

## Fidelity to the Event in Roberto Bolaño's "Laberinto"

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Roberto Bolaño's *El secreto del mal* is a compilation of texts published posthumously. As Ignacio Echevarría explains in an introduction to this work, this compilation is based on three files containing numerous texts that were found on Bolaño's computer after his death. Most of the texts selected by Echevarría are short stories: several of them are unfinished or have inconclusive endings. It cannot be established with certainty when these texts were written, as none of them was dated by the author. One story—"Sabios de Sodoma"—blends essayistic and narrative content. Other stories include autobiographical content. There are also two conference papers. Echevarría explains this selection of heterogeneous texts by noting "la acusada tendencia de Roberto Bolaño a intercalar en sus últimas colecciones de relatos textos de naturaleza no narrativa, con el evidente propósito de confundir las fronteras del género, y fecundarlo" (9-10).

At twenty-five pages in length, "Laberinto" is the longest story in *El secreto del mal*. Based on a description of a photograph taken in Paris around 1977, it is reminiscent, on a smaller scale, of Camilo José Cela's novel *La colmena* (1951), consisting of diverse narrative sequences focused on the characters appearing in the photograph. The narrator's use of specific details inside or outside of the photograph as the starting point for imagining these sequences is reminiscent of Julio Cortázar's story "Las babas del diablo" (1959).

In his book *The Century*, Alain Badiou considers the last twenty years of the twentieth century to be a time of counter-revolutionary political resurgence "fallaciously in thrall to the idea that nothing begins or will ever begin" (140). I will demonstrate how "Laberinto" contradicts Badiou's characterization of this period of time after 1980 by representing the consequences of a European Court of Justice case-law as a progressive political development whose effects were to be acknowledged in the 1980s and beyond. To paraphrase Badiou negatively, "Laberinto" is a text in thrall to the idea that something begins. The way in which this is expressed in Bolaño's text is relevant to Badiou's theory of "the event," Lacanian theory, and to an understanding of the role of law in the construction of the European Union. Throughout "Laberinto," repeated references to the void suggest the proximity of an event: a possibility that becomes more certain as the text progresses. However, it will be demonstrated that fidelity to the event in question does not imply a political stance stereotypically associated with Badiou (that is, an ultra-leftist distance from the established order), but rather working within the state to achieve progressive goals. In this sense, "Laberinto" differs from *Estrella distante* (1996), a Bolaño novel that represents

the political implications of a renewal of leftist identity in terms of Marxism-Leninism (Cacheiro 145).

Badiou defines an event as follows: “An event—of a given evental site ... —is the multiple composed of: on the one hand, elements of the site; and on the other hand, itself (the event)” (*Being* 506). In order to understand in what sense “multiple” is used in this quotation, it is necessary to refer to the ontological concept of the one. For Badiou, the one exists solely as a mathematical operation exemplified by counting the elements of a set as belonging to a set, and not as presentation: “the one *is not*” (23; emphasis in the original). Thus the world consists of multiples, that is, multiplicities of multiplicities that are infinitely decomposable. In order for an event to be classified as such, a subject must intervene: “I term *intervention* any procedure by which a multiple is recognized as an event... An intervention consists ... in identifying that there has been some undecidability, and in deciding its belonging to the situation” (202). Initially the event is not presented in the situation: it is something new in the sense that its consequences are not fully recognized or developed. This does not prevent the subject from deciding that it belongs to the situation and enacting a conscious or unconscious fidelity to the event, a process that consists of deciding which multiples among the sets of presented multiples depend on the event, and sustaining their consequences (232). For Badiou, to sustain these consequences is also to affirm the truth of the event. Here it is important to clarify that, in his parlance, “a truth is, first of all, something new,” distinguished from knowledge as repetition through its supplementation by an event (“Event”). The philosophical problem pertaining to truth is the problem of “its appearance and its becoming” (“Event”). A correct interpretation of the faithful subject’s course of action within a socio-historical situation presents the outcome of a wager that the event took place based on a process of the subject’s verification of the outcome of that wager as truth. For Badiou, love, art, science, and politics are capable of generating truth procedures, which is to say that these four fields can generate events linked to indiscernibles not presented in the situation. “All sorts of other practices—possibly respectable, such as commerce for example, and all the different forms of the ‘service of goods,’ which are intricately in knowledge to various degrees—do not generate truths” (*Being* 340).

If an event has occurred, history validates it retroactively by confirming that it took place. Given that an event consists of all the elements belonging to the evental site plus the event itself, this decision does not change the ontological status of the event. For example, the French Revolution

is more than the innumerable list of happenings that occurred in France between 1789 and 1794. It is rather something bound up in this assemblage, which the term “French Revolution” specifically names. But when we try to specify what this extra something is, we find ourselves again confronted only with the assemblage of happenings—plus that elusive addendum. The Revolution is not simply the narrative of what occurred, but it cannot be filtered out from this narrative either. (Dews)

The Revolution as such has no objective existence; it only “emerges along with the subject who recognizes it, or who nominates it *as an event*” (Dews).

“Laberinto” is about a photograph that takes on a life of its own. Neither the location nor the identity of the narrator is specified, and he does not intervene directly in the

fictional events he describes. These events involve relationships between eight people sitting around a table in the aforementioned photograph, mostly intellectuals that correspond to real people who will be referred to by name in this essay. Some of them, such as Julia Kristeva, are described as looking at things outside of the borders of the photograph. Kristeva's gaze, described as "la más rara de todas, aparentemente se dirige hacia la cámara pero en realidad está mirando . . . el espacio vacío que media entre la cadera del fotógrafo y la nada" (70-71). "[E]l vacío" is the first of several references to the void. Another example is when a narrative sequence about one of the characters "se acaba o se inmoviliza en un vacío en el que las apariencias poco a poco se difuminan" (73). Finally, there is the following description: "Y entonces la noche acaba (o la parte de la noche pequeña, la parte manejable de la noche, acaba)" (78), the unmanageable part being the void. Unmanageable as it is, this is the irreducible emptiness at whose border the event takes place. The association of the event with the void is due to the event being an unrepresented multiple in relation to the situation in question (Badiou, *Being* 175), in this case, represented by the photograph. An event that hints at its existence in a dream in which J.-J. Goux<sup>1</sup> hears a voice that warns him about a demon (75) through an unusual noise in a parking garage (77) and by means of an unspecified object beyond the borders of the photograph that provokes reactions of recognition and insecurity in M.-Th. Réveillé<sup>2</sup> and C. Devade<sup>3</sup> (75-76). This object later becomes a Central American in the imagination of the narrator (79), and he is described as a young intellectual investigating the French literary scene.

The Central American visits the editorial office of *Tel quel* and talks with Marc Devade and Phillippe Sollers.<sup>4</sup> During his visit, which is possibly motivated by the desire to be published ("tal vez se trata de un joven escritor que en alguna ocasión intentó publicar sus textos en *Tel Quel*" [79]), the first person to greet him is Devade (in real life, a painter and a member of the editorial board of *Tel quel*). As they climb the stairs, the Central American sweats profusely: a manifestation of an anxiety motivated by the desire to please. The market is the formal result of the utilization of this desire for the practical purpose of connecting with the desire of the customer. The identification of the Central American's desire with this desire takes place by means of Devade, who precedes him "hablando de

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<sup>1</sup> In "Laberinto," the narrator speculates that J.-J. Goux "[p]robablemente se llama Jean-Jacques" (66), but the J.-J. Goux in the photograph on which "Laberinto" is based is Jean-Joseph Goux, a former member of the *Tel quel* group who is currently a professor emeritus of French Studies at Rice University.

<sup>2</sup> The narrator subsequently refers to M.-Th. Réveillé as Marie-Thérèse Réveillé. She is Pierre Guyotat's lover in "Laberinto."

<sup>3</sup> The narrator subsequently refers to C. Devade as Carla Devade. She is identified as Marc Devade's wife in "Laberinto" (84).

<sup>4</sup> Sollers, a French writer and critic, was editor in chief of the avant-garde journal *Tel quel*. According to Jeffrey Mehlman, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Tel quel* was instrumental in creating the impression that "[Jacques] Derrida was *the* French thinker to be reckoned with" (745; emphasis in the original). *Tel quel's* Maoist phase took place between 1971 and 1974. During this time, Sollers—a convert to Maoism—broke with Derrida on political grounds (746). In 1974, editorials criticizing Derrida and Louis Althusser for proposing philosophies of idealism were published in *Tel quel* (French and Lack, "Chronological" 15). The break with Derrida resonates in "Laberinto" in that Sollers's interview with the Central American represents a rejection of the cultural/intellectual progeny of Poststructuralism as embodied in the Central American's postmodern worship of difference.

cualquier cosa, del tiempo, del dinero, de trabajos ineludibles, con esa elegancia que sólo algunos franceses parecen poseer” (80). Devade is an elegantly self-referential literary manifestation of Lacan’s maxim “man’s desire is the desire of the Other”; a desire which produces a ceaseless innovation formally related to Devade’s topic-surfing avoidance of dwelling on anything for too long that could be construed as boring or cause his guest to be uncomfortable. The Central American’s interview with Sollers, framed by his flattering appraisal of the latter as “uno de los grandes genios del siglo” (80) and “de la belleza y de la gracia sin par de la mujer francesa” (82), parodies Devade’s mercurial volubility, as in talking about the French literary establishment, he switches from Kristeva to Marcelin Pleyne and then to Denis Roche. This interview, which Sollers finds boring, condenses flattery with a parody of market innovation as literary analysis that reveals the repressed desire animating the postmodernist worship of difference as the desire to gratify capital.

The narrator’s dislike of the Central American is evident in the description of his awkward interaction with Sollers. Nevertheless, there is more than dislike here. As the Central American is leaving the office, he runs into Réveillée, and she notices, gazing into his eyes, “un pozo de horror y de miedo insoportables” (82). The source of this horror becomes clearer a few pages later when the narrator speculates that the Central American could become a killer: “Este Pol Pot no matará a nadie en París. Lo más probable . . . es que de vuelta en Tegucigalpa o en San Salvador se dedique a la docencia universitaria” (85-86). A link to the United States is established when this individual is compared to Pol Pot. As Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky have observed, there is a relationship of cause and effect between the genocidal effect of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia and Pol Pot’s genocide (264). The connection to the United States is reinforced by the selection of countries to which the Central American could be returning. The subjugation of Honduras to the United States climaxed in the 1980s when the “central feature” of its national life became its occupation as “Washington’s forward military base” in Central America (Dunkerley 521). Given the history of El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s—including the involvement American-trained troops in human rights abuses—becoming a killer is more likely for the Central American were he to return to that country (401). The association of the desire to please capital with the image of the university professor as killer in the context of indirect reference to American foreign policy inserts the text into a set that includes the United States. Within this set, the combination of the desire to please capital with the brutality of the killer professor is sublimated in the day-to-day functioning of the university discourse as a vehicle for capitalist recuperation, as shown by a fascination with deconstruction in literature departments in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, which in turn led to the postmodernist conception of the subject as an effect of a market-based clash of discourses. In short, a predominance of the symbolic order over the Lacanian real that, for example, Ed Pluth considers to be characteristic of Judith Butler’s work (148).

According to Lacan, the acquisition of language by means of entrance into the symbolic order separates the subject from a state of nature, posited by the subject as a time of pre-symbolic enjoyment (henceforth experienced as lacking). In Lacanian terms, this lack is the void of the real as seen from the perspective of the symbolic order (*Ethics* 120-21). The symbolic emerges from the “primordial Real,” (131) which, according to Lorenzo Chiesa, is the point of creation *ex nihilo* of the signifier and history: “. . . the points of creation and destruction (of history) are a strict logical ‘necessity,’ but they can be posited only through

either retroactive or anticipatory mythical speculations" (138). The real of history (the event) can never be posited in its unconscious actuality. In "Laberinto," the killer professor is a symptom of the postmodern attempt to obliterate the unconscious through a repression of the real resulting from symbolic identification with the Other, a repression that conforms to a tendency whose *telos* is historical amnesia and the production of the stupefied, ideologically constrained subject of Postmodernism.

The event becomes gradually evident in a series of dreams. In one of these, Sollers dreams he is walking on a beach in Brittany accompanied by a scientist who has the key to the destruction of the world (84-85). Suddenly he becomes aware that he is the scientist and that the person walking with him is an assassin.<sup>5</sup> This identification with the ability to destroy the world is equivalent to the assumption of the death drive, which can also lead to creativity, since it necessitates a new beginning. The assassin is the Central American who, as we have seen, functions as a symptom of the desire to gratify capital, but also of proximity to the void, which in Sollers's dream is associated with something new by means of the death drive. The night before teaching a seminar, Kristeva dreams about a German town where she participated in another one:

... soñará con un pueblito alemán en donde hace años participó en un seminario y verá las calles del pueblito, limpias y vacías, y se sentará en una plaza minúscula pero llena de plantas y árboles, y cerrará los ojos y escuchará el lejano piar de un pájaro solitario y se preguntará si el pájaro está en una jaula o es un pájaro silvestre, y sentirá sobre el cuello y el rostro ... una brisa perfecta, perfumada con lavanda y azahar, y entonces recordará su seminario y mirará la hora pero su reloj de pulsera se habrá detenido. (85)

The interposition between the seminars—one in the past and another one that will take place in Paris—of a German town combines national difference with sameness (the repetition of seminars and time as represented by the stopped wristwatch) and is a reminder of the European Union—known as the European Community in the 1970s—in the sense of the inclusion of national difference within the same. Kristeva wonders if the bird she is listening to is free or in a cage. This question of freedom should be considered in relation to critical discourse, since by way of the seminars, this is a subject of the dream. By means of the Central American, postmodernist critical discourse is represented in "Laberinto" as not free due to subjection to the ideological constraints of capitalism. In contrast, Kristeva's discourse is associated with freedom. This is understandable, as in her discourse, she integrates Lacan's teaching with regards to the impact of desire on the divided subject in a way that is incompatible with ideological constraint. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), she explores the connection between writing and bodily drives expressed as affects, concluding that the disruption of the symbolic order by unconscious drive subverts ideological repression:

In other words, poetic language and mimesis may appear as an argument complicitous with dogma—we are familiar with religion's use of them—but they may also set in motion what

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<sup>5</sup> The conflation of Sollers with a scientist possibly alludes to scientificity as a characteristic of *Tel quel's* discourse, a topic discussed in Patrick French's and Roland-François Lack's introduction to *The Tel quel Reader*, where it is affirmed that the emulation of science "functions in relation to ... what Foucault called 'initiatory' discursive practices, the discourses founded by Marx, Freud and Saussure" (Introduction 3).

dogma represses. In so doing, they no longer act as instinctual floodgates within the enclosure of the sacred and become instead protestors against its posturing. And thus, its complexity unfolded by its practices, the signifying process joins social revolution. (112)

Kristeva relates “the empty soul or psyche of the postmodern world” to a disconnect between words and affects (Oliver 561). The relationship between a project involving the liberation of human potential by reconnecting affect to language, and the opposition of a wild bird to a caged bird in the fictional Kristeva’s dream is clear, but a more specific political message is implied by the content of this dream. The parallel between Kristeva and the bird is clear: she is sitting in a “plaza minúscula” which brings the image of a birdcage to mind. This would seem to imply captivity. The fact that the plaza is not really a cage and the imaginative freedom represented by “una brisa perfecta, perfumada con lavanda y azahar” (as neither flower is characteristic of Germany, particularly the orange blossom, which is more typical of Spain) tips the balance in favor of liberty. As to the question of political content, the juxtaposition of Kristeva’s work with freedom in the context of seminars in Germany and France, sensory experiences characteristic of southern Europe, and the theme of civic order represented by clean streets and a garden suggests that a correlative of this freedom corresponds to a pre-2007 idealized conception of European unification as conducive to political freedom.

Bolaño, who died in 2003, did not live to see the current (2013) socio-economic crisis of the European Union. In terms of the history of the European Community, the mention of a stopped watch can be interpreted as referring to the “Eurosclerosis” of the 1970s, that is, to the political paralysis of a decade “dominated by member-state politics, a policy-making system that was paralyzed by its own complexity and the inability of the main actors to develop sufficient momentum to launch new policy initiatives” (Staab 15). The association of orange blossoms with Spain suggests a connection to 1986, the year that country was admitted into the European Community. The signing of the Single European Act by member states of the European Community in 1986 gave a renewed impetus to European political integration that would result in the Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht Treaty) in 1992 (18-21). The past is represented by the location of seminars in Germany and France: two countries that formed the nucleus of the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951, and the first organization in a series of supranational organizations that culminated in the European Union.

With the present taken as corresponding to the 1970s, Kristeva’s dream condenses the past, present, and future of the European Community within the context of European unification as productive of a community conducive to a non-repressive academic discourse and political freedom. In other words, she is represented as becoming subjectivized by means of supporting the consequences of a political process (a support embodied by the metonymy of an imaginative freedom—“una brisa perfecta”—that includes political freedom as the outcome of a choice between captivity and freedom), which formally complements Badiou’s concept of subjectivization by means of fidelity to an event. If proximity to the void in Sollers’s dream is proximity to that event, showing that this undecidability belongs to the situation will involve showing that a form of “the service of goods” that is “intricated in knowledge” (the European Community) generates a truth. This is a contradictory proposition according to Badiou (*Being* 340-41), but one that, for

Oliver Feltham, who describes the eventual site as “an intersection of heterogeneous situations” (99), should not prevent this determination from taking place.

To name the event in “Laberinto,” the reader must look elsewhere besides Kristeva’s dream. This is to be expected, given that “*in order for the causality of lack to exert itself, all terms must be split*” (Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* 71; emphasis in original). That is to say, the absent cause of the event produces a series of traces scattered throughout the structure under consideration (in this case, a text). Some of these have already been discussed such as the proximity of the void in Sollers’s dream and subtle allusions to the history of the European Union mediated by the event in Kristeva’s dream. Other examples are provided by the closing lines of “Laberinto,” as Jacques Henric (in real life, a writer and a member of the French Communist Party) walks in a very dark indoor parking lot (“párking oscuro”): “. . . ahora la oscuridad le parece hermética como un ataúd vacío en el fondo de una cripta” (89). At first, he is apprehensive, but fear gives way to serenity as he recollects what took place that day:

Rememora a Guyotat, a quien admira secretamente, cortejando sin tapujos a la pequeña Carla. Los ve sonreír una vez más y luego los ve alejarse por una calle en donde las luces amarillas se quiebran y se recomponen a ráfagas, sin ningún orden aparente, aunque Henric, en su fuero interno, sabe que todo obedece a algo, . . . que lo gratuito se da muy raras veces en la naturaleza humana. Se lleva una mano a la bragueta. Ese movimiento, el primero que hace, lo sobresalta. Está empalmado y sin embargo no siente ninguna clase de excitación sexual. (89)

In “Laberinto,” Carla Devade has an affair with the writer Guyotat, a member of the *Tel quel* group. As Henric meditates on love (for Badiou one of the four fields capable of generating events linked to truth procedures), anxiety is trumped by courage. Fear of the void is replaced by the security of being able to master the disruptiveness of the advent of the real, a security produced by the conviction “en su fuero interno” that the apparently disordered street lamps follow (“obedecen”), like everything else, a non-apparent (indiscernible) order. A meaning of *fuero* is a compilation of laws (“Fuero,” def. 3).

Another indication that some kind of legal order is involved is provided by the closing sentence, where Henric notices that he has an erection, but does not feel sexually excited. An erection without sexual excitation is akin to the Lacanian phallus, which is “as symbolic object +/- *par excellence*, always an object that lacks (something)” (Chiesa 88). As the symbol of the differentiability proper to the symbolic order, the phallus at once signifies the lack of the real and the transcendent law of symbolic castration in its role as the signified of the Name-of-the-Father, the signifier that substitutes for the Desire-of-the-Mother during the Oedipus complex (88-92).

A Lacanian interpretation of Henric’s erection has a role to play in this reading of “Laberinto,” but of more immediate concern is the likelihood that the law in question names the event. That it pertains to the European Union is suggested by the unconsciously anachronistic content of the passage under consideration as it relates to disorder. The signifiers *Jacques Henric* and *párking oscuro*, which occur in the sentence immediately preceding the passage quoted above, contain the following letters: *a, u, e, e, n, i, p, r, n, o, u, o*. These letters can be rearranged to form *Unión Europea*, the current name of the European Community. When they are arranged in this manner, they can be used to solve

the puzzle hinted at by the apparently disordered street lamps in the following paragraph. In other words, there is an order underlying the apparent disorder: these lamps represent the countries of European Union. By referring to the European Union in the proximity of the void, and to the faithful subject (confident in the existence of an underlying legal order as a truth in relation to the European Union), the signifiers *parking oscuro* and *Jacques Henric* determine the legal order of the European Union as the eventual site in "Laberinto." Given that the faithful subject represents the law in relation to the European Union as a truth corresponding to the event, this suggests that the name of the event corresponds to a law or legal ruling.

There is no need to speculate on what this name is because it is inscribed in Bolaño's text in the same way as *Unión Europea*: that is to say, unconsciously. It was noted previously that the combination of *Jacques Henric* and *párking oscuro* contains letters that spell *Unión Europea*. If *Carla Devade*, the name of the woman Henric is thinking about, is added to this combination, and this addition is represented by an ampersand, the letters contained in the combination of these signifiers (*a, e, s, n, n, g, o, o, l, d, v*), can be rearranged to form *Van Gend & Loos*, which is the name of a Dutch postal and transportation company that is no longer in business. More to the point, this name refers to *Van Gend & Loos v. Netherlands Inland Revenue Administration*, a landmark 1963 decision of the European Court of Justice (*Van Gend*). *Van Gend en Loos* established the principle of direct effect for European Union law, according to which its provisions created individual rights that the courts of European Union member states are bound to recognize and reinforce (McCormick 175).

Among Europe's foundational myths, *Van Gend en Loos* and *Costa v ENEL* [a 1964 decision of the European Court of Justice that reaffirmed the supremacy of European Community law] ... can easily claim a very special position. ... [T]hese two judgments stand as a unique moment of revelation of Europe's nature (a unified legal order where EC norms have direct effect and prevail over national norms) and future (a process of Europeanisation through case-law). (Vauchez 1)

Antoine Vauchez considers that one reason case-law became a principal force producing Europeanization is that "in the context of inter-governmental rivalries in Brussels, EC] case-law was regarded as a more tangible and lasting form of European integration. ... [T]he EC] appeared to be available to all Euro-concerned interests (be they expressed by individuals, interest groups, companies, etc)" (24). According to Karen J. Alter, as the supremacy of European Community law over national law became accepted as national doctrine, the European Court of Justice became more willing to make "substantive rulings affecting important state interests," such as the 1990 *Barber v. Guardian Group* ruling in which the European Court of Justice "forced the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher to equalize its retirement age for men and women" ("European Court and Legal Integration" 34). In the European Union, private citizens can invoke European law in national courts to challenge national law. By means of the European Union law's preliminary ruling mechanism, these courts have the option to refer cases to the European Court of Justice for a final determination of the case in question (Article 177 of the EEC Treaty): a formal equality of rights and privileges that suggests the viability of the European Court of Justice as a democratic institution. This viability is the subject of Quoc Loc Hong's article on



constitutional review in the European Union, in which he argues that “the ECJ’s competence to review and invalidate legislation is, in fact, indispensable for the democratic legitimacy of the EU’s legal system as a whole” (695), given, in the limit case which proves the point, the role of constitutional judges as protectors “of permanent minorities, that is to say, minorities whose political agendas are so ‘different’ from the rest of society ‘that they are virtually excluded from all attempts at coalition building’” (702). The conception of constitutional judges as essential participants in the process of determining the democratic viability of a polity can serve to link Kristeva’s dream, in which the European Community is associated with freedom, with the specification in Henric’s dream (through reference to *Van Gend en Loos*) of the supremacy of European Union law as interpreted by the European Court of Justice (an institutional determinant of that freedom).

The relationship of the law to an event is a topic explored by Badiou in “Meditation Thirty-Two” of *Being and Event*, which is based on a reading of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. Rousseau distinguishes between decrees pertaining to particular objects, such as those that create privileges for specific individuals, and laws, which always consider “subjects collectively and actions abstractly, never an individual person or a particular action” (34). For Rousseau, the law is a manifestation of the “general will,” (34) which, in Badiou’s reading, is “the operator of fidelity which directs a generic procedure” (*Being* 346):<sup>6</sup>

In truth, the pact is nothing other than *the self-belonging of the body politic to the multiple that it is*, as founding event. “General will” names the durable truth of this self-belonging: “The body politic . . . since it owes its being solely to the sanctity of the contract, can never obligate itself . . . to do anything that detracts from that primitive act . . . To violate the act by which it exists would be to annihilate itself. . . .” (346; emphasis in the original)

Equality is what the people have in common in their dual role as sovereign and subject in relation to the law: “General will never considers an individual nor a particular action. *It is therefore tied to the indiscernible*” (347; emphasis in original). Thus, as a declaration of the general will, law is tied to an indiscernible that “refers back to the eventual character of political creation” (347).

Hong relocates the source of law’s legitimacy from the traditional Rousseauian ideal of popular self-legislation at the national level to the liberation of law subjects, as manifested in the opportunity provided to outvoted minority members to liberate themselves from unwanted laws by means of a transnational court (712). A lower level of reciprocal solidarity is still a form of reciprocal solidarity, and is in this case—in my opinion—subject to social contract theory. Here the contract would be the self-belonging of a body politic consisting of citizens of the diverse nations comprising the European Union to the multiple that it is, not as a founding event, but as an effect of *Van Gend en Loos*. As case-law that is also a declaration of the general will affirming that European Union law confers rights and obligations to the population of the European Union that member states are obligated to recognize and reinforce, regardless of the individual or action involved. It is tied to an indiscernible that “refers back to the eventual character of political creation” (Badiou, *Being*

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<sup>6</sup> A generic procedure consists of an investigation of the terms of the situation with the goal of grouping together those that are positively connected to the event (Badiou, *Being* 335).

347). However, in this case, the law names the event: a reflexivity experienced by the subject as “a minimal difference” (Žižek) between a reductionist limitation of *Van Gend en Loos* to law and its status as an event. This difference should be understood according to Žižek’s conception of “the parallax gap” as the result of a subjective shift between different perspectives due to libidinal investment by the subject in an object (in this case, the event as productive of the faithful subject’s lifeworld). This subjective shift divides the object from itself (*Parallax* 17-18): an investment of a type that will become evident upon further analysis of Kristeva’s dream.

The supernumerary multiple named *Van Gend en Loos* is something composed of this case-law and contingent factors not evident when it was promulgated. For example, its subjectivization at the national level of the lower-court judiciary that used the preliminary ruling mechanism as a means of asserting the prerogatives of lower courts vis-à-vis higher courts by referring cases directly to the European Court of Justice for a final determination (Alter, “European Court’s Political Power” 99-101). This transformation in the role of the lower courts would figure positively in an inquiry classifying multiples connected to the name of the event. According to Badiou, these multiples cannot be “determinant of the encyclopaedia” (that is, knowledge), because that would negate their condition as truth connected to the event: “. . . the faithful procedure is random, and in no way predetermined by knowledge” (*Being* 337). The political power of the European Court of Justice—as exemplified by the transformation of the role of national courts in the European Union—was not predetermined knowledge in the aftermath of *Van Gend en Loos*. In the 1960s, the decade in which this ruling was promulgated, the court was relatively weak politically (Alter, “European Court and Legal Integration” 33-34). Thus, a faithful procedure seeking to connect the aforementioned transformation to an event at the time the European Court of Justice’s political power started to become evident in the 1970s would be “random” in the sense of not being foreseen or foretold in advance. Similarly, in “Laberinto,” Kristeva’s dream and the conclusion in the parking garage are examples of multiples positively connected to the event: seemingly disparate textual components whose interrelatedness—unclassified by knowledge—is demonstrated by means of reference to the event.

Returning to Henric’s erection in the last sentence of “Laberinto,” its relationship to the Lacanian concept of the phallus has already been noted. The relevance of this relationship to a reading of “Laberinto” becomes evident by juxtaposing the parking garage episode with Kristeva’s dream and describing the relationship between these episodes in terms of Lacan’s formula of the master’s discourse from seminar 17, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*:

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{S1} \rightarrow \underline{S2} \\ \$ \quad a \end{array}$$

The following analysis owes much to Alenka Zupančič’s discussion of the master’s discourse in an essay on seminar 17. S1, the master signifier, corresponds to the phallus represented by Henric’s erection, an appropriate signifier for an event named after a case-law. Henric is the divided subject \$, who is symbolically castrated and determined by S1 (a determination which is an ideological consequence of fidelity to the event). Kristeva corresponds to S2, the place of the other signifying the conjunction of knowledge that binds

with the master signifier and work (Zupančič 163). *Objet a* corresponds to a residue left over by the subject's loss of *jouissance* (a form of enjoyment associated with the real) upon entry into the symbolic order. In seminar 17, Lacan describes this residue or waste product as "surplus *jouissance*": a byproduct of the process of signification in which—according to Lacan's definition of the signifier—the signifier "represents a subject to another signifier" (19-20). Throughout seminar 17, Lacan often poses equivalence between work and enjoyment based on a conception of work as a signifying process (Zupančič 162). In the subject, the repetitive oscillation between work-related signifying processes by means of the signifier and the desire for *jouissance* occasioned by this immersion in the symbolic order leaves *objet a* as its residue, thus tying the signifier to the desire for *jouissance*, which is in itself a form of *jouissance*. Kristeva's dream (85) includes the manifest content of public space, academic work, and the theme of liberty. These are presented in the context of a sense of pleasure that pervades the dream and culminates with the caressing lavender and orange-blossom scented breeze. It is at this point that she remembers her seminar (that is to say, her work). Before this, the following takes place: she hears the chirping of a bird and feels the aforementioned breeze. The chirping corresponds to *objet a* in its manifestation as voice, and the breeze—to the extent that a lavender and orange-blossom scented breeze in Germany gives form to an impossibility that distinguishes *jouissance* from pleasure—is the *jouissance* corresponding to *objet a*. The preceding sequence can be understood retroactively as a byproduct of the recollection of work. That is, an instance of repetition whereby the subject moves between *jouissance* and that which occasions it: the immersion in work-related signifiers. The latent content of Kristeva's dream signifies that the consequences of fidelity to the event are not the conversion by capital of surplus *jouissance* into surplus labor or exchange value in the form of consumer products, but rather the existence of surplus *jouissance* as an indicator of satisfying work on a continuum that includes political freedom and public space as a positive image of the commons. Given that for the subject this continuum is predicated on fidelity to the event, the existence of this *jouissance* is also an indicator of the subject's libidinal investment in the event.

The master's discourse foregrounds the role of ideology in the formation of the subject. There are repressive ideologies, such as anti-Semitism or hetero-normativity, but ideology can also serve a non-repressive function. Žižek provides a pertinent example of how master signifiers can determine the horizon of totality of an ideological field in a non-repressive manner. He describes the Laclau/Mouffe project of radical democracy as

... an articulation of particular struggles (for peace, ecology, feminism, human rights, and so on), none of which pretends to be ... "the true Meaning" of all the others; but the title "radical democracy" itself indicates how the very possibility of their articulation implies the "nodal," determining role of a certain struggle which, precisely as a particular struggle, outlines the horizon of all the other struggles. (*Sublime Object* 88)

The more determinant this role is, the less repressive it becomes: "The dialectical paradox lies in the fact that the particular struggle playing a hegemonic role, far from enforcing a violent suppression of the differences, opens the very space for the relative autonomy of the particular struggles: the feminist struggle, for example, is made possible only through reference to democratic-egalitarian political discourse" (88-89).

The same dynamic is at play in “Laberinto,” as is evident in the positive correlation between *Van Gend en Loos* as represented by a master signifier and the association of work with the ideal of liberty in Kristeva’s dream. In fact, one of the results of the supremacy of European Union law as called for by the stipulations of *Van Gend en Loos* has been the consolidation of workers’ rights throughout the European Union as a result, for example, of the Council of the European Union directives prohibiting gender discrimination with regard to remuneration for the same work (Directive 75/117/EEC of 10 Feb. 1975); discrimination based on religion or sexual orientation with regard to employment (Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 Nov. 2000); and in the area of the organization of working time, the legally enforceable right to a four week paid vacation (Directive 93/104/EC of 23 Nov. 1993). The enhancement of religious, gender and sexual-orientation equality in the work place represents an increase in the liberation of workers from certain kinds of discrimination. Similarly, guaranteed vacations represent the freedom to escape from the stress of overwork. The directive on gender discrimination in the workplace dates from 1975, before the period of time in which “Laberinto” takes place. The directive on paid vacations dates from 1993, and the one on racial and sexual-orientation discrimination in the workplace from 2000, so both were promulgated after the historical period represented in the text. Nevertheless, they could be said to form part of the text if Badiou’s concept of “forcing” is taken into account. Forcing can be conceived of as a subject in a situation sustaining the consequences of an event in such a way as to transform the situation (Bosteels 187-88). Even though the last two of the aforementioned directives did not exist in 1977, there is nothing to prevent the faithful subject from concluding that such directives will have been promulgated on a supranational level in her lifetime, thus reinforcing the connection of the event to freedom. In Kristeva’s dream, this reinforcement as a result of forcing is the material force that tips the balance in the wager between deciding whether the birdsong is emanating from a caged bird or a wild bird in favor of the second choice or freedom. That it is a question of forcing is evident taking Kristeva’s stopped wristwatch into account, which is the first thing she perceives after remembering her work. In a temporality characteristic of forcing, it symbolizes the transposition of the present into the future anterior in such a way as to affect the present. In other words, underlying the association of work with freedom represented by Kristeva’s dream is the transposition by the subject of her present situation into the future anterior with the result of changing or forcing the subject’s situation in the present.

The master’s discourse has developed the reputation of being an authoritarian discourse for, among other reasons, its association with the dialectic of the master and slave from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For those who find it objectionable on these grounds, there is no better riposte than the following by Žižek: “There is . . . no reason to be dismissive of the discourse of the Master, to identify it too hastily with ‘authoritarian repression’: the Master’s gesture is the founding gesture of every social link” (“On Alain Badiou”). The establishment of a social link pertaining to the European Community by way of the ideological consequences of fidelity to the event is a brief but accurate description of the socio-political content of “Laberinto.” This social link is represented by the unification of separate sentences that mention the characters that appear in the photograph on which “Laberinto” is based—immediately preceding the concluding episode in the parking garage

(86)—into a single sentence of enormous length that includes these characters and concludes with Kristeva's dream:

Y entonces Henric piensa que su moto parece un dios asirio y se complace en este pensamiento, pero sus piernas, por el momento, se niegan a adentrarse en la oscuridad, y Marie-Thérèse cierra los ojos y abre las piernas, una sobre el sofá, la otra apoyada en la alfombra, mientras Guyotat la penetra sin quitarle las bragas... y J.-J. Goux se sienta a la mesa y unta un trozo de pan con paté y se lo lleva a la boca y mastica... y Julia Kristeva soñará con un pueblito alemán... (83-85)

In tandem with those textual components that correspond to the terms of the formula for the master's discourse (the conclusion in the parking garage and Kristeva's dream), the unification of separate sentences into one is retroactively understood as the textual embodiment of a social link. The analysis of "Laberinto" by way of Badiouian and Lacanian concepts yields the conclusion that its political content is represented as being emancipatory within the context of working within the political system of the European Community. That is to say, what takes place in this text is the representation of a series of equivalences, mediated by the event, between the political system of the European Community, liberation in work, and the liberation of subjectivity.

"Laberinto" is difficult to interpret because it does not conform to reader expectations. This is also a source of considerable fascination with this text. For example, the Central American is not simply a representative of an oppressed culture or a victim of discrimination. He is principally a representative of the ideology of free-market capitalism, which qualifies him as a *menace* within the context of the emancipatory themes of "Laberinto." In "Laberinto," Europe is not used as a vantage point to focus on Latin American issues, such as the human rights abuses of *la guerra sucia*, as in Bolaño's story "Sensini" or "[l]a preocupación por los orígenes de la literatura y de la historia de América Latina," which, according to Sandra Garabano (10), is the defining characteristic of *Los detectives salvajes*. Nor is this a case of a Latin American writer affirming his universalistic aspirations: a type of writer considered by Jorge Volpi to be typical of the generation of Latin American writers born in the 1970s, and for whom Bolaño, who was older, is a precursor. For Volpi, the best Latin American literature belongs to a tradition "que siempre ha promovido un cosmopolitismo abierto e incluyente" (40). "Laberinto" is not so much a cosmopolitan text as it is a European text. To put it in Badiouian terms, in "Laberinto," Europe is a "self-belonging multiple": it is there to be considered for its own sake. The geographically limited and relatively backwards region of Latin America represented by the Central American serves as a foil to highlight the superiority of the European Union's socio-political system and remind the reader of the menace of unregulated capitalism emanating from the United States. Nevertheless it is certain that the two European countries represented in "Laberinto"—France and Germany—are not entirely characteristic of the European Union. They have among the most advanced economies in a region that currently includes other countries in its southern periphery—such as Greece and Spain—that are beset by economic crises. Even if the problems besetting these countries, which were not evident before Bolaño's death, are not taken into account, it seems unfair, if not biased, to select two of the most backward countries in Latin America to underscore the advantages of living in one of the most highly developed regions in

Europe. Nevertheless, given that some of these advantages in Bolaño's text—such as the jurisprudential foundation of liberation in work—are represented as consequences of fidelity to an event, this may well have an explanatory value as signifying that a primary source of the persistence and viability of the European Union, *beyond* the limited selection of countries directly referred to in "Laberinto," may well have more to do with the ideological and political ramifications of the subject's response to an event than any reductively economic causality.

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