

**“If You Go Carrying Pictures of Chairman Mao, You Ain’t Gonna Make it  
with Anyone Anyhow”: Response to James W. Barker**

**By**

**Joshua Davis, Vanderbilt University**

I would like to begin by noting what I take to be the strongest points of Mr. Barker’s analysis. First, I believe that the mention of the almost quotidian element of element of Paul’s mystical experiences should be taken to heart, especially in light of the way that Badiou maintains that Paul isolates the ‘mystical’ as a fourth ‘discourse’ set in opposition to Judaic, Hellenistic, and Apostolic. To take seriously such a claim is no light matter mainly because it resists the classification of the ‘mystical’ as a discourse at all; it suggests something more akin to the disposition of the subject, if I can put it that way – something like what Badiou is trying to say about militancy, only inverted. Second, the manner in which Jimmy has suggested that this is an irreducible element of the proclamation of the Gospel only serves to reinforce this first claim. The point that Jimmy appears to be making, if I am interpreting him correctly, is that what Badiou is naming the mystical is, for Paul, the necessary subjective side of the event itself, which he seems to associate with the miraculous. Jimmy makes this clear when he asserts that “the miraculous appears as the very condition that, when satisfied, opens up the space for proclamation of the gospel as an apostle.” I find this compelling, although I believe that this requires more precise articulation, as will be noted below. Third, I also find compelling what I take to be a major implication of Jimmy’s critique, namely, the notion that Paul maintains a stronger distinction between the event (resurrection) and the

declaration of its truth (preaching.) I deeply appreciate the way in which he names this space the miraculous, and asserts that is in fact the condition for truth declaration. There is something very Barthian about such a claim; it seems to me that this could almost be mapped directly onto Barth. (I must note here that this appears to me to very close to Zizek's critique of Badiou, although not exactly. Zizek maintains that Badiou makes the subject "consubstantial" with the event in such a way that there is not enough distance between the event, the constitution of the subject, and the process of subjectivization (declaration.) What Jimmy has isolated here, however, is I think a further space, not between the event and the subject, but between the subject and subjectivization, and he has named this the 'miraculous'. Furthermore, he has associated the sphere between the event and the subject directly with the mystical. [I am unsure whether this is something that Zizek himself would concede to, however.]) Fourth, I think that Jimmy has effected a significant blow to Badiou's argument by noting the Johannine reversal of the priority between sign and faith and connected this with the function of the miraculous in Paul's discourse as a domain between the subject and the process of subjectivization. Finally, the points regarding Moses and Jesus are likewise well taken, especially inasmuch as they, in conjunction with his reflections on the Gospel of John, significantly call into question the juxtaposition Badiou makes between Jew and Greek discourses respectively.

Now, on the matter of criticism. As should be apparent, I think that all of these points are solid bones of contention. As they stand, however, I think they require significant fleshing out, primarily because I recognize a certain degree of incoherence concerning how these points hang together. I am willing to concede that this may be either a matter of Paul's own incoherence, but it could also be a matter of your own

articulation of Paul's thinking. First, I recognize that Jimmy wants to make a stronger distinction between the mystical and the miraculous, and I think that this would help to make his case clearer. Reason being, I remain confused as to the nature of the relationships between the mystical, the miraculous, the event, the subject, the process of subjectivization, and the preaching of the Gospel. In one instance, Jimmy appears to associate the 'mystical' with the event and then to name the miraculous as the condition for the declaration of the event as true. This would imply that the mystical corresponds to subjectivity in much the same way that the event corresponds to the event in Badiou. But, he also appears to associate Badiou's notion of the event with the miraculous while uniting it with the subjective function of the mystical. This is made clear in the statement: "the miraculous or the mystical is the very vehicle of the truth event." Yet, a distinction is implied in the assertion that the miraculous occupies a place subsequent to the subjectivization of the event, but prior the declaration of the truth of the event. What is the relationship of the mystical to the miraculous here; and, what how does each relate to Badiou's conception of the event. In sum, I think that there is some conceptual confusion here. Second, I am not so sure that Badiou himself would have a major problem with what Jimmy has called the miraculous. Indeed, I think that he would say that to the degree that the event itself was *ex nihilo* with regard to the situation, it must be called 'miraculous' because it cannot be accounted for within the dominant ontology. To Jimmy's credit, however, this does not appear to be his point. He seems to be saying that any subsequent miraculous event that occurs in the declaration actually confirms the truth of the declaration, independently of the subject's constitution of the event. In other words, Jimmy is assuming that there is some genuinely objective truth in the event itself

that *happens* so as to found a subject, thereby providing a ground for faith. I think that this is solid point that deserves more fleshing out in juxtaposition to Badiou's own logic of subjectivity. But more on this later. Third, I am not so sure that what Jimmy is calling the mystical here, understood in Badiou's terms as incommunicable, is made strongly enough in opposition to Badiou's assertion that a truth itself must be communicable. I think that what Badiou is saying in this claim is that the truth of the encounter, not the subject's relation to the encounter, must be communicable. There is a distinction there: he is saying that the truth is not in the relation to the event, but in the declaration of the meaning it holds for the subject that it constitutes. It is not so clear that Jimmy is denying this aspect of Badiou's project. Furthermore, I think that Badiou could claim, in continuity with Jimmy, that it is in the declaration of the event that further 'miraculous' events occur to the extent that the subject's own declaration serves as the basis for the constitution of other evental sites which necessarily lead to the constitution of further subjectivities. Finally, I wish that there was more engagement with Badiou's reading of Paul on the Law, because ultimately in my own analysis of Badiou suggests that this is where his project goes completely awash. That is, I think that Jimmy's critique would be massively strengthened if he was able to clarify the meaning of miraculous and mystical as these terms function with respect to what Badiou terms the subject's relation to the Law. Let me substantiate this just a bit. My hope is that by bringing these brief reflections to bear upon Jimmy's paper, we can begin to flesh out a stronger notion of the mystical and miraculous these concepts pertain to the event and subjectivity. I will spell out this idea with reference to one of Badiou's examples of the event, namely, that of falling in love.

First, according to Badiou, falling in love is a perfect example of an event in the sense that such a thing happens precisely as incalculable, unpredictable, and unrepresentable within the ‘situation,’ or dominant political ontology. There is no sense in which that situation can account for that form of encounter. Thus, falling in love only arises from the ontological Void which exceeds the situation *per se*. Second, falling in love is magnificent example of an event because we witness therein the manner in which subjectivity literally arises *ex nihilo*. This is made clear from the fact that the event itself brings the question: What am I to do? - a question that is a call to action. The subject is thus born as the lover called to love.

Badiou breaks this process of subjectivization down into four ‘moments’: nomination, intervention, investigation-connection, and fidelity. Nomination is the act of naming the event falling in love, the subject as the lover, and the one loved as the beloved. Here, the event is dissolved into the subject’s engagement with it. Intervention is the moment of the subject’s decision concerning the truth of the event: whether the lover will choose to affirm or deny the event, stating that it did or did not occur. Investigation-connection relates to the subject’s act of inquiring into those aspects of the situation that bore down upon the event (investigation), and struggle to ‘win’ those aspects over to the truth of the event. Finally, fidelity is the commitment to carry out this process infinitely.

How can this be said to be universal? Because the lover comes to be committed to forcefully investigating and connecting all aspects of her ontological situation to her love, the declaration of her love must be addressed to all – in a sense *forced* upon all others, especially those that deny the legitimacy of her love. We can clearly see here the

manner in which this serves an explicitly Leninist political vision, especially when view in light of, say, Paris May '68, the Seattle riots of 2000, the French Revolution – or, dare I say, the American Revolution (a perilous affair.) When translated into the realm of politics we can see how the love for the event, even the event of love, can quite easily become a violent affair, especially with regard to the truth procedure in its investigation-connection phase.

Does such an account adequately describe the logic St. Paul? It is a bold statement to make about a philosopher who is such an accomplished logician and mathematician, but it appears to me that Badiou is here being, not simply a bad interpreter of Paul, but also a bad theorist. And the problem pertains to his insistence upon the necessity of abstracting from the singularity of the event to its universal significance. Let me substantiate this claim.

Of course, any event of falling in love is 'universal' in the sense that a subject's love is always addressed to all in the sense that it inherently demands recognition. Yet, Badiou's claim is that the truth of this universality implies a further abstraction that applies to all such truths. Badiou insists that, in order to sustain even the singularity of this one event, we must be capable of abstracting to a universal that makes this singular event itself truthful. (Note that the truth of the event is not directly associated with the meaning of it; the truth that is established in the universalizing moment is something that is subjectively established through a process of abstraction that can account for the event in light of a overarching process of investigation-connection.) The implication being that the truth of the event lies in the form and not the content. This the reason Badiou maintains that it does not matter in slightest whether Jesus Christ was actually raised

from the dead – indeed, he was not; all that matters is that we recognize the formal truth that Paul is declaring.

Echoes of Bultmann should now be ringing in each of ears – perhaps of Rahner as well. The question is whether there is a form of faith that is separable from the content of Jesus Christ.

I anticipate that Badiou would respond that the nature of the event requires that form and content not be divided in this way; he has simply given ‘content’ a different meaning – the content being the truth and not those aspects of the situation within which the truth occurs. This is fine observation as far as it goes. But, the very term ‘evental site’ presupposes an overarching structure of some instantiation *qua* event – a structure that ‘falling in love’ is merely one instance of, the truth of which, and indeed the event itself, are in some sense retroactively constituted by, through an act of fidelity that is carried out on the basis of an abstraction from the encounter itself. And this moment of abstraction is essential, not only in order for the form of event as such to be applicable, but also for the subject to be faithful to the event. For example, in order to be faithful to the event of falling in love, I must abstract from the event in such a way that I can remain subjectively faithful to it in all aspects of all situations. But, what I am faithful to then is an abstract conception of love, and not the beloved that actually inspired the love; the beloved himself has become incidental to my own subjectivization; and acts of investigation-connection and fidelity are heretofore matters of adhering to the significance of the event *pro me*, not *pro nobis*, all the less *pro tu*.

Thus, it would seem that, if I am not to betray the love in my act of fidelity to my love, then I can only do so on the basis of a refusal to abstract the form of love from the

singularity of its instantiation. This would seem to suggest, merely at a formal level, that the account of truth and subjectivity that Badiou has given us is precisely not universalizable in the manner he seems to believe it to be – a mistake by the way that can only be made by one who has never known what is to love another and not merely oneself or an idea. *But see: that very statement is made universally; it is meaningless, presumptuous, and cruel in abstraction from my singular relation to Alain Badiou.*

Now, this is why we must declare unequivocally, not on the basis of our subjective fidelities to the form of Jesus Christ, but on the basis of our fidelity to the content of one another (including Alain Badiou), that he is a minion of Satan. Why? Because like the serpent in the Garden, Badiou has provided us a reading of Paul's rejection of the Law and philosophy that perfectly reinscribes the very reason Paul rejected both. What Badiou simply cannot see is that it is neither Law nor philosophy that Paul is rejecting, it is the very abstraction of form from content that is demanded by subjectivity, which leads to the demand for universality – a demands that itself causes the Law and philosophy to fail. The Law is death because it reveals the impossibility of being faithful to it by virtue self-exertion (Judaism) and self-assertion (Rome.) [failure to isolate the discourse of Rome as independent from Greek philosophy as a discourse of self-assertion.] The point, of course, is that one cannot fulfill the obligations demanded by the law on the basis of anything associated with subjectivity. Badiou completely misses the fact that what the Law reveals is the death and futility of subjectivity itself and the failure of any wisdom founded on subjectivity. The reason, of course, is that subjectivity is the manifestation of sin and nothing more – pure unadulterated evil, which is *nothing* at all but a form with no content.