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With and Against the Powers of Contingency: an Introduction

Stamatina Dimakopoulou

So, what I'm talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency. Our lives don't really belong to us, you see—they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding. We brush up against these mysteries all the time. The result can be truly terrifying—but it can also be comical.

Paul Auster

Paul Auster's humane, albeit tongue-in-cheek, outlook seems to conflate the contingent and the unpredictable, just as it questions the potential of the human subject to master the conditions of its own existence. In retrospect, Auster's endearing and poetic injunction to think of "the world" as "a place beyond our understanding" is resonant with the by now well-worn notion of a decentred post-modern subjectivity whose humanity however is redeemed in Auster's work by the committed "effort" to "make sense" of "lives," and not just our own, that "don't really belong to us." Although reflection on "the utterly bewildering nature of human experience" remains as topical as it ever was in our current moment, recent directions in continental philosophy, namely the speculative turn, have generated renewed, if not radically new, ways of thinking about the "powers of contingency" (52). For one, the speculative turn, as its main theorists, proponents and critics, repeatedly stress, urges us to rethink, what in an oft-quoted and discussed passage from *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux has called "correlation," to wit "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5).

This critique, as the editors of *The Speculative Turn* stress in their Introduction, emerges as a reaction to the sense that "the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy ... now actively limits the capacities of philosophy in our time." As they argue "speculation" is essentially "a concern with the Absolute" in

response to a contemporary “reality” that is altered by new breakthroughs in science, by “the divide between human and machine,” as well as by “the ecological crisis” (Bryant et al, 3). To these events, the thought that has drawn from phenomenology and deconstruction is seen as somewhat inadequate to respond. Yet perhaps, as Peter Gratton stresses, the critique of “correlationism” compels us to think of relation otherwise: Gratton therefore invites us to read Meillassoux as offering “a critique of *previous* correlationisms in order to provide the basis for *another* correlationalism anchored in the real,” beyond “the limits of knowledge in the phenomenal” (41). Yet as Gratton stresses “there is one part of this ‘correlationist’ circle that cannot be said to be inescapable, namely the relation itself” (53). And relations after all are, as Gratton also stresses, contingent, just as they are, to remember Édouard Glissant, “the opposite of the reductive transparency of the generalizing universal” (55). The point perhaps where the ramifications of Meillassoux’s philosophical positions join the legacies of deconstruction and poststructuralism is on the level of reflecting, albeit differently, on the limits, permeability and disjunction between thinking, knowing and not knowing.

In the Introduction to the recently published volume on *The Medium of Contingency*, Robin Mackay stresses that what is also to be valued in the speculative turn is the posited imperative to think the real beyond causality –what he aptly calls “what must be” (1), to wit a teleological understanding of reality and, all the more so, if such an understanding rests on essentialising certainties. Yet Mackay also invites us to reflect on “the marked importance” of contingency in contemporary philosophy and art practice, by returning to the “simplest” definition of contingency as an “attempt to think events that take place but *need not take place*: events that could be, or could have been otherwise” (1). In resonance with Meillassoux, Mackay goes on to state that contingency appeals to speculative thought precisely because it is “that which thinking can grasp only as *event*, not as proceeding from a rational necessity” (1). *Pace* Auster on the other hand, contingency, he suggests, is something which is after all “in principle, if not in actuality, predictable” (1). Mackay pursues this paradox by reiterating questions that have preoccupied art, literature and philosophy well before the speculative turn: why is it that we relate contingency to the probable, and the possible? Why do we feel that the contingent often defies our means to face it, or makes us feel that it finds us unprepared? Why is it that the contingent is thought of as intermittently un/predictable? Or, occurs and manifests itself in ways that we cannot always comprehend or have not precisely predicted?

Be that as it may, with and against Meillassoux, reflection on contingency necessitates a sustained reflection on relations across long established conceptual pairs such as consciousness, perception and reality, self and world, immanence and transcendence, language, thinking and event. What is more, as the essays in this special issue of *Synthesis* attest, contingency may indeed be thought of as the medium through which we experience the world, as Christine Savinel puts it. Just as

reflective thinking remains crucial in our encounter with the world, contingency necessitates reflection on mediation, namely “the mediating role of human experience,” that as the editors of *Speculative Aesthetics* state (Mackay et al. 1) is what is often wrongly perceived as being dismissed by speculative realists (Mackay et al. 4). Perhaps an exploration of mediation can begin by the way Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* invites us to *relate* the words “chance” and “contingency” to their etymology that MacKay evokes (Mackay, Introduction 2). Contingency is that which “befalls”: while “chance” relates to “falling” to the “eventuality of one of a number of possible outcomes,” contingency “is an event that happens *to* us, that comes from outside, that simply ‘strikes’ without any possible prevision” (MacKay Introduction 2) Such is the point of departure for Marion Picker’s reading of the French banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn’s universalising impulse in commissioning the “Archives de la Planète” (1908-1931): as Picker demonstrates, Kahn’s project was premised on an attempt to bypass, as it were, the unevenness of humanity as well as the contingent, material processes that condition the making of an archive, its flaws, the obstacles to its preservation. The contingent is inscribed in the very process of recording and the project itself is contingent upon the conditions of its production against the grain. In Picker’s reading, Kahn’s archive is revealed to be underpinned by “a system of thought” which, to borrow Mackay’s words, aspired to “subordinate the events that befall us to some kind of predestined necessity.” (Introduction 1). What is more, in Picker’s analysis, Kahn’s archive entails the impossibility of foreclosing the contingent. As Picker argues, the inadvertent, and unsolicited as it were, inscription of the contingent punctuates Kahn’s project, thereby rendering the all-encompassing intent impossible, elusive even. The actual limits of Kahn’s project, in Picker’s reading, are also its material and conceptual limitations: the “Archives de la Planète” set out to record humanity on a planetary scale, instead of attempting to encounter the unevenness and the complexity of the world.

As a counterpoint to Kahn’s impossible aim to contain and domesticate contingency through a record of life on what was then perceived as a global scale, Christine Savinel examines how Gertrude Stein’s thought confronts itself and is confronted by historical contingency, through a reflection on how contingency is /becomes a ‘medium’ in Stein’s writing. Savinel returns to *Wars I have Seen* (1944), one of the Steinian texts that poses unresolvable ethical and political quandaries to its critics. Examining how Stein responds to the intractable contingency of war also by attempting to keeping it at bay, Savinel returns to Stein’s puzzling if not disturbing lack of compassion for human loss and destruction. In her analysis, Savinel powerfully problematises what Mackay calls “the possibility of thought’s autonomy from events” (Introduction 1), as well as the old metaphysical question of “the possibility” “that the thinking subject can in principle withdraw from the contingencies of the world into a space where the occurrence of every event has already been written” (Introduction 1), while also remaining a potentiality. Stein

thereby seems to perform a move that brings to mind Meillassoux's claims about a necessary shift from a metaphysical vision to a speculative perspective, from which the lesson to be drawn, Peter Hallward tells us, is that "nothing is necessary, apart from the necessity that nothing be necessary" (130). Against the backdrop of the speculative turn, Stein could emerge in retrospect as a critic of correlationism; or, as a writer who put forward the necessity and the difficulty to mediate contingency, because thinking through mediation involves a sense of possibility. As Savinel writes: "Stein converts the (imposed) contingency of the event into a (chosen) creative possibility, passing from a view of contingency as dependence to a view of contingency as potential." In Savinel's reading, writing itself performs Stein's own difficult relation to contingency and her attempt to hold onto "creative possibility." Through her critique or quandary regarding human agency and mediation, Stein may even be thought of as a "speculative realist" who is preoccupied by a "reality" that "does not involve the way things are so much as the possibility that they might be otherwise" (Hallward 131); if so, through her reading of Stein, Savinel gestures towards an ethical wager, namely our response.

It is precisely on the level of response that Laurence Bécél reflects on the "poethic particulars" that are at the centre of Anne Waldman's recent work. An improbable counterpoint to Stein's treatment of contingency, Anne Waldman's *Manatee Humanity* (2009) takes us beyond mainstays of postmodernism, and the decentring of the self as thinking subject, by investing in a reflective and reflexive encounter with the details of a "composite" world. As the poet herself puts it: "What is poetry's relationship to the composite world, / in the relative world?" The detail in Waldman is not a taxonomic principle, but a principle of relations which are contingent, unstable, changing, rather than immutable and universal. Taking as a point of departure her encounter with a wounded manatee in a sea-park in Florida, as Bécél argues, Waldman reflects on our place in the world, and our encounter with its discrete, yet interrelated contingent details in terms of compassion. Contingency therefore is both possible and probable in the world that we inhabit and in which we co-exist with other species and natural forms. What is more, Bécél also sees contingency as an epistemological trope that does not unduly prioritise the human, and the Glissantian poetics of relation that she engages in her essay may constitute a counterpoint to the 'correlationism' that the speculative realists return to and critique. In Bécél's reading, Waldman's "poetics of detail is also a poetics of Relation investigating 'the rich layer of inter-living beings on the planet Earth's surface' and protesting that 'we aren't the rulers of the universe.'" At this point, we may posit an unsuspected affinity with the implications of Meillassoux's thought about the existence of the world outside of us. In another oft quoted passage from *After Finitude*, Meillassoux speaks of speculative materialism as premised on our awareness of our separation from the world:

Our task ... consists in trying to understand how thought is able to access the uncorrelated, which is to say, a world capable of subsisting without being given. But to say this is just to say that we must grasp how thought is able to access an absolute, i.e. a being whose severance (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not. (28)

With regard to this notion of the absolute, Waldman's notion of a "layer of inter-living beings" takes us beyond in/difference, and embraces the world's separateness from us through an ability for compassion in a changing world. Peter Hallward's nuanced critique of Meillassoux comes to mind once more: Hallward has argued that Meillassoux's notion of a pure "Chaos" that consists of unrelated contingent realities, to wit the absolute nature of contingency, does not allow us to conceptualise change:

Meillassoux's acausal ontology, in other words, includes no account of an actual process of transformation or development. There is no account here of any positive ontological or historical force, no substitute for what other thinkers have conceived as substance, or spirit, or power, or labour. (139)

Precisely for this reason, we need to attend to relationality: and ultimately, relations, and we within them, are historically, culturally, politically contingent. Along such lines, from a poethics that solicits an activist and compassionate form of agency before the powers and the vagaries of contingency, Marjorie Perloff takes us to Kenneth Goldsmith's and Sophie Calle's conceptualist poetics where the contingent is mediated through a literalism that in a self-reflexive manner reproduces discursive and/or performative variants and accounts of what *has happened*. Perloff discusses Goldsmith's and Calle's appropriation of language that exists independently of the intentions of the poet in Goldsmith's case, or language that is generated at the instigation of the artist as is the case with Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* (2007). Perloff's reflection on the appropriation of language that purportedly responds to what *happens*, compels us to return to Richard Rorty's positions on the contingency of language. Acknowledging the centrality of Donald Davidson's "break[ing] with the notion that language is a *medium*" (Rorty 10), Rorty turned to a question that was also central in poststructuralist thought: whether language reveals what exists within the self or whether it mediates what exists outside the self (11). For Rorty, and perhaps for Perloff too, contingency is also tantamount to an awareness of the fact that our "truths" and our "vocabularies" are "made by human beings" (Rorty 21).

Probing Kenneth Goldsmith's tactics of appropriating found language that responds to violence and death (ironically and darkly the most un/expected contingency of all), as well as his controversial performance of *The Body of Michael Brown* (2015), Perloff invites reflection on mediation and reception. Goldsmith's provocative assembling, recycling, altering of unreflective responses to the eruption of a contingent event that had a public resonance (President Kennedy's assassination in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, 2013) is set in dialogue with the more

private, yet shared inflections of Calle's work. In *Take Care of Yourself*, Calle invited 107 women to comment on an email "she received from her then lover G." As Perloff writes, "this letter is submitted to a set of fascinating analyses by Sophie's female respondents, making the piece at one level, a collaborative feminist project," through which Calle "is mischievously inventing a scenario in which the man himself is finally silenced and only the women...speak." Perloff argues that Goldsmith's and Calle's work is underpinned by "similar" "metapoetic assumptions," that we may add thematise the contingent production of the discourses of others about others.

Both the production and the reception of discourse are contingent on contextual relations, and Perloff's concluding remarks on "the paradox" of conceptualism are resonant with lines of enquiry that are central in speculative realism: what is our position as observers and thinking subjects vis-à-vis "what really happened"? How are events processed, represented and understood? What are the contingent conditions within which events come to us? How exposed are we to contingencies as such, and how much depends on mediation of the event as such? "Carried to its logical conclusion," Perloff writes, "conceptualism," "in works like *Seven Deaths* and *Take Care of Yourself*, becomes a kind of hyperrealism." Might Meillassoux's notion of a "hyperchaos" be an alternative way to think contingency beyond a saturated realm in which, as Perloff writes, "everything is *documented*," by "the means now available to the poet as word processor, the poet as writing (or image) machine"? As the editors of the *Speculative Turn* point out, Meillassoux may be read as "radicaliz[ing]" correlationism "from within" and his notion of the "hyperchaos" as tantamount to "the necessity of contingency," that is "the apparently counterintuitive result that anything is possible from one moment to the next" (Bryant et al., 8). Might Meillassoux's "hyperchaos" then be pointing towards the "openings" that we "as readers" need "to continue to look for" in order to see beyond the opacity of the "hyperreal" as such?

The question of the ethical wagers of the hyperreal is followed on by David Rudrum in his analysis of data artist Jer Thorp's piece *Before Us Is The Salesman's House* (2012), produced in collaboration with statistician Mark Hansen. Rudrum examines another paradox of our age whereby, although "the seemingly random and haphazard nature of our lives and our cultures ... would appear to suggest that contingency ... has become the grounding property of the twenty first century," "data threatens to contain all possible contingencies." Rudrum's essay reflects on the incalculable contingencies that are generated by the relations, the virtual encounters and transactions that are generated and stored due to the possibilities of the digital age. Data are contingently generated as events that are ironically determined by "ideologies of probability and chance" that, as Mackay puts it, "hallucinate a universe in which—at least—the parameters within which events may take place can be circumscribed," while "an event, a real contingency, is precisely something that overflows this compartmentalization and management" (Mackay, Introduction 2).

Rudrum probes the nature of this paradox: a “database” “is unreadable” because of “its potentially infinite scope,” and because it is “forever mutating, at remarkable speeds.” As databases “do not have a permanently fixed existence of any kind, physical or otherwise,” human subjects seem disempowered and become as “vulnerable” as the form of the novel is “in the face of the database,” as Rudrum argues. Rudrum’s reading of the challenges that a piece like Jer Thorp’s poses to the claims of literature engages crucial questions about our enmeshment in and reflective stance towards contingency: since, “we live,” as Rudrum puts it, “in an age where ‘big data’ makes ever bolder claims about explaining, predicting, and containing the random contingency that pervades our world,” how “can literature mediate between the apparent contingency of our lives and the senses made of them by big data? Or, can the act of reading do so?” Rudrum’s questions compel us to contemplate how the insights of the speculative turn about what exists independently of us can be set in dialogue with a reflective stance on the ideologies that mediate the “contingent events, material histories, webs and networks of anonymous forces” of which we are “the product” (Mackay, Introduction 3).

To extrapolate: is the lived or, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, what “really happened” always something that may or may not happen? Is always *what happens* “capable of existing whether we exist or not”? Conversely, does the contingent always involve a *yet* in the sense that something may not have happened if it could have been predicted and/or averted? How might this impact our understanding of the “time of the contingent,” as Chryssa Marinou puts it? The essays that are assembled here are equally about *what* happens as well as about *how* the contingent is mediated, just as they reflect on how what might happen might have happened *otherwise*. If so, contingency necessitates a reflection on our agency: how one encounters, confronts or triggers the workings of contingency. Probing human agency, Chryssa Marinou reflects on the contingency of our historical present and takes the case of what is currently called the Greek crisis as it is fictionalised in Kostas Peroulis’s short story collection *Automata* (2015). Marinou argues that Peroulis creates “a language system that is governed by the vicissitudes of the economic system depicted in the stories, as well as by a sense of the indeterminate and the contingent.” Marinou argues for the necessity to think historical contingency and our present moment through the genealogy of the modern, by taking T. J. Clark’s assertion that “‘modernity’ means contingency” as her point of departure.

By taking a genealogy of the present as his point of departure, that of a diasporic Arab literary modernity and its relations with the West, Tahar Bekri offers a (self-) reflective piece that performs and speaks of relations of a different kind. Bekri responds to particular historical presents and micro-histories wherein contingencies, adversities, possibilities are determined by what Marinou terms “the time of the contingent.” In counterpoint to the Glissantian poetics that Bécél evokes, Bekri sees literature as a beautiful debt [*devoir*] towards history and towards the

contingencies of this world. The beautiful debt that Bekri evokes is integral to a modality of existence that is entwined with a resourcefulness and a “will to live” with and against the “powers of contingency” to which “the increasingly global discipline of literature” (Christofides 7) needs to respond. On this level perhaps, Bekri’s envisioning of literature’s debt gestures beyond Rorty’s paradigm of the “liberal ironist”: Rorty implicitly concurred with Nietzsche who, as he put it, “suspected” that “only poets...can truly appreciate contingency” while “the rest of us are doomed to remain philosophers” (Rorty 28) who, in resonance with Auster, carry on seeking “one true description of the human situation, one universal context” for “our lives,” while also, we could add, contesting “life-long certainties” (Auster 52). Pursuing this distinction between the philosopher and the poet as what divides us, perhaps also within ourselves, Rorty goes on to suggest that qua “philosophers” we are “doomed to spend our conscious lives trying to escape from contingency,” while qua poets we are “acknowledging and appropriating contingency” (28). Bekri’s return to Tunisia’s national anthem is significant here for pointing beyond this dilemma. Moulay Youness Elbousty notes that the phrase in Arabic is a construction, that “unequivocally suggests that human beings possess a will and this will only gains momentum when it is enacted upon by its dwellers, that is, citizens” (161); if so, the will-to-live and the debt that Bekri envisions involve a more reciprocal notion of agency. For Bekri, the contingent debt of literature, as well as literature’s encounter with contingency should be premised on the will to fight against dehumanisation, against the debasement of human life. Suffice it to recall her the tragic self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi as a tragic contingency that *was* entwined with the will-to-live. This remains a most poignantly tragic instance of the complexity of our uneven world that perhaps, after all, speculative realism also seeks, sometimes inadequately, to comprehend.¹

What the essays of this issue powerfully imply is that we need to nuance Rorty’s earlier conceptualisation of agency in the face of contingency just as we may be wary of the implications of a radical critique of ‘correlation.’ Certainly the speculative turn was a more than timely corrective to Rorty’s vision of a “liberal utopia” whose “citizens ... would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community” (61). Although Rorty tempered the mastery that such a vision implies by hastening to add that the “liberal ironists” would be “people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment,” (61) the human subject is at the centre of his thought. The essays that are brought together in this issue of *Synthesis* eschew the lapses of a postmodern relativism that Rorty also had sought to eschew, and reclaim a human(e) connection to the world by reflecting on contingency as co-extensive to the experiential and the lived, as entwined with how we experience and how we live. Such lines of reflection solicit and generate responses well beyond the realisation of the “terrifying” and the “comical” guises that the inevitable “brushing

up” with contingency may take, to remember Auster, and gesture towards the ethics that Bekri’s debt entails. This duty points beyond the paradoxical certainty that underpins Rorty’s injunction to his “liberal ironist” “to have continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” and not to think that “her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself” (Rorty 73). On the other hand, the ethics of response equally envision our share in the world with and against the radical disjunction on which speculative thought seems to be premised, without compromising the otherness of the contingent that Meillassoux evokes as:

something that finally happens—something other, something which, in its irreducibility to all pre-registered possibilities, puts an end to the vanity of a game wherein everything, even the improbable, is predictable. (Meillassoux 108, ctd in Mackay, Introduction 2)

In other words: can our encounter and our enmeshment with the contingent be thought of as empowering, yet not overpowering towards ourselves and others? This quandary or rather imperative still compels us to combine reflective critique with a reflexive sense of our place in a contingent world which also exists in its apartness: and it is because of this apartness that contingency may after all be a ‘rather menacing power.’ If so, as Slavoj Žižek says, “Meillassoux’s assertion of radical contingency as the only necessity is not enough—one has to supplement it with the ontological incompleteness of reality” (410). If indeed there is something “terrifying” to remember Auster, about the fact that our lives “belong to the world,” it is even more imperative to think of our agency through and beyond relatedness: even if we concur with Meillassoux’s realisation that “there is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuitousness of the given- nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence, or persistence” (63), Žižek’s urging us to think of the “true materialist” as of someone who would “refuse to accept ‘objective reality’ in order to undermine consistent subjectivity” (407, 408) is all the more topical.

Faced with “the unknown ... rushing in on top of us at every moment,” Auster saw his “‘job’ as being about keeping himself open to these collisions, to watch out for all these mysterious goings-on in the world.” Although Auster’s musings are at a remove from the insights of the speculative turn, as he disarmingly suggests we carry on living and existing, perhaps because of and not despite the fact that we many never know what will happen and will always be uncertain of the outcome and impact of contingencies on the world, human and otherwise. What ultimately transpires in this issue is how capacious as a trope and as a modality contingency is, and that it may be possible to “treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity,” not just as “equally valid yet forever incommensurable” (Rorty xv). The renewed perspectives on contingency that are brought together in this issue, in their different ways, invite us to contemplate the overcoming of Rorty’s *yet*, with and against the disruptive and menacing powers of contingency. This special issue of *Synthesis*

posits the necessity to respond as agencies to the powers of contingency and to think of relations *after* causality: to respond to the world, beyond the divide between the presumed anti-realism of the tradition of deconstruction and the speculative focus “on the nature of reality independently of thought and humanity more generally” (Bryant et al, 3), through a reflective and compassionate stance, unencumbered by a residual idealism that would compromise both our relatedness to and apartness from a ‘composite’ world that does exist independently of us.

¹ For a topical discussion of how to think our uneven world in the present, see Mina Karavanta in conversation with R. Radhakrishnan (Karavanta and Radhakrishnan 2008).

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