

**“Als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein...”:
An All Too Brief Response to J. Aaron Simmons and Travis E. Ables**

David Dault
Vanderbilt University
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There is much that must be said, and no time to say it. I offer this here, then, as a gesture for the critique which is *to come*, perhaps (if such a critique exists).

So, instead, I will do the following: I will read a poem, mention a few theses, and talk about a movie.

First the poem:

Die Pole
sind in uns,
unübersteigbar
im Wachen,
wir schlafen hinüber, vors Tor
des Earmens,

ich verliere dich an dich, das
ist mein Schneetrost,

sag, dass Jerusalem *ist*,

sags, als wäre ich dieses
dein Weiss,
als wärst du
meins,

als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein,

ich blättere dich auf, für immer,

du betest, du bettest
uns frei.

[Paul Celan]¹

¹ *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea, 1995) 352-353.

Next, some theses:

- 1) The things that are outside the text, the *hors-texte*, are not *things*. This is a vital distinction.
- 2) There is an assumption that the fundamentalist is an adversary and the theorist is a friend. This assumption, and the ethos it obtains, is false, and should be resisted.
- 3) There is only one event.

The Movie: M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*.

Here we go.

Die Pole sind in uns, unübersteigbar im Wachen....

The Poles are inside us, insurmountable when we're awake.²

For both Ables and Simmons, this inside/outside is important. It should be noted that in both Ables's reading and Simmons (perhaps) *misreading*, the essence of the outside is that it is vacuous – not a thing or an extant at all, but rather an effect, perhaps a trace. That, for Ables, reading Badiou, this outside is also *inside* is notable, but will remain a surplus until later in this (too brief) discussion.

The outside, the outsider, the trace which turns out to be an inside job.

...wir schlafen hinüber, vors Tor des Ebarmens, ich verliere dich, das ist mein Schneetrost,...

...we sleep across, up to the Gate of Mercy, I lose you to you, that is my snowy comfort,...

This desire of Levinas, seen prism'd through Derrida and distilled here through Simmons: this desire that *the* task of ethics [Simmons 12] (assuming, of course, that we all would agree on this universal task) is the goading of a democracy, the goading in which 'the unique I that I am' *loses* 'you to [the unique] you'...allowing, tolerating you in your critique of everything, even critique [of democracy] itself.

² All translations are by Michael Hamburger.

To Quote Levinas, from Simmons's paper: "Therein lies the very foundation of democracy. One can debate decisions; there is no human decree that cannot be revised" [Simmons 4]. And Derrida later echoes this point. However, since Nazi Germany has been referenced so much this evening, let's remember it again here. In Nazi Germany, Hitler and his cronies said very plainly, as part of their campaign platform, that if they were elected they would dismantle the constitution. 'Democracy will end when you elect us democratically.' And they were elected. And here, suddenly, in democracy, was a decree which could *not* be revised.

Somehow, the Weimar weakness, the spectre of the beer-hall *Putsch*, the promise of those who-would-come-to-power, is here to be *tolerated* as well, or perhaps merely ignored, for a season. 'That is [my] snowy comfort'.

...*sag, dass Jerusalem ist, ...*
...say that Jerusalem *is*,...

Cold comfort, strange bedfellows. There is an antipathy to the Fundamentalist reeking from the walls of our hallowed halls. We, the proper theologians, wish some distance. Or rather, you. I wish no such distance. I would rather stand with those who say, despite all reality or propriety, that Jerusalem *is*. I would stand here, rather than with Badiou (who says that 'there is no God' [*Ethics* 25]) or with Derrida (who says, repeatedly, that he is an *atheist*). Ables never explicitly states his alliances, but they seem to me clear. He is with the theorists. He expects that we are, too. He says 'Fundamentalist' expecting within us a certain guaranteed reaction, a reaction with which I take issue, a reaction I wish here to *problematize*.

Jerusalem *is*. Say it with me, for that is your responsibility as theologians. The theorists and philosophers can say what they like: they are not required to *believe* in anything. We are. And that is why our kind is closer to the fundamentalists. We reject them at our peril. The peril of both our abstract effectiveness and our practical, mortal souls.

...*als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein, ...*
...as though without us we could be we...

The ‘Immortal’ in us, for Badiou (awakened by the Good and staring into the Void), is beholden to *nothing*. What makes us truly human (and not merely animalic humanity) is this onanistic call-and-response. So says Badiou.

But we are not immortal in ourselves,³ but only by the providential Grace of the One God. We do not exist by or for the Good, but by and for the Glory of God. No theory can take this place nor fill this void, as if, without us, without being *who we are*, we might still be *we*, and discuss ourselves in this abstract, rarified, voided way. Badiou’s event is always the empty void, for Derrida, the democracy and Messiah is always *to come*. This is, simply, that for Badiou there can be no event and for Derrida, no Messiah.

There is only one event: Jesus Christ. And thus, only one Truth: Jesus Christ.

Badiou and Derrida cannot say this. The Fundamentalist absolutely does and can say this - as *we*, as theologians, do and *must* say this.

Let me say this a different way: I am not sure who considers the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection of Christ, or the literal occurrence of the miracle narratives to be ‘marginal’ or ‘minor issues,’ but I posit that, whoever they are, they are *not* the voices with which we should clamor to ally ourselves.

We are not here to make our language palatable to ‘non-adherents,’ to soften the tone or reduce this semiotic *exclusivity* (and, contra Chidester, I will insist upon this term). We are, rather, here to speak *the truth*: a virgin conceived, a dead man rose from the grave, the thousands were fed, the lame walk, the blind see.

It seems, in paying attention to Ables’ argument, we might say this: ‘If homosexuals did not exist, the fundamentalist would have to invent them.’ (I have run this phrasing past Travis, and he tacitly agrees.)

This is, of course, the logic of Shyamalan’s *The Village*, wherein a would-be utopian community cloisters itself away from the wicked world, and maintains its borders through a fiction of evil creatures at large in the forest (with their own favorite color

³ I am thinking here very much of the *Barmen Declaration* as a response to Badiou’s position.

scheme, no less, thinking red is *fabulous* and ignoring tacky yellows). These creatures are invented (a la *The Republic*) as part of the lie that maintains the community and keeps it pure and noble.

And, of course, just as Ables' paper would have us understand, in the film, eventually, one of the members within the community *takes on* the fictitious persona, autoimmunizing the hermetic body and wreaking havoc with the stability of utopia. So the movie, so fundamentalism, *so what?*

Need I point out that (just as Derrida warned us, long ago) making these one-sided sorts of pronouncements about the inner and the outer get us nowhere? Perhaps I do need to point out that, if we reverse the tropes cloaking the mechanics – substituting a gay bar for the Fundamentalist church, and making the homosexual the 'insider', the exact same reactionary functionality of the outside still obtains. The homosexual, in this construal, is just as dependent upon the fundamentalist (by which, I believe Ables here means, 'the bigot') as the fundamentalist is upon the homosexual. (If you have not been privy to homosexual identity politics in your experience, take it on faith from me.)

As an aside, we might read *Angels in America* as the Ablesian contrapositive to *The Village*, in which the autoimmune attack of AIDS is preceded by an internalized fundamentalism which wreaks havoc on the utopia of gay love. A lot could be said about this, but I'll let that just linger here.

My larger point is that both the 'Fundamentalist' *and* the 'Homosexual,' construed in these terms, are the same. They are vapid fictions. They are *boring* to talk about. They are simply *boring*.

There is another homosexuality, just as there is another fundamentalism, and these are *not* boring, nor vapid, nor fictional. To speak dismissively of the homosexual, when one is not one, is funded by a certain ignorance. To speak dismissively of the fundamentalist, when one is not one, is funded by a certain ignorance. But they each have their certain beauties, with which some or all might ally themselves, as practices, as ways of living, as ways of – strange though it may sound – being forgiven.

...*du betest, du bettest uns frei.*

...you pray, you bed us free.

Is there any beauty in theory? Is there any forgiveness for the philosopher? For the one who says 'there is no God'?

This remains to be seen.