break with the past, maintaining the idea of an historical rupture, so as to emphasize the eventual novelty that is present in the situation. In its ontological aspect, philosophy conceives of itself as a creative repetition of its past, which sees the past inflected in a different and unique way in the present, that is, as an eventual recurrence in the present. I want to suggest that we read Badiou’s own philosophy along these lines, which helps to make sense of the apparent contradiction between his tendency to use the language of speculative leftism to describe the event and the more modest claims, relatively speaking, associated with the notions of intervention and eventual recurrence. When Badiou describes the event as “radical novelty,” something “absolutely new,” or a “pure beginning,” he is certainly using language often

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associated with speculative leftism. However, it does not necessarily follow from this that Badiou's philosophy adopts a speculative leftist position, as many of the critics mentioned above assume. Indeed, as I have argued, Badiou is critical of speculative leftism, and is careful to distance himself from it, as seen for instance in the doctrines of intervention and evental recurrence. Badiou's use of the language of speculative leftism, in this respect, seems more militant than ontological. Problems arise when the militant aspects of Badiou's philosophy are taken on their own terms, which is what the critics mentioned above tend to do. That is to say, they repeat the move that Marcion makes in reference to Paul, in that they mistake Badiou's militant claims for strict ontological theses. However, as we have seen, the event always maintains a certain connection with the past. Every event takes place in the between-two of intervention, evoking previous events for the sake of new events. Fidelity to an event, in this sense, takes place along a diagonal, which, as seen in Badiou's reflections on Pascal in *Being and Event*, indicates the necessity of continuity and discontinuity in order to think the new.<sup>68</sup>

Pointing out that Badiou uses the language of speculative leftism without falling into the trap of the latter, however, does not explain what Badiou gains from the use of such language. To be sure, I have emphasized the necessity of making a distinction between militancy and ontology in Badiou's thought, as a corrective to those interpretations mentioned above that tend to conflate the two. However, a thorough examination of why Badiou finds it necessary to continue to use the language of speculative leftism to emphasize discontinuity remains. Such an examination ultimately concerns determining the relationship between militancy and ontology, without collapsing one into the other or absolutely separating the two, as if they were discrete aspects of Badiou's thought.<sup>69</sup> Although a thorough examination of this relationship is beyond the scope of this paper, I want to conclude by indicating, albeit briefly and in a preliminary way, one way to understand Badiou's use of militant language by focusing on his discussion of the Manifesto in *The Century*.<sup>70</sup>

In a chapter devoted to the "staggering programmes" announced by the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, Badiou makes the following claim:

Always precarious and almost indistinct, real action exists in such a way that it has to be pointed out and emphasized by loud proclamations, rather like the circus ringmaster amplifies his calls and orders a drum roll so that a pirouette on the trapeze—novel and daring, but also extremely fleeting—will not be ignored by the public. Ultimately, the aim of all these constructions is to devote every energy to the present, even if one gets bogged down in the rhetoric of hope. Only the recognition of the fabrication of the present can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art.<sup>71</sup>

The quotation occurs in the middle of a discussion of the meaning of the Manifesto. Taking the form of "an announcement" or a "programme", a manifesto is "alien to the present urgency of the real. It is a matter of finality, of prospective conditions, of a promise."<sup>72</sup> The Manifesto uses "projective rhetoric" as "a linguistic shelter for what takes place, without however either naming or grasping it."<sup>73</sup> That is to say, the Manifesto marks a clean break with the past and projects itself into the future, declaring the advent of a new way of being, in art and politics, but also in love and science. The concern of the projected future, however, is always the present. In this sense, the Manifesto uses "projective rhetoric" that often takes the form of "loud proclamations" in order to activate ruptures in the present. As Badiou puts it, the declarations and manifestos of the avant-gardes "produced the envelopment of a real present in a fictive future."<sup>74</sup>

Said otherwise, the Manifesto attempts to indicate or even force an event in the present, and does so through the use of a militant rhetoric that functions as the support for the happening of something new. In light of this, it is no accident that Badiou has written a *Manifesto for Philosophy*. The function of the Manifesto dovetails with Badiou's conception of philosophy outlined above: philosophy breaks with its own history in order to secure its future for the sake of the present. Indeed, the militant vocation of philosophy passes over into the thinking of the event itself, which is described variously as "radical novelty," something "absolutely new," or a "pure beginning," and so on. Badiou's use of such militant rhetoric, the language of speculative leftism, to describe the event becomes all the more clear in light of his claim that, in the absence of any contemporary widely

recognizable emancipatory projects, we remain “in thrall to the idea that nothing begins or will ever begin, even if we find ourselves caught in the midst of an infernal and immobile agitation.”<sup>75</sup> Badiou’s militant rhetoric, in this sense and similar to the avant-gardes, serves to interrupt the stasis of the present, to provoke the thinking of something new in the present. However, insofar as Badiou recognizes the gap that exists between the militant features of the Manifesto and what takes place in the present at the level of action, Badiou is able to utilize the language of speculative leftism without following the path of destruction, which is often associated with the avant-gardes and, more generally, with the “passion for the real” that he thinks characterizes the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> Rather, to place militant claims in relation to the ontological, the level of action; indeed, to situate his theory of the event between these two, between rupture and repetition, is perhaps to adopt an approach to Badiou’s philosophy that coincides with a subtractive orientation: “To purify reality, not in order to annihilate it at its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the miniscule difference, the vanishing terms that constitutes it. What takes place *barely* differs from the place where it takes place. It is in this ‘barely,’ in this immanent exception, that all the affect lies.”<sup>77</sup>

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NOTES

- 1 Alain Badiou, Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London/New York: Continuum, 2005), 210.
- 2 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 3 Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. by Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 90.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 5 Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 406. I am following Jon Roffe's translation, published as Alain Badiou, "The Event in Deleuze," trans. Jon Roffe in *Parrhesia*, Number 2 (2007): 37-44.
- 6 Badiou notes this criticism of Deleuze's in *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, 90. See also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Commenting on Badiou's four truth-procedures, Deleuze and Guattari argue, "But perhaps we then arrive at a conversion of immanence of the situation, a conversion of the excess of the void, which will reintroduce the transcendent: this is the *event site* that sticks to the edge of the void in the situation and now includes not units but singularities as elements dependent on the preceding functions. Finally, the *event* itself appears (or disappears), less as a singularity than as a separated aleatory point that is added to or subtracted from the site, within the transcendence of the void or *the* truth of the void, without it being possible to decide on the adherence of the event to the situation in which it finds its site (the undecidable) (151-152; emphasis in original).
- 7 Daniel W. Smith, "Badiou and Deleuze on the Ontology of Mathematics" in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 93.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 9 See Badiou, *Saint Paul*. Badiou does not deny that he often uses theological language to describe the event. However, he is quick to note that these should only be understood as metaphors. On this point, see Radical Politics and Alain Badiou, "After the Event: Rationality and the Politics of Intervention. An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Prelom* 8 (2007): 180-194.
- 10 Simon Critchley, "On the Ethics of Alain Badiou," *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 224.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 141-145.
- 12 Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 126.
- 13 Peter Osborne, "Neo-classic: Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*," *Radical Philosophy* 142 (March/April 2007): 26.
- 14 This is certainly the case with Critchley and Žižek, both of whom utilize religious metaphor in their own right. See for example Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding* (London/New York: Verso, 2007). Žižek's use of theology is scattered throughout his writings, especially as of late. The most sustained discussion to date is Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- 15 Daniel Bensaid, "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event," *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 97.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 18 Simon Critchley in "'Fault Lines': Simon Critchley in Discussion on Alain Badiou" in *Polygraph* 17 (2005): 297. Critchley raises the same concern in *Infinitely Demanding*, 48. Kenneth Surin raises a similar concern in his article, "Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject" in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 255-256: "The other problem with a politics of the exceptional event is that it is the right that is now using the category of the exceptional event to mobilize the very considerable resources of power and coercion that are at its disposal after September 11. September 11 is clearly the right-wing obverse of Badiou's 1968 truth-event, as evidenced by such claims as 'things can never be the same again in America' or 'from now on everything is different,' used by George Bush and his handlers to mobilize American public opinion not just as a response to al-Qaeda, but also to promote the republican Party's overall right-wing agenda."
- 19 Marchart, 129.
- 20 Surin, 256.
- 21 See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 1, 5. In Badiou's words, "For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him....I have always read the epistles the way one returns to those classic texts with which one is particularly 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" (1). Again, "If it is possible to speak of belief from the outset...let us say that it is rigorously impossible to believe in the resur-

rection of the crucified” (5).

22 Ibid., 108.

23 Ibid., 108.

24 Ibid., 58.

25 Ibid., 1.

26 Ibid., 2.

27 See Ibid., 14-15.

28 Ibid., 42.

29 Ibid., 43.

30 Ibid., 33, 43, 49, respectively.

31 Ibid., 34; emphasis in original.

32 Ibid., 35.

33 Ibid., 35; emphasis mine.

34 Bruno Bosteels, “The Speculative Left,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Issue 101(4) (Fall 2005): 754.

35 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, 210.

36 Ibid., 210.

37 Alain Badiou, “Who is Nietzsche?” in *Pli* 11 (2001), 1-11.

38 See for example Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), especially 11-25.

39 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 202.

40 Ibid., 203.

41 Badiou himself has acknowledged this problem. See for instance the interview “Ontology and Politics” in Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, ed. and trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 169-193 and *Logiques des mondes*, 380.

42 For this point I am indebted to Justin Clemens’ and Oliver Feltham’s paper, “The thought of stupefaction; or, event and decision as non-ontological and pre-political factors in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou,” presented at Claremont Graduate University in December, 2007 at the conference, *Event & Decision: Ontology & Politics in Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead*.

43 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 211.

44 Ibid., 210.

45 Osborne, 26.

46 Ibid., 26.

47 Ibid., 209.

48 Ibid., 209; emphasis in original.

49 Ibid., 210.

50 Ibid., 210; emphasis in original.

51 Badiou, “After the Event: Rationality and the Politics of Intervention. An Interview with Alain Badiou,” 185.

52 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 213.

53 Ibid., 216.

54 Ibid., 219.

55 See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 40-54.

56 Ibid., 103.

57 The passage is quoted in Ibid., 103.

58 Badiou, *Being and Event*, 210.

59 Ibid., 211; emphasis in original.

60 Alain Badiou, “The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself,” *Manifesto for Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 114.

61 Ibid., 115.

62 Ibid., 116.

63 Alain Badiou, “Philosophy as Creative Repetition,” *The Symptom* 8 (Winter 2007), <http://www.lacan.com/badrepeat.html>.

64 Alain Badiou, “The Desire for Philosophy in the Contemporary World,” *The Symptom* 8 (Winter 2007), <http://www.lacan.com/badesire.html>.

65 Badiou, “Philosophy as Creative Repetition.”

66 See Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 33-39.

67 Badiou, “Philosophy as Creative Repetition.”

68 See Badiou, *Being and Event*, 219. This emphasis on continuity and discontinuity also seems to be, at least in part, the

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idea behind the subjective figure of resurrection developed in *Logiques des mondes*, 70-76.

69 I am thankful to Justin Clemens for this latter point.

70 See Badiou, *The Century*, 131-147.

71 Ibid., 139-140.

72 Ibid., 137.

73 Ibid., 139.

74 Ibid., 139.

75 Ibid., 140.

76 According to Badiou, *The Century*, 32, “the passion for the real...provides the key to understanding the century.”

77 Ibid., 65; emphasis in original.