

‘Extraction from the Mortal Site’: Badiou on the Resurrection in Paul*

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This essay explores the heuristic force of Alain Badiou’s theory of ‘truth-processes’ for an understanding of the psycho-social effect of Paul’s gospel upon first-century inhabitants of the Roman Empire, both elite and lower class. Badiou’s analysis of the ‘situated void’ around which existence is constructed directs attention to figures of the subject as ‘living death’ in the literature of the first century, illuminating the process by which a new, liberated self came forth, in response to Paul’s message of the resurrection. An immanent critique of Badiou’s singular emphasis upon the resurrection as the Pauline ‘truth-event’ gives rise to an hypothesis regarding Paul’s description of his gospel as ‘Christ crucified’ in his later epistles: Paul dared to name the ‘situated void’ around which the existence of slaves was constructed in order to redeem the oppressed, whose identities were submerged in shame, from the annihilating power of the cross.

Keywords: Alain Badiou, truth-event, resurrection, crucifixion, interpellation, Walter Benjamin

In Badiou’s *Saint Paul*, the philosopher applies his theory of ‘truth processes’ to the founder of Christianity.¹ Badiou finds in Paul’s epistles the formal model of the *temporality* of the truth-event, which has undergirded his earlier analyses of the ruptures in the fabric of social life in the domains of art, science, love, and politics.² The NT scholar may feel obliged to collaborate on

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1 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (trans. R. Brassier; Stanford: Stanford University, 2003).

2 Alain Badiou, *L’être et l’événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988); English ed. *Being and Event* (trans. O. Feltham; London: Continuum, 2006).

Badiou's project, since Badiou heralds the rediscovery (by an atheist!) of the archetypal truth-event in Paul's declaration 'Christ is resurrected'.³ Drawn to this project by Badiou's ability to articulate the relevance of Paul's gospel in a secular idiom, the historian of Paul's world may find work to do at the point of Badiou's most important achievement—which is to have exposed the dark, mortal site from which new life emerges, for purposes of theologico-political reflection. Along the way toward an analysis of the construction of death in the Roman Empire, we may find ourselves approaching a more adequate understanding of the representation of the subject in the mid-first century, illuminating the sense of disillusionment and catastrophe that pervades the literature of Paul's contemporaries, to which the message of the resurrection is addressed, and from which a new, liberated self comes forth by means of a subjective division. On the other side of Badiou's account of the Resurrection as truth-event, we will encounter the limit of Badiou's interpretation of Paul, in his insistence that Jesus' death does not belong to the operation of eventual grace. It will be argued that Badiou's attempt to disjoin death from resurrection leads him to place the Pauline concept of the Christ in dangerous proximity to the Nietzschean idea of the Overman as a figure of pure self-affirmation.

A disclaimer is in order, from the outset: the immanent critique of Badiou's *Paul* that follows is informed by philosophical premises which have much in common with Badiou's own. Immersed in Heideggerian existentialism as a student, an encounter with the writings of Walter Benjamin in the early 1980s led to engagement with the works of Georg Lukács and Louis Althusser.⁴ The usefulness of Lacan's psychology for analysis of the representation of the subject, even in the case of the literature of antiquity, also belongs to the assumptions of this essay, especially as ethical dimensions of the Lacanian ontologization of the subject are reflected and mediated by Slavoj Žižek.⁵ Eric Santner's account of the 'undeadness' of the subject opened a fresh perspective on Paul's understanding of death.⁶ Finally, this essay shares the professed aim of Giorgio Agamben's seminar on Paul: 'to restore Paul's letters to the status of the fundamental messianic texts for the Western tradition'.⁷ Thus, the reader should not expect to find here a critique of Badiou's philosophy in its entirety, but rather an attempt to think *with* and *through* Badiou's reading of Paul, until, in the

3 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 4, 17.

4 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1972); Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

5 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000).

6 Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001).

7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2005) 1.

end, we venture to think *against* Badiou’s understanding of Jesus’ death, abandoning, finally, Badiou’s basic premise of the singularity of the resurrection in the operation of evental grace.

For those who come fresh to Badiou’s philosophy, it may be useful to situate the book on Paul within Badiou’s larger project, by recapitulating the argument of his *Ethics*.⁸ Badiou’s concept of a ‘truth-event’ describes the ways in which human beings undergo tears in the fabric of their social lives, ruptures which, in principle, allow not merely for the emergence of new objects of desire, but rather for the fundamental restructuring of the coordinates of desire, through radical shifts in the direction of life. According to Badiou, our embeddedness in the customs and opinions of the world we inhabit is structurally susceptible to a disruption that ‘compels us to decide a new way of being’.⁹ Such ruptures bring about a transformation of the social animal that I was into the human subject I am to become: ‘a socialized animal is convoked by certain circumstances to become a subject—or rather, to enter into the composing of a subject. That is to say, at a given moment, everything he is—his body, his abilities—is called upon to enable the passing of a truth along its path. This is when the human animal is convoked to be the immortal that he was not yet’.¹⁰ Badiou gives examples of what can count as ‘truth-events’ from the realms of politics, love, science, and art: the French Revolution of 1792, the meeting of Heloise and Abelard, Galileo’s creation of physics, Haydn’s invention of the classical musical style.¹¹ Each such event generates within our animal inertia a ‘vital disorganization’ that can become the source of a radically new kind of subjective stance:

Every pursuit of an interest has success as its only source of legitimacy. On the other hand, if I ‘fall in love’, or if I am seized by the sleepless fury of a thought, or if some radical political engagement proves incompatible with every immediate principle of interest—then I find myself compelled to measure life, my life as a socialized human animal, against something other than itself. And this above all when, beyond the joyful or enthusiastic clarity of the seizing, it becomes a matter of finding out if, and how, I am to continue along the path of vital disorganization, thereby granting to this primordial disorganization a secondary and paradoxical organization, that very organization which we have called ‘ethical consistency’.¹²

An adequate understanding of Badiou’s notion of a vital rupture in the fabric of being requires us to probe more deeply into the circumstances in which the

8 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (trans. P. Hallward; London: Verso, 2001).

9 Badiou, *Ethics*, 40.

10 Badiou, *Ethics*, 41.

11 Badiou, *Ethics*, 41.

12 Badiou, *Ethics*, 60.

socialized animal is convoked to become a human subject. Badiou builds upon Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' to describe the process by which ideology compels us to accept our determinate place within the socio-symbolic edifice, which is a place of guilt and servitude.¹³ Badiou recognizes that a break emerges insofar as the norms of the socialized human animal are articulated around a void: 'You might ask what it is that makes the connection between the event and that "for which" it is an event. This connection is the void of the earlier situation. What does that mean? It means that at the heart of every situation, as the foundation of its being, there is a "situated void", around which is organized the plentitude (or the stable multiples) of the situation in question'.¹⁴ Badiou gives as an example of such a 'situated void', one from the realm of politics: 'Marx is an event for political thought because he designates, under the name "proletariat", the central void of early bourgeois societies. For the proletariat—being entirely dispossessed, and absent from the political stage—is that around which is organized the complacent plentitude established by the rule of those who possess capital'.¹⁵ Thus, Badiou draws the following conclusion about the relationship between the event and its circumstance: 'the fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, to name the situated void of that for which it is an event'.¹⁶

Now we are able to comprehend why Paul is a foundational figure for Badiou in the history of the emergence of a universal subject, and hence for the existence of any truth whatsoever: unlike effective truth-procedures which aim at the production of a universal in the domains of science, art, politics, and love, 'there occurs with Paul...a powerful break',¹⁷ whose 'immense echo' reverberates backwards and forwards in time,¹⁸ a break which deserves to be called 'theoretical',¹⁹ because the situated void which Paul's proclamation inscribes and names is nothing other than *death itself*. Paul's declaration 'Christ is resurrected' blasts open the continuum constructed around death. Badiou explains, 'For Paul, the Resurrection is that on the basis of which life's center of gravity comes to reside in life, whereas previously, being situated in the Law, it organized life's subsumption by death'.²⁰

13 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 127–86. See also Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1979) 100–11; Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 128, 141–2, 145.

14 Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.

15 Badiou, *Ethics*, 69.

16 Badiou, *Ethics*, 69.

17 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 107.

18 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 107.

19 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 108; cf. Žižek, 'The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', *The Ticklish Subject*, 143–4.

20 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 62.

Badiou emphasizes that, for Paul, 'death' does not signify a biological terminus, but rather a certain subjective stance or path, a way of dying to life within life, a living-death.²¹ Badiou takes Rom 8.6 to be a 'central aphorism':²² 'The thought of the flesh is death; the thought of the spirit is life'. Badiou comments: 'The death about which Paul tells us...has nothing biological about it, no more so, for that matter, than life. Death and life are thoughts, interwoven dimensions of the global subject'.²³ Death is 'the real, configured through the subjective path of the flesh'.²⁴ 'Resurrection' therefore designates the possibility of a disruption of this peculiar death-in-life that constrains human existence. The crucial point for Badiou is that it is precisely from this void, that is, from this uncanny site of death-in-life, that the upsurge of life signified by the Christ-event first becomes possible.²⁵ That is the meaning of Badiou's assertion that 'death is the evental site immanent to the situation', and, in that sense, 'enters into the composition of the event itself'.²⁶ Badiou explains: 'Death is the construction of the evental site insofar as it brings it about that resurrection will have been addressed to men, to their subjective situation'.²⁷ Badiou sums up: 'Christ has been pulled *ek nekron*, out from the dead. This extraction from the mortal site establishes a point wherein death loses its power'.²⁸

For NT theologians schooled on Bultmann, Badiou's concept of death as a subjective path towards the void, a death-constrained immobility, will evoke the Heideggerian notion of 'inauthenticity'.²⁹ But, for Badiou the Marxist, our death-in-life is not a personal anxiety, distractedness, or numbness generated by our 'thrownness' into being.³⁰ Thus, for examples of what Badiou terms the 'symptomal torsion of being' around the void,³¹ we should not look to that group of tombstone jingles, half-prose, half-verse, found in various forms in every quarter of Paul's world: 'I was not. I came to be. I am not. I don't care'.³²

21 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 55–6; cf. Žižek, 'Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', 146.

22 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 55.

23 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 68.

24 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 68–9.

25 Cf. Eric Santner, 'Miracles Happen', *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (ed. S. Žižek; London and Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005) 119.

26 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70.

27 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70.

28 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 73.

29 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. J. Stambaugh; Albany: State University of New York, 1953).

30 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 73, distinguishing Paul's thought from that of the early Heidegger.

31 Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, 25; cf. Žižek, 'Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', 131.

32 IG 14, 2190; for further examples, see R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962) 84–5; W. Peek, *Griechische Grabgedichte* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1960) 323. Note the conjecture of Imre Peres, *Griechische Grabinschriften und neutestamentliche Eschatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 28: 'Wahrscheinlich waren

Rather, Badiou conceives of the void that 'Resurrection' names as a social and political construct. Because Badiou articulates his understanding of the Christ-event as a commentary on 1 Corinthians 1-4, 'the 'world' that Paul declares has been crucified with Jesus is the Greek cosmos, the reassuring totality that allots places, and orders thought to consent to those places'.³³ We do not wish to deny that Paul understood his gospel as the overthrow of that regime of discourse which aimed at securing mastery for the wise man. But students of the cultural project of being Greek under Rome are increasingly aware of the various ways in which the ideology of wisdom, in the form of rhetoric and philosophy, served Roman interests and reinforced empire.³⁴ Thus we may seek to supplement Badiou's project of naming the situated void of the Christ-event by exploring figures of subjectivity as 'living-death' in the Roman world of the mid-first century. In this experiment, we will be following the logic of Paul's own exposition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1-4: after penetrating the ideological mask of Greek wisdom (1 Cor 1.18-25), Paul exposes the naked face of 'the rulers of this age', who had 'crucified the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2.6-8).

In a handful of recent studies, critics of Silver Age literature have noted the number of works in which the characters seem to be dead before actually dying.³⁵ What has changed in Roman society to account for this transformation in the figure of the subject? Paul Miller suggests that a fundamental split in the nature of subjectivity occurred in the late first century BCE, a split that was symptomatic of a change in the structure of power.³⁶ The answer lies in the consolidation of the political and cultural order around the figure of the emperor. Perhaps we should have attended more closely to Tacitus's bitter insistence that the slavishness fostered by Augustus and his successors had destroyed the Roman character.³⁷ For an example of this split in the subject, we turn to Ovid. In his poetry from exile, Ovid constructs his condition as a living death in which true death,

diese oder ähnliche Lebensvorstellungen vor allem für höhere Schichten und in grösseren Städten typisch, inspiriert durch das kulturelle Leben im Theater und die Möglichkeiten zu Lebensgenuss'.

33 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 71.

34 E.g. Ramsay MacMullen, *Romanization in the Time of Augustus* (New Haven: Yale University, 2000); Simon Goldhill, ed., *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic, and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001); Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008).

35 T. N. Habinek, *The Politics of Latin Literature: Writing, Identity, and Empire in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1998); P. A. Miller, *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003); B. Dufallo, *The Ghosts of the Past: Latin Literature, the Dead, and Rome's Transition to a Principate* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2007).

36 Miller, *Subjecting Verses*, 184-209.

37 Tacitus *Ann.* 1.2.1; 4.1.

while desired, nevertheless eludes him: in *Tristia* 1.3, Ovid portrays his departure into exile as a funeral; in 3.2, Ovid casts himself in the role of traditional erotic elegy's excluded lover knocking in vain on the door of death; in 3.3, he looks forward to death, since it will mean his longed-for return to Rome, once his wife has transferred his bones there; in 3.11, he describes himself as a ghost, his body already reduced to ashes and buried in a tomb; in *Ex Ponto* 1.9, Ovid exhorts his friend Maximus to number him with the dead. Ovid's exile poems are a testament to the consolidation of Augustus's power. Indeed, in their expressions of dependency on the emperor's mercy and frank acknowledgment of his authority, they provide a model of imperial subjecthood.³⁸

Literature contemporary with the inception of Paul's mission gives expression to a deepening disillusionment with the realities of Roman rule, especially in the aftermath of the Caligula crisis.³⁹ This literature is also conspicuously 'haunted' by figures of death-in-life, whether in the form of ghosts, or persons who have returned from the dead, or pictures of the world as a ruined place, from which all vitality has been withdrawn.⁴⁰ Making all proper allowances for rhetorical hyperbole in Philo's invective against the Emperor Gaius,⁴¹ it is nevertheless clear how much genuine disappointment, and later revulsion, accompanied the revelation of madness and cruelty at the center of Roman power, as Philo and his contemporaries discovered that the weight of empire could turn a young man, whose accession had aroused so much hope, into a monster:

As the author of general ruin and destruction,...you changed what gave pleasure and joy into discomfort and grief and a life which all men everywhere find unworthy of the name. And so insatiable and quenchless were your lusts that you stole all that was good and valuable, whether from east and west, or from all other regions of the world southwards or northwards, and in return you gave and sent them the fruits of your own bitterness and all things

38 Miller, *Subjecting Verses*, 210–36; Dufallo, *The Ghosts of the Past*, 123–7.

39 On the importance of the Caligula crisis, see A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven: Yale university, 1990) 140–91.

40 Dufallo, *The Ghosts of the Past*, 123–7; J. G. Fitch, *Seneca VIII Tragedies* (LCL 62; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2002) 39.

41 There is a pressing need for rhetorical analysis of Philo's political writings *In Flaccum* and *Legatio ad Gaium*, where virtually every line is shaped to meet his rhetorical ends. Philo's rhetorical subtlety is so great as to give impressions contrary to what occurred, without complete fabrication. See the brief treatment of rhetorical aspects of the *Legatio* in Daniel R. Schwartz, 'On Drama and Authenticity in Philo and Josephus', *SCI* 10 (1989/90) 113–29; Manuel Alexandre, *Rhetorical Argumentation in Philo of Alexandria* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999). There is relevant material in the insightful articles by Allen Kerkeslager, 'The Absence of Dionysios, Lampo, and Isidoros from the Violence in Alexandria in 38 CE', *SPhA* 17 (2005) 49–94; 'Agrippa and the Mourning Rites for Drusilla in Alexandria', *JSJ* 37 (2006) 367–400; 'Agrippa I and the Judeans of Alexandria in the Wake of the Violence in 38 CE', *REJ* 168 (2009) 1–49, to whom I owe sincere thanks for guidance in the matter of Philo's rhetoric.

mischievous and hurtful that abominable and venomous souls are wont to generate... You stripped the cities of all that tends to well-being and happiness, and turned them into hotbeds of what makes for confusion and tumults and the height of misery... You rained miseries untold one after the other as from perennial fountains on every part of the inhabited world.⁴²

Philo insists that knowledge of Caligula's crimes was not restricted to those who, like himself, were highly placed: 'In every mouth there was common talk about these inexpiable abominations, though quietly and in undertones, since fear prevented open discussion'.⁴³ The effect of Caligula's reign upon Jews and Jewish sympathizers must have been shattering. God had intervened to save a remnant of the Jewish community of Alexandria, Philo believed, though many perished in the pogroms.⁴⁴ But Philo's confidence was broken: there is a bitter irony and a sense of hopelessness about Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium* that is not characteristic of his writing generally. Pessimism about human nature steals into Philo's thought.

An even darker vision of the world and human nature is found in Seneca's tragedies.⁴⁵ Here we enter a world of moral chaos, in which isolated individuals are driven to acts of violence by gigantic passions.⁴⁶ Seneca's Hercules returns from the underworld at the height of megalomania, and resolves to storm the gates of heaven; descending rapidly into madness, he slaughters his wife and children.⁴⁷ Making allowances for the nature of tragedy, it is difficult not to see the bleak world depicted in Seneca's *Hercules* as a reflection of the macabre reign of Caligula, who likewise 'overstepped the bounds of human nature in his eagerness to be thought a god',⁴⁸ descended into madness, and murdered members of his own family.⁴⁹ Amphitryon's account of the paradoxes of his world echoes the dark experiences of Seneca's own times: 'Crime which prospers and flourishes is given the name of valor; good people take orders from the wicked; might is right, and laws are stifled by fear' (251-3). In Seneca's *Hercules*, death manifests itself in the rhythms of everyday life: dawn and birdsong awaken 'hard toil, bestir every care' (137-8); crowds in the cities are 'conscious of fleeting time' and 'hold fast the moments that will never return' (176-7); the throng moving

42 Philo *Leg. Gai.* 89-90, 101.

43 Philo *Leg. Gai.* 66.

44 Philo *Leg. Gai.* 347-8.

45 D. and E. Henry, *The Mask of Power: Seneca's Tragedies and Imperial Rome* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1985).

46 J. G. Fitch and S. McElduff, 'Construction of the Self in Senecan Drama', *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002) 18-40.

47 Seneca, 'Hercules' *Seneca VIII Tragedies* (LCL 62; trans. J. G. Fitch; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2002) 48-159.

48 Philo *Leg. Gai.* 75.

49 Barrett, *Caligula*, 213-41.

through the streets is on its way to the underworld, 'each with a sorrowful sense of being buried beneath the whole earth... All around is turbid emptiness, unlovely darkness, the sullen color of night, the lethargy of a silent world, and empty clouds' (859–63); sleep is the 'languid brother of hardhearted Death' (1069), from whom fearful humans gain advance knowledge of the 'long night' that is to come (1075–6). In seeking the reasons for the pervasive insecurity that marks the characters of Senecan tragedy, it is worth remembering that 'Seneca himself lived through and witnessed, in his own person or in the persons of those near him, almost every evil and horror that is the theme of his writings. Exile, murder, incest, the threat of poverty and a hideous death were the very texture of his career'.⁵⁰ Seneca's epistles return repeatedly to the thought of suicide: he directs the reader's attention to 'any tree,...any vein', as the path to freedom.⁵¹ In *Letter 77* to Lucilius, he confesses a longing for suicide: 'death little by little, in a steady weakening not without its pleasures, a peaceful annihilation I know well, having lost consciousness several times'.⁵²

A more thorough analysis of the representation of the subject in the mid-first century would demonstrate that the figure of death-in-life, which makes its appearance in Ovid, Philo, and Seneca, was by no means idiosyncratic, but was endemic, at least in the literature of persons of a certain social class. In the writings of those who were most self-conscious and articulate, we glimpse a subject cringing around a void, simultaneously registering and repressing knowledge of the death-driven situation by which his existence was constrained. The ground of this experience of disillusionment was not personal, despite Philo's fixation upon the wickedness of Caligula, but structural: the geopolitical expansion of the Roman Empire, and the emergence of sole sovereignty, exercised through an ongoing 'state of exception',⁵³ ensured that 'the actions of one man, the emperor, could indeed affect the known world'.⁵⁴ And what if this one man were unable to bear the weight of Empire, and descended into paranoia, or exploded in megalomania? The family history of the Euryclids at Corinth demonstrates that the suspicion of a Tiberius could reach out to a provincial city and result in exile and the confiscation of property.⁵⁵ In any case, the effect of the political changes of the first century upon the way in which men such as Ovid, Philo,

50 C. J. Herrington, 'Senecan Tragedy', *Arion* 5 (1966) 430.

51 Seneca *Ep.* 70.

52 Seneca *Ep.* 77; see the comments of P. Veyne, *Seneca: The Life of a Stoic* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 167.

53 On the Principate as a 'state of exception' in the Schmittian sense, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005) 65–88.

54 Fitch, *Seneca VIII Tragedies*, 9.

55 K. M. T. Chrimes, 'The Family and Descendants of C. Julius Eurykles', *Ancient Sparta: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1952) 169–204; G. W. Bowersock, 'Eurycles of Sparta', *Journal of Roman Studies* 51 (1961) 112–18.

and Seneca chose to represent the figure of the subject is writ large upon their works: they portray increasingly isolated individuals, wracked by obsessive emotions and a sense of supine powerlessness.⁵⁶ We may reasonably conjecture that Paul's converts in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth would have been susceptible to these experiences, as well, even if they were less self-conscious and articulate than Seneca.

Now let us imagine the day when a gentile Godfearer, someone like Gaius of Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 1.14; Rom 16.23), would have heard Paul preach for the first time at the house of Titius Justus next door to the synagogue. The announcement that God had sent the Messiah (Acts 18.5), a figure of counter-sovereignty, would have signified an intervention, hoped for, but seemingly beyond hope, of divine power into a world where so much had gone awry. The message that God had raised Jesus out of the dead (1 Thess 2.10; 1 Cor 15.4, 20), the very one put to death under Pontius Pilate (1 Cor 2.8), would have signified a rupture in the chain of atrocities. The promise that the Messiah would reign, enthroned in heaven, until he subjugated every inimical authority (1 Cor 15.24–25), must have signified that corrupt human power over the world had been broken, shorn, and undone. If the secret of the sole sovereignty of Augustus and his successors was that it located the center of gravity in death, in utterly dependant subjecthood, then Paul's message of the Messiah's resurrection must have restored the center of gravity to life, so that Gaius, in hearing Paul's gospel, would have experienced an upsurge, an insurrection of the self, with the exhilarating sensations that attend the sudden emergence of a new subject—freedom, empowerment, hope. And in the company of others who were simultaneously experiencing and declaring the event of their faith, Gaius must have begun to sense the recovery of a community that had largely disappeared amid the political changes of the preceding century. Naturally, we cannot know how deeply Gaius's conversion penetrated, or how many of his social values were changed. But the baptism that Gaius received at Paul's hands (1 Cor 1.14) symbolized a death of the former self and the beginning of a new life (Rom 6.3–4). We may assume that one who eventually placed his house at the disposal of the Christian community (Rom 16.23) would have experienced a profound transformation, as he responded to Paul's gospel.

Thus far, our exploration of the nature of subjectivity in the first century has focused on the literature of the elite; and for this reason, we took Gaius, 'the

56 The difficulty of drawing inferences from such highly rhetorical sources as the exile poetry of Ovid, the political writings of Philo, and Senecan tragedy prevents us from speaking, as some Classicists do (e.g. Fitch), of the 'psychology of the self' in the first century. Instead, we have contented ourselves with the language of the 'representation of the subject'. But to the rhetorical *inventio* of these writings belongs the calculation of what would have been plausible to contemporary readers. Hence, it is significant confirmation of Badiou's account of the 'situated void' of Paul's gospel that the figure of the subject as a 'living-dead' appears so consistently in the literature of Paul's contemporaries.

host of the whole *ekklesia*' (Rom 16.23), and perhaps the wealthiest person we know of from Paul's assemblies,⁵⁷ to illustrate the psychological effect of the Pauline gospel. Yet, the majority of those who experienced a 'calling' as a result of Paul's gospel, even at 'wealthy' Corinth, were uneducated, poor, and low-born (1 Cor 1.26).⁵⁸ How would such persons—slaves and the urban poor—have experienced the vital disruption in the fabric of their lives that liberated a new and fully human subject? Is it possible to comprehend the specific construction of the mortal site from which the 'nothings and nobodies' of the Roman world (1 Cor 1.28) were extracted? As is well known, the obstacle to such an undertaking lies in the silence of the sources: the voices of the poor have vanished from history; as Walter Benjamin observed, the place where their lives are remembered is in the mind of God.⁵⁹ Where, then, should we look for the poor as subjects in relation to the 'situated void' of Roman society?

In my own research, I have turned to popular comedy, and especially the mime, as a means of access to the thought world of the lower classes of the Roman Empire.⁶⁰ On the stage, one encounters portraits of slaves and the poor in abundance, since, in accordance with the Greek and Roman theory of the laughable, their weaknesses and deficiencies, both physical and intellectual, were taken as subjects of ridicule.⁶¹ Here I found, initially to my surprise, that the figure of the subject is represented not as one who suffers death in general, but a particular kind of socially shameful death, namely, the cross.⁶² The most popular mime of Paul's day was evidently the *Laureolus* of a certain Catullus.⁶³ Numerous references by historians and satirists make it possible to reconstruct

57 Steven Friesen, 'Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-called New Consensus', *JSNT* 26.3 (2004) 323–61, at 356.

58 Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 71–3.

59 Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings I* (ed. M. Bullock and M. Jennings; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996) 254; cf. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', *Gesammelte Schriften I.2* (ed. R. Tiedemann; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974) 693–704.

60 L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

61 Aristotle *Ars Poet.* 1449a30; Cicero *De Orat.* 2.236; Quintilian *Inst. Orat.* 6.3.8; M. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1924) 19; G. M. A. Richter, 'Grotesques and the Mime', *American Journal of Archaeology* 17 (1913) 148–56; R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Greco-Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1995) 108–10; Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 34–48.

62 Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, esp. 129–47.

63 *Mimorum romanorum Fragmenta* (ed. M. Bonaria; Geneva: Instituto di Filologia Classica, 1955) 112. On the popularity of the *Laureolus* mime, see A. Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931) 110–11; R. Beacham, *The Roman Theater and its Audience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992) 136.

the plot:⁶⁴ Laureolus is a slave who runs away from his master and becomes the leader of a band of robbers; in the final scene, he is crucified.⁶⁵ The crucifixion was enacted with a considerable degree of stage realism. Josephus reports that 'a great quantity of artificial blood flowed down from the one crucified'.⁶⁶ According to Martial, a condemned criminal was forced to take the part of Laureolus at a performance during the reign of Titus, and actually died on the cross.⁶⁷ In the opening scene of the 'Adultery Mime' from Oxyrhynchus, the *archimima* orders that two of her slaves be 'fastened to the trees'.⁶⁸ When a slave's complicity in the plot to murder his master is uncovered, at the conclusion of the same mime, the master loudly calls for the 'stake' to be brought.⁶⁹ In the denouement of a mime-inspired tale in the tenth book of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, the slave who has assisted his mistress in an attempt to murder her stepson is hanged on the cross.⁷⁰

The most vivid references to crucifixion in ancient literature are found in the comedies of Plautus, where the lives of slaves are portrayed with unparalleled sympathy.⁷¹ Examination of these passages indicates what a large space the specter of the cross occupied in the consciousness of the servile class.⁷² The slave Sceledrus in Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* confesses: 'I know the cross will be my tomb. That's where my ancestors rest—father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather'.⁷³ In Plautus's *Mostellaria* (a story of a 'haunted house'), the slave Tranio, realizing that his demise looks imminent, asks: 'Anybody here want to make some easy money? Anybody ready to be crucified in my place today?... I'm offering a talent to anyone prepared to jump on a cross..., after that he can come and claim the money, cash on the nail!'⁷⁴ The pages of Plautus are full of such gallows humor.⁷⁵ Even more frequent are the passages in which slaves use the word

64 Josephus *Ant.* 19.94; Suetonius *Calig.* 57; Martial *De Spect.* 7; Juvenal 8.187–8; Tertullian *Adv. Val.* 14; cf. T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and his World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985) 183–98, 258–9.

65 For reconstruction of the plot, see H. Reich, *Der Mimus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1903) 564–6; Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles*, 110–11.

66 Josephus *Ant.* 19.94.

67 Martial *De Spect.* 7.

68 *POxy* 413, lines 123–4; cf. H. Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus. Dokumente zur Geschichte des antiken Volkstheaters* (Bremen: Schünemann, 1972) 94–5.

69 *POxy* 413, line 186; cf. Wiemken, *Der griechische Mimus*, 101.

70 Apuleius *Met.* 10.12; on the mimic elements in this scene, see J. Winkler, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991) 77–8.

71 E. Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1952).

72 Segal, *Roman Laughter*, 137–69.

73 Plautus *Miles Gloriosus* 372–3.

74 Plautus *Mostel.* 359–64; cf. J. Meggitt, 'Laughing and Dreaming at the Foot of the Cross: Context and Reception of a Religious Symbol', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Ethics, and Society* 1 (1996) 9–14.

75 E.g. *Miles* 539–40, 610–14; *Persa* 855–6; *Stichus* 625–6; *Asinaria* 314, 545–61; *Epidicus* 610–14.

'*crux*' in vulgar taunts, calling one another 'cross-meat' and 'cross-bird', or bidding one another to 'go be hanged!'⁷⁶

How deeply slaves lived in the shadow of the cross is illustrated by episodes from satires and novels. Horace criticizes a master who crucified his slave for finishing off a half-eaten plate of fish which he had been told to remove from the table.⁷⁷ In his novel, Petronius tells how one of Trimalchio's slaves was crucified for having cursed the soul of Caligula; the notice of his death is read out by a clerk from a long list of things that happened that day on Trimalchio's estate, such as the harvesting of wheat, and the breaking-in of oxen.⁷⁸ The novelist Chariton, who was probably writing in the middle of the first century CE,⁷⁹ gives a grim depiction of the crucifixion of sixteen slaves who were working on a chain gang in Caria. Shut up in a dark hut, under miserable conditions, the slaves broke their chains in the night and tried to escape, but failed because the dogs' barking gave them away. Chariton relates the outcome: 'Without even seeing them or hearing their defense, the master at once ordered the crucifixion of the sixteen men. They were brought out of the hut chained together at foot and neck, each carrying his cross'.⁸⁰ Juvenal describes a Roman matron blithely sending a slave to the cross, merely because she is of a humor to do so; when her husband asks what offense the slave has committed worthy of death, the lady replies that she has no reason, but, after all, a slave is not really a man.⁸¹

The omnipresence of the cross in popular literature portraying the lives of slaves stands in striking contrast to the social constraint upon discourse about the cross in the literature of the elite.⁸² Cicero is representative of his social class, when he insists, in a well-known passage of the *Pro Rabirio*, that 'the very word "cross" should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears... The mere mention of such a thing is shameful to a Roman citizen and a free man'.⁸³ The surviving literature illustrates how consistently members of the upper class adhered to this principle. There are no references to the cross in learned Roman writers such as Lucretius, Virgil, Statius, or Aulus Gellius;⁸⁴ and there is little or no mention of crucifixion in Greek writers like Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, Aelius Aristides, or Maximus of

76 E.g. *Aul.* 522; *Bacch.* 584, 902; *Cas.* 93, 416, 641, 977; *Persa* 795; *Captivi* 551, 563, 577, 600, 659; *Asin.* 940; *Cur.* 611, 693; *Menaech.* 915, 1017; *Mostel.* 1133; *Poen.* 271, 495, 511, 789, 1309.

77 Horace *Sat.* 1.3.80-3.

78 Petronius *Satyr.* 53.

79 B. P. Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989) 17.

80 Chariton 4.2; trans. in Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 67.

81 Juvenal 6.219-23.

82 M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 38-43.

83 Cicero *Pro Rabirio* 5.16.

84 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 38.

Tyre.⁸⁵ What is truly remarkable is the absence of the words *crux* and *patibulum* from the works of Caesar,⁸⁶ despite the fact that he is known to have used crucifixion as a punishment;⁸⁷ the same is true of the younger Pliny, who as governor of Bithynia must have condemned many to the cross.⁸⁸ Inevitably, there are references to crucifixion in Greek and Roman historians who recount wars and rebellions;⁸⁹ but even in such cases, there is reticence, and a tendency to portray crucifixion as a barbarian mode of execution.⁹⁰ It is clear that the rarity of references to crucifixion in canonical literature is not an historical accident, but a reflection of the social and aesthetic values of upper-class writers.⁹¹

What makes the silence of the upper class with respect to crucifixion more significant is the fact that the practice was so widespread in the Roman world. In speaking of the ubiquity of the cross, I do not have in mind the occasional use of crucifixion as the 'supreme penalty' (*summum supplicium*) in notorious cases of high treason,⁹² nor the more frequent use of crucifixion as a means of suppressing rebellious subjects in the provinces,⁹³ but rather the regular employment of the cross as a punishment for slaves in cities throughout the Roman Empire.⁹⁴ Just outside the Esquiline Gate at Rome, on the road to Tibur, was a horrific place where crosses were routinely set up for the punishment of slaves.⁹⁵ There a torture and execution service was operated by a group of funeral contractors who were open to business from private citizens and public authorities alike.⁹⁶ There slaves were flogged and crucified at a charge to their

85 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 77.

86 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 38.

87 Caesar *De Bello Hispaniensi* 20.5.

88 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 38.

89 E.g. Livy 30.43.13; Valerius Maximus 2.7.12; Appian *Bell. Civ.* 1.120; Strabo 3.4.18; Dio Cassius 49.12.4.

90 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 23.

91 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 38.

92 E.g. Cicero *In Verr.* 2.5.158–65; cf. P. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1970) 122–31.

93 E.g. Josephus *B.J.* 2.75, 241, 253, 306, 308; 3.321; 5.289, 449–51; *Ant.* 17.295; 20.129; cf. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 46–7.

94 J. Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1975) 49–50, 60, 86–90; K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978) 118–23; K. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1987) 113–37.

95 Plautus *Miles Gloriosus* 359–60; Tacitus *Ann.* 2.32.2; 15.60.1; *CIL* VI, 31577, 31615; R. Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (London: Macmillan, 1888) 64–7; Wiseman, *Catullus and his World*, 7–8.

96 O. F. Robinson, 'Slaves and the Criminal Law', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 98 (1981) 223–7; Wiseman, *Catullus and his World*, 7–8; K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 166.

masters of 4 *sesterces* per person.⁹⁷ Passing references in the satirists disclose aspects of the grisly scene: Varro mentions rotting corpses;⁹⁸ Horace speaks of whitened bones;⁹⁹ Juvenal describes the way in which the Esquiline vulture disposed of the bodies: 'The vulture hurries from dead cattle and dogs and crosses to bring some of the carrion to her offspring'.¹⁰⁰ An inscription from Puteoli confirms that such places of execution, with crosses and other instruments of torture, were found throughout Italy, and probably outside the gates of every large city in the Roman Empire.¹⁰¹ At these places of execution, it is impossible not to recognize the real reason for the silence of the upper class with respect to crucifixion: crucifixion was the 'slaves' punishment' (*servile supplicium*).¹⁰² One can still hear the tone of shock and revulsion in the voices of Roman writers of a certain class, when they speak of the exceptional circumstances under which the 'slaves' punishment' came to be inflicted upon Roman citizens and free men.¹⁰³

Following Badiou's suggestion to direct our attention to the mortal site from which new life is extracted, we have arrived at a place where we are able to look more deeply into the 'situated void' of Roman society. Now we can see that the cross was not merely a 'lacuna in the discourse' of the upper class, to use Giorgio Agamben's term,¹⁰⁴ but is perhaps better described as the specific, *material density* within the situated void around which Roman power was constructed. Indeed, the cross was not only the ominous specter around which the consciousness of the slave cringed, but because the cross was the evil instrument by which the legal institution of slavery was maintained, that extracted the surplus upon which the power of the ruling class depended, the cross may be identified as the dark, gravitational center which, whether recognized or repressed, allotted places to all those who lived within the socio-symbolic edifice of the Roman Empire, and compelled thought to consent to those places.

In my view, it was an historic moment when Paul, in the course of his correspondence with Corinth, began to articulate his gospel as a 'message about the cross' (1 Cor 1.18).¹⁰⁵ In Badiou's terms, Paul dares 'to name the situated void'

97 *L'année épigraphique* (1971) 88.2.10.

98 Varro *Ling. Lat.* 5.25.

99 Horace *Sat.* 1.8.8–13.

100 Juvenal 14.77–78.

101 *L'année épigraphique* (1971) 88 and 89; cf. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 54; Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 166.

102 W. L. Westermann, 'Sklaverei', *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* Suppl. VI, 980–81.

103 E.g. Livy 29.18.14; Valerius Maximus 2.7.12; Tacitus *Hist.* 4.11.3; cf. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 51 n. 1.

104 G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

105 The pre-Pauline kerygmatic formulae do not contain the word 'cross' at all. The formula preserved in 1 Cor 15.3 speaks of the death of Christ, but not of the *manner* of his death.

of that for which Christ was an event. Paul seizes upon the cruel and disgusting term which the educated elite of the Roman world least wanted to hear, and pronounces it with a vengeance. But what is surprising, from the point of view of Badiou's philosophy, is Paul's drastic *reduction* of the content of the gospel, which omits not only the details of Jesus' life (which never mattered to Paul in the first place),¹⁰⁶ but also, astonishingly, the resurrection! That this omission was conscious is demonstrated by Paul's repeated choice of the perfect participle, *estaurōmenos*, to describe more precisely the Christ whom he proclaims (1 Cor 1.23; 2.2): Paul insists that the continuing and present significance of the Christ, even after his death and resurrection, consists of nothing other than the fact that he *is the crucified*.¹⁰⁷ How can we understand this development in Paul's thinking? And what challenge does it pose to Badiou's understanding of the Resurrection as the archetypal 'truth-event'?

I would submit that it is no accident that this drastic constriction in the content of Paul's gospel is found in that portion of the writing known to us as 1 Corinthians where Paul champions the cause of the 'nothing and nobodies' against the destructive partisanship of the rich and the strong, a partisanship driven by their over-valuation of 'eloquent wisdom'.¹⁰⁸ Badiou rightly identifies as 'the most radical statement' in 1 Corinthians 1–4 the following: 'God has chosen the things that are not in order to bring to nothing those that are' (1 Cor 1.28).¹⁰⁹ But Badiou does not connect Paul's provocative assertion that God has chosen the nothings of the world with Paul's reduction of the content of the gospel to 'the message about the cross'. The truer Marxist, Paul claims that the purpose of God's intervention in history was not the liberation of a universal subject from the path of death, but rather the redemption of the many oppressed, whose identities are submerged in shame, and whose lives are in danger of disappearing, on account of the annihilating power of the cross.

I propose to appropriate two concepts from Walter Benjamin in an effort to understand how the *crucified* rather than the resurrected Messiah could be a vital rupture in the death-constrained existence of the oppressed. Benjamin suggests that the redemption of those whose lives are in danger of being forgotten takes place, paradoxically, through a process of *mortification* and *living-on*.¹¹⁰

In Paul's earliest epistle, 1 Thessalonians, both the noun and the verb are lacking. Cf. T. Heckel, 'Der Gekreuzigte bei Paulus', *BZ* 46 (2002) 194–5; Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 252–3.

106 2 Cor 5.16.

107 H.-W. Kuhn, 'Kreuz', *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 19 (1990) 720; Heckel, 'Der Gekreuzigte bei Paulus', 196–200.

108 1 Cor 1.17; Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 102–16, 147–60.

109 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 47.

110 Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', 253–63; A. Chowdhury, 'Memory, Modernity, Repetition: Walter Benjamin's History', *Telos* 143 (2008) 28–9.

Benjamin compares this process to the gluing together of the fragments of a broken vessel: the result does not constitute a new, seamless totality, but remains essentially fragmentary, a vessel of broken parts.¹¹¹ In his last essay, Benjamin describes the messianic event as a moment of 'arrest', a 'cessation of occurrences', accompanied by a 'shock', after which the struggling, oppressed worldlings are able to live on, in openness to further moments of immanent redemption, by dint of a 'weak messianic power'.¹¹² Applying these categories to Paul's argument in 1 Cor 1.26–31, we infer that the proclamation of the crucified Messiah summoned the weak and the low-born into the material density of the cross, where Christ's willingness to suffer the very death which threatened their existence became the resource for living-on in righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. This constant process of mortification and living-on is expounded by Paul in a crucial passage of the writing known to us as 2 Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in our body the mortification (*nekrōsis*) of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our body. For constantly we the living are being handed over into death on account of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4.7–11).

Later in the same epistle, Paul penetrates more deeply into the psychology of the one who experiences the shameful death of the Messiah: 'For the love of Christ constrains us, being convinced of this: that one died for all...' But notice that Paul does not continue as we might expect, 'so that all might live'; rather, Paul writes: 'one died for all, and *therefore all died*. And on behalf of all he died, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for the one who for their sake died and was raised' (2 Cor 5.14–15).¹¹³ In the operation of eventual grace, Paul decisively shifts the balance between death and resurrection in favor of death, not death as the mortal condition, but death as the self-contraction of the Messiah, on behalf of the oppressed.¹¹⁴

We may now attempt to imagine the day when members of the lower class—'Chloe's people' let us say—heard Paul's 'message about the cross', and were 'called' into the paradoxical experience of power in weakness, so that their lives

111 Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator', 258; cf. Paul de Man, 'Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', *Yale French Studies* 69 (1983) 43–4.

112 Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', Thesis XVII, 702–3.

113 See the comments on this text by R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976).

114 Compare Žižek's differentiation of the Lacanian subject from the subject as represented by Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, 152–61.

came to be characterized by a sense of justice, sanctity, and freedom (1 Cor 1.30). Paul makes it clear for whom his cross-gospel had this unexpected consequence: for the most part, they were members of the lower class, those who lacked education, wealth, and birth (1 Cor 1.26). It is at this point that failure to understand Paul's thought is most significant. Martin Hengel, the most diligent researcher of crucifixion in the ancient world, opines that, because the cross was such a horror to slaves and the poor, the message of the crucified Christ 'was hardly an attraction to the lower classes of Roman and Greek society'.¹¹⁵ Nothing could be farther from an adequate understanding of the psycho-social dynamic of Paul's gospel. In the message that the anointed one of God had died the contemptible death of a slave, slaves and the poor heard that they had been 'chosen' by God (1 Cor 1.27–28). The message that the Christ had shared the fate of a piece of human garbage, one of those whom life had demolished, and who had touched bottom—this message was a power capable of rescuing those who trusted in it from despair over the nothingness of their lives (1 Cor 1.18b, 21b, 24), so that, even if they lived in the shadow of the cross and died a bit every day, and even if the cross should be their tomb, as it was of their fathers and grandfathers, its power over them was broken and undone, so that they could live-on with value and meaning and love and hope, because the one who had died in this contemptible way was the anointed one of God.

Badiou's most significant failure to understand Paul occurs at this point. Badiou asserts that 'for Paul...the event is not death, it is resurrection'.¹¹⁶ He reiterates, 'Death...cannot be constitutive of the Christ-event... What constitutes an event in Christ is exclusively the Resurrection'.¹¹⁷ Thus, Badiou insists that Jesus' death does not belong to the operation of evental grace, but is only 'an operation that immanentizes the evental site, while resurrection is the event as such'.¹¹⁸ Badiou is led to this disjunction between Christ's death and resurrection by his desire to 'de-dialecticize' the Christ-event, to liberate the Christ-event from its Hegelian captivity, in which resurrection is nothing but the negation of the negation, a moment in the self-realization of the Absolute.¹¹⁹ Badiou seeks to 'avoid the pitfalls of the morbid masochist morality that perceives suffering as inherently redeeming'.¹²⁰ But is Badiou right to deny that Paul's thought is dialectical? Badiou insists, 'resurrection...comes forth *out from* the power of death, not through its negation'.¹²¹ The emergence of new life is not a dialectical outcome of the dense materiality of death-in-life; rather, 'the sudden emergence of new life

115 Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 61–2.

116 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 66.

117 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 68.

118 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70.

119 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 65–6.

120 Žižek, 'Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', 146.

121 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 73.

remains of the order of grace'.¹²² Surely, Badiou is right in insisting that one who is dead in sin cannot give to himself the possibility of new possibilities. 'Something must *happen*, something beyond one's own control, calculations, and labor, something that comes from the locus of the Other'.¹²³ But for Paul, the Event which *happens*, and which faith declares, consists of Christ's death *and* resurrection. Again, we may find ourselves asking whether a more instructive analogue to Paul's proclamation of the Christ-event as *death and resurrection* is not to be found in Walter Benjamin's notion of 'dialectics at a standstill': at the moment when one hears the word of the 'crucified Christ', the constant motion of positing the self in a dialectic between law and desire is arrested, and sudden insight into the death of the Messiah on behalf of all ignites a revolutionary upsurge of life.¹²⁴

Badiou's answer to the question 'Why Christ must die, and to what end Paul expands on the symbol of the cross?'¹²⁵ falsifies the argument of Romans 5. Badiou explains that 'Christ dies simply in order to attest that it well and truly is a man who, capable of inventing death, is also capable of inventing life'.¹²⁶ But in Romans 5, Paul argues that Jesus died, not merely to manifest his share in the universal human condition, but to commend God's love towards the *weak* and *ungodly* (Rom 5.6–7). And Paul asserts that this hitherto unimaginable 'act of righteousness', namely, Jesus' death for the weak and sinners, *is* the free gift of grace, the event that reverses the consequences of Adam's sin and ends the reign of death (Rom 5.12–21). Badiou's interpretation of Romans 6 seems a willful misreading: 'death counts for nothing in the operation of salvation'.¹²⁷ But Paul describes the saving event as 'being united with Christ in a death like his...Our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is free from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him' (Rom 6.5–8).

As a result of Badiou's misrepresentation of the Christ-event, as consisting only of resurrection without death, Paul becomes Nietzschean, and the new man in Christ becomes the Overman.¹²⁸ Badiou asserts: 'Both [Paul and Nietzsche] share the same desire to initiate a new epoch in human history, the same conviction that man can and must be overcome'.¹²⁹ How different is

122 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 71.

123 Santner, 'Miracles Happen', 123.

124 See the analysis of the relevant passages in Benjamin's 'Theses' and the 'Arcades Project' by Rolf Tiedemann, 'Dialectics at a Standstill', *Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004) 929–45.

125 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 68.

126 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 69.

127 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70.

128 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 71.

129 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 72.

Paul's final exhortation to Christians in the tenements of Trastevere who, beyond honor and shame, beyond the holy and the profane, beyond all superego inculpation, are enjoined to 'enslave' themselves to the Messiah and seek to please not themselves but one another, the powerful ones being obligated to 'bear the weaknesses of the powerless ones' (Rom 14.18; 15.1-3).¹³⁰

¹³⁰ See the very insightful commentary on these passages by Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 829-85.