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NOVEL AND NOVELTY

Dealing with Contingency[*]

One strand of debate in Anglo-American political theory is that concerning the unencumbered as against the encumbered self as the subject of political interest. The 'liberal', Rawlsian figure of the autonomous rational chooser as political agent is set against the 'situated' self, the person embedded in their community – or, to avoid slipping (merely) into the over-polarized 'liberals versus communitarians' argument, against the person 'encumbered' by 'givens', features derived from tradition, cultural context, accidents of birth and the like (thus, for example, the 'relational', or 'dialogic' self as set out in post-liberal or feminist theory).

Across that dichotomy cuts a rather different division, based on the notion of *contingency*.[1] On the one hand is a tendency to underestimate 'the contingent', treating it not as a normal element in politics, but at best to be coped with, to be, as it were, worked round.[2] Even some radical, 'postmodern' approaches while noting its ubiquity still find it distracting, an irritation if not (rather literally) a disaster – thus frequent reference to such 'acts of god' as floods and famine, or man-made disasters such as environmental pollution or the possibility of nuclear holocaust.[3] Alternatively, the contingent may be considered so obviously an element of the quotidien that a satisfactory account of the political – such as aspired to by political theory – can hardly afford to neglect or disparage it.[4]

Within the context of political literary criticism – the practice of moving between works of literature and thinking about the political – attention to novels, and to their treatment of the lives of characters, and the investigation thereby of narrative identity as a matter of current interest in political theory, leads inexorably to consideration of the role of contingency – especially in the sense of chance or coincidence – on the construction of identity. And contingency can thence be seen to have a direct bearing on political agency.

Various strands of contemporary political theory recognise the contingent elements of identity; but, frequently, they also continue to treat contingency as a *problem* to be contained.[5] However, this apparent disjunction in political thought may be related to the question as to whether theory *can* deal with contingency inasmuch as it deals with types rather than characters. In addition, theories of causality, or of intentionality, may seem to be threatened by the *acceptance* of contingency as part of the political story. The narrative contribution, alternatively, suggests that purpose can stem from (the *response* to) contingency. Furthermore, although 'contingency' directs particular attention to the *unpredictability* of politics/political action, contingency is not necessary negative – to be avoided.

In fictional narratives, plots (often) hinge on chance or coincidence. Novels typically revolve around the contingent, especially in the form of chance and coincidence: stories seem to be reliant on those elements, and the development of character includes responses to them. However, that may be discounted as, precisely, 'fictional', as though in 'real life' – in empirical situations of interest to political theorists – contingency cannot, or should not, be allowed such a pivotal role. I suggest that this deprives political theory of an understanding and of a methodological tool to be gained from narrative; and I query the dismissal of the contingent in those theoretical accounts which are inclined to adopt a relatively deterministic attitude to agents' actions, or in those which, less rigidly but equally exclusively, rely on the notion of the rational chooser or strong versions of rational choice theory.[6] Literary narratives show the place of the contingent in 'real lives' and the way in which contingencies may act as the impetus for political action, depicting characters whose achievement of political identity is obtained precisely by way of their response to the contingent. And narrative form indicates how contin-

gency can be assimilated into a coherent account of human behaviour, into *political* explanation (political theorizing).

* * *

A writer has borrowed a summer cottage in Vermont. One early evening he takes a walk in the woods, intending to walk for half an hour and then turn back. However, he is distracted by thinking about what he is writing and just goes on walking. Eventually he realizes that the light is fading, tries to get his bearings but cannot, and decides that he must sleep there. Next morning, lost, he walks on, deciding that the woods must end somewhere – he can find a road, and then a house where someone will tell him where he is. Three or four hours later he comes out on a narrow dirt road with no houses in sight. After ten minutes or so on this road, a pickup truck appears, and the driver gives him a lift. The young man driving the truck tells him that he had wandered about ten miles on foot, but the road journey back to the cottage is well over thirty. The driver then says that he knows a shortcut, reverses, and takes a very narrow dirt trail through the woods. A mile or so down this trail, they come upon a man standing by a car. Thinking he must be in trouble, the driver gets out to offer help. The stranger appears angry; the driver continues to go towards him; the man reaches for a gun in his car and shoots the driver; the writer picks up a metal softball bat, jumps out of the car, hits the stranger's head and kills him; when he moves over to the driver, he too is dead.

Leviathan

This is the central incident in Paul Auster's novel *Leviathan*. It is a turning point for the writer, the protagonist of the novel, Ben Sachs, who has expressed dissatisfaction with his life – "I want to end the life I've been living up to now. I want everything to change" – but has not hitherto altered his life as a writer. His killing of a complete stranger is tied into the narrative by ensuing developments and by past connections. The 'stranger' is in fact Reed Dimaggio, the husband of a friend (Lillian) of a friend (Maria Turner) of Sachs' friend

and fellow-writer, Peter Aaron. Sachs discovers this when, by chance, Maria is the only person to whom he can turn when trying to decide what to do about this bizarre occurrence.

Sachs decides to find Lillian in order to recompense her for the death of her husband. As events turn out, he could have settled down with her in Berkeley, to begin a new life; instead he takes on the identity of the dead man. He becomes the Phantom Bomber, traveling America blowing up reproductions of the Statue of Liberty (as a form of political action, protesting against the state of America); and he himself dies, apparently as a result of an accident with explosives. The novel is framed by the discovery of his body and the FBI's attempt to discover whose it is. His friend, Aaron, has guessed from a newspaper report that it is Sachs, and determines to tell the 'true' story of Sachs – the substantive content of the narrative – before the FBI catch up on his own connection with the dead man, as they do at the end of the novel.

Aaron, as narrator of Sachs' story, comments that

> My whole adulthood has been spent writing stories, putting imaginary people into unexpected and often unlikely situations ... but the real is always ahead of what we can imagine. No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth. This lesson seems inescapable to me now. *Anything can happen.* And one way or another, it always does.

Most critical studies of this novel comment on the extent to which the action of the plot (and, indeed, the 'development' of character) is a matter of contingency, with instances enough of the "fortuitous chance and odd, barely credible coincidence" which typifies Auster's work. The narrative begins on the 4th of July, which is also the date of a party at which Sachs by chance falls from a fire escape but escapes death because his fall breaks a washing line and he lands on the clothes. The party is held on the hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty – the site of a significant occasion in Sachs's childhood and also the focus of his eventual political activity. And the accident happens because of "the particular combination of strangers on a Brooklyn fire escape".[7]

That accident, which has strange effects on Sachs, begins the period of his life which culminates in the random killing and a new life with his victim's wife (an outcome of the sheer chance that she is Maria's friend). But "Then, with no apparent cause, everything suddenly changed". Firstly Lillian begins behaving strangely, erratically. Then Sachs discovers that Dimaggio had become involved with terrorism for political change. He decides to try and continue Dimaggio's work by writing about him. But again "something strange happened". Diving into a secondhand bookshop to avoid someone who had known him in New York, he immediately notices a copy of his own book, 'The New Colossus', and buys it. Later,

> I sat there on the sofa, staring at the cover of my novel, feeling like someone who's just run into a brick wall. I hadn't done anything with the book about Dimaggio ... I'd botched every hope for myself. Out of pure wretchedness I kept my eyes fixed on the cover of the book. For a long time I don't think I even saw it, but then, little by little, something began to happen. It must have taken close to an hour, but once the idea took hold of me, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The book is "filled with references to the Statue of Liberty": so Sachs becomes the Phantom Bomber, until his death when, presumably, a bomb he is preparing detonates 'accidentally'.

Aaron's narrative has to integrate the predominance of chance in Sachs's life (and death):

> like Sachs himself, who takes life's contingencies as cues, Aaron has to accommodate the leakiness, contradiction, and dubious leads that beset his enterprise within that enterprise ... the music of chance is paradoxically at once freer and denser than the routine scales of evident cause.[8]

And so he

> comes to understand that every life is a leviathan, that connections stop nowhere, and that a person's public self is merely the tip of a colossal iceberg shaped by chance, destiny and secrecy.[9]

Mao II

Don DeLillo's *Mao II* is another fictional case for the examination of contingency in a political context. This novel depicts and 'discusses' distinctive features of modern politics: mass politics, the crowd, and the submersion of the individual in the crowd; totalitarian leadership; terrorism, and the problem of political agency and responsibility in such a world. Against this is set a version of the classic issue of 'the writer and commitment' embodied in the figure of a famous author (who could also be regarded as the figure of the autonomous individual of liberal theory) caught up in a particularly difficult political situation. The ostensible problem is the position of the author in the face of actual manifestations of political power. But this writer is also an instance of what is said of DeLillo's treatment of his protagonists – that he has them

> tunneling deeper and deeper toward some unreachable solution or explanation, then shows them to be players in a game manipulated by unknowable forces ... Likely to fall into the chaos they hoped to show and correlate

and he is concerned with "connections, links, secret relationships", catastrophe, and conspiracy.[10]

Mao II opens with a Moonie wedding: one of the participants, Karen, later appears in the household of Bill Gray, a reclusive author. When he goes missing, she goes to New York to look for him, lodging with Brita, a photographer who had been allowed to visit and photograph Bill as part of her project to record all living authors. Brita's visit had disturbed Bill, partly because she got beneath his defenses, talking to him about his work, partly because he found himself attracted to her, and specifically – the actual cause of his going missing – because she had brought him a message from his friend and publisher, Charles Everson. Everson wants Bill to take part in a plan to free a hostage being held by a terrorist group in Beirut. Bill is increasingly drawn into the plans to free the hostage, going first to London and then to Cyprus where an intermediary, George Haddad, a sympathizer with the terrorist group, attempts to get Bill to Beirut to meet the terrorist leader, Rashid.

It is a problematic feature of this novel that Bill's activity and eventual thinking-through of the positions entailed, the working-out of personal and political commitment, is framed in the narrative by a coincidence and an ambiguity. Bill's initial impetus to action is his interest in Brita who had met Everson by chance in New York at the point where she had been chosen to be brought to take photographs of the famous author. Bill's apparent willingness to take responsibility for the life of the hostage then initially relies on coincidence – as Charles tells him, "If I hadn't run into Brita ..."; and it is largely unexplained thereafter. His turn from reclusiveness and authorship towards political activity is moved along by accident: he is to give a public (and televised) reading of the hostage's poems in London and simultaneously the hostage will be released in Beirut; it is when this plan goes wrong – due to violent action, the planting of a bomb – that Bill decides to go further and to become more actively involved. And at the last, in Cyprus, he is hit by a car, with no certainty in the narrative as to whether this is an accident or an attempt on his life by some element involved in the hostage situation. As the attempt failed, the ambiguity would not matter but that it caused internal injuries from which Bill dies on the ferry taking him to Beirut to meet the terrorist leader, Rashid.

What then of contingency – and of political agency? *Leviathan* is, as a reviewer put it, an unlikely but possible story, where a high degree of chance moves the plot[11], and in this novel, as in *Mao II*, and others – for example, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature*, or William Golding's *Rites of Passage* – the characters can be said to be driven by contingency. These novels would appear to bear little similarity to theoretical accounts of action and agency: yet, if they are 'possible stories', some degree of consonance between literary and theoretical (non-narrative) accounts might be expected?[12]

Contingency and Identity

One sense of 'contingency' is acknowledged in that theory which, arguing against the notion of the autonomous rational chooser cen-

tral to liberal theory, recognises the contingent nature of identity. Thus Michael Sandel, arguing against Rawls, points out that

> I am indebted in a complex variety of ways for the constitution of my identity – to parents, family, city, tribe, class, nation, culture, historical epoch, possibly God, Nature, and maybe chance – and I can therefore claim little or no credit (or for that matter, blame) for having turned out the way I have.[13]

William Connolly agrees – identity is 'deep in its contingency',

> contingent in the sense that happenstances of genetics, family life, historically specific traditions, personal anxieties, demands, and aspirations, surprising events (the death of a parent, the intrusion of a war) all enter into its composition and give shape to the porous universals that mark me as human.[14]

Reviewing Connolly's *Identity\Difference*, Iris Marion Young says that

> The most important contribution of Connolly's book is to plunge political theory into the contingency of the human condition – our ultimate human fragility in the face of mortality, disease and disaster. I find very convincing his diagnoses of how identities and political institutions are overloaded with disciplines and resentments because people refuse to accept ambiguity, the incommensurability of differences, the contingencies of natural fate and human mortality.[15]

But even in such relatively sympathetic treatments, contingency is problematical: for instance, Connolly speaks of

> a fourth dimension of contingency in the constitution of identity, then: identity is a site of interdependence and strife between incipient formations/presentations of self and intersubjectively constituted modes of identification.[16]

And commenting on Connolly's notion of democratic citizenship, Dana Chabot notes that

> By 'contingency' Connolly means that identity is not, as is commonly believed, something one chooses on the basis of careful reflective thought;

> it is, rather, the reflection (or interiorization) of society's mechanisms for discipline and control. By becoming aware of the contingency of identity, Connolly believes, we put ourselves in a position to fight back, by contesting "established definitions of normality and rationality" on the grounds that these definitions are manipulative and too confining.[17]

'Contingency' is then something to be dealt with (because it is reflective of social control, for example), less to be accepted, or taken as the impetus to political activity, than it is to be 'contested'. Connolly's position as summarized by Chabot does not seem to allow either that the 'reflective thought' which establishes identity is most often post hoc, a matter of incorporating the contingent into the life story after the event, or for the willing acceptance of contingent identity (as, for instance, by those whom contingency has favoured).

Contingency and Agency

In both *Leviathan* and *Mao II* there is some linkage between the realization of (political) identity and contingent effect resulting in the expression of political agency. Coincidence and chance lead Bill Gray and Ben Sachs towards and into action. The novels present political agency occurring as a result of contingency; political action is 'caused by' the exigencies of plot: it could have been otherwise.

Political theory, however, more often presents action and agency as non-contingent, the result of reasoned decisions followed through by conscious, purposive, behaviour. Thus, for example, while Benjamin Barber acknowledges that

> [T]he embeddedness of politics in action suggests a temporality and contingency, as well as an engagement in the world of ongoing events that rebuff a facile philosophical reconstruction.

He goes on to say that "politics as a domain of action needs to be characterised by the constraints of necessity and the accompanying logic of necessity" – including the judgment of actions by reference to their location in chains of cause and effect.[18] But for Sachs it is

action as such which is the 'necessity'. Once he had decided to carry on Dimaggio's work,

> All of a sudden, my life seemed to make sense to me. Not just the past few months, but my whole life, all the way back to the beginning. It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambitions. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together. For the first time in my life I would be whole.

A particular contribution to political understanding to be gained from these novels is then (the possibility of) a positive connection between contingency and agency. A full consideration of political agency requires inclusion of the contingent and its effects.

Contingency and Agency: Problems and Issues

1. Contingency is an everyday occurrence: and where theory treats it, if at all, as a problem to be coped with, or controlled, it fails, accordingly, to allow for the effects of contingency in the lives of persons – including their behaviour as political agents. Where the social sciences, in their attempt to be 'scientific', have sought rules and principles, that has tended to push the contingent to the margins, theoretically speaking. And even for political theorists and philosophers, explanations of the political – including, of course, *narrative* explanations - constitute an attempt to impose patterns, to order. And this is not just a 'theoretical' practice: because life is quite largely contingent, subject to chance and coincidence, persons have the impulse to 'order' it – to narrate, give pattern to the contingent and chance events; or, rather differently, there is a wish to live a life that makes the contingency meaningful – as Ben Sachs clearly demonstrates.

In the context of forms of enquiry which seek rules and principles analogous to 'scientific fact' ('the laws of nature'), contingency refers to that which is not subject to laws, principles or rules (and hence to that which is not predictable). Referring to the 'multifaceted charac-

ter' of the term, Connolly points out that:

> By contrast to the necessary and universal, it means that which is changeable and particular; by contrast to the certain and constant, it means that which is uncertain and variable; by contrast to the self-subsistent and causal, it means that which is dependent and effect; by contrast to the expected and regular, it means that which is unexpected and irregular; and by contrast to the safe and reassuring, it means that which is dangerous, unruly, and obdurate in its danger.[19]

Insofar as theory assumes certain regularities or predictabilities, there is an association with 'order' or 'control' (and thus the tendency to assert, or to rely on, relationships of cause and effect). The contingent may then be understood in terms of that which cannot be ordered, which escapes control, and where 'effect' cannot necessarily be derived (predicted) from cause – or outcome from intention.

The 'theoretical' inclination is to attempt to bring contingency under control. Thus, for example, Rawls' intention for a theory of justice is one "that nullifies the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstance". (Though consistently with the main thrust of his theory, the 'contingencies of social circumstance' might be allowed to work for the good of the less fortunate.)[20]

In general, liberal theorists like Rawls are apt to write off 'contingencies' as though they are, as part of a natural (and/or un-ordered or irrational) world, to be coped with, or, preferably, overcome by reasonable principles for orderly arrangements. And political theory of all persuasions works with such figures as the autonomous rational chooser, the member of the group acting within or under the collective impetus, the citizen operating politically within the State, or the activist engaging in extra- or anti-State activities. These are all, in diverse ways, political agents, with

> capacities for decision-making, for initiating projects, for determining futures, for entering into reciprocal obligations, and for taking responsibility for actions.[21]

All assume some measure of intention or choice, clear motivation is attributable, and there is an expectation of and, indeed, primary focus on, outcomes.

2. The theoretical understanding that persons are agents and authors (capable of self-reflection, judgment, and choice) together with implications of authority and order would appear to be in contradiction to the idea that contingency, chance and coincidence have to be accommodated in the story, and to preclude agency based on (the response to) chance occurrences. As I have said, some theory is apt to treat contingency as a problem to be coped with, or controlled, and it does not (therefore) allow for the effects of everyday contingency in the lives of persons. But how would it, given that theory frequently fails to make the political agent concrete?[22] Theory deals with types – including such figures as 'the citizen' or 'the rational chooser'; but literature deals with characters ('thick' rather than 'thin' selves),

> individual, unique modes of human life – whose particular qualities and trajectory in time are, in quite crucial ways, not like others, nor by any means entirely a matter of voluntary actions, and yet no less morally important for that[23]

where choice and action *follow from* contingency. Narrative adds character to the person who is the necessary agent of the political process (the political actor, as it were). And in the novel the person is shown as one in whom private behaviour and public, political, activity are interrelated. This is, among other things, the usefulness of fiction: that it shows the coexistence of these strands.

Whereas theory (or, different bodies of theory, different disciplines) separate out aspects of the person for investigation and analysis, persons as *characters* (re)unite the strands. Thus for example, it is said of Sachs that

> his exchanging his role of angel of Lillian's household for the Phantom of Liberty owes itself to the conception of Dimaggio as his active alter ego, whereby the coincidences that brought Sachs and Dimaggio violently together symbolize a conspiracy of reintegration, or at least a transference of directed political energies.[24]

3. To accept that responses to contingency may form part of political agency and action raises problems concerning intention and motivation. The narrative presentation of contingency relates to a political

understanding of the concept in respect of the effect on agency of, or the gap between intention and outcome occasioned by, chance, unforeseen events – the discrepancy between purposeful action (as understood in political theories of identity and agency) and contingent 'cause'.

Both narrative and political theory agree on the need for purposeful action: thus the distinction between "all the thousands of things a living person does, what we might call his or her *activity*, and those done voluntarily and intentionally, his or her *actions*".[25] Political agency similarly, as Barber points out, requires purpose – at least intention, if not pre-planning (otherwise failure if thrown off course and required to improvise?). And concepts of narrative and action have been inter-related by way of that requirement:

> It is the intentional nature of human action which evokes a narrative account. We act for an end, yet our actions affect a field of forces in ways that may be characteristic yet remain unpredictable ... by structuring a plausible response to the question, And what happened next?, narrative offers just the intelligibility we need for acting properly.[26]

However, both narrative examples studied here would seem to have little place for purposeful intention: it is, rather, contingency which moves Ben Sachs and Bill Gray on. If agency is defined in terms of purposeful action, what then of that sense of purpose in the face of contingency?

If it is intention which as it were 'causes' the narrative account, what possibility of story is there when intention is thwarted by contingency? Quentin Skinner warns that the causal basis of action can be over-emphasized:

> It may well be strenuously doubted, however, whether the knowledge of the causes of an action is really equivalent to an understanding of the action itself. For as well as – and quite apart from – the fact that such an understanding does presuppose a grasp of antecedent causal *conditions* of the action taking place, it might equally be said to presuppose a grasp of the *point* of the action for the agent who performed it.

(Skinner goes on to point out that the examples used for this kind of distinction are usually very simple (trivial), so demeaning (the ques-

tion of) the point of the action.)[27]

Similarly, while Jerome Bruner claims that

> What marks human agents is that their acts are not produced by such physical 'forces' as gravity, but by intentional states: desires, beliefs, knowledge, intentions, commitments

he adds to his stipulation of intention the rider that

> It is intrinsically difficult to 'explain' exactly why it is that human agents, impelled by intentional states, do as they do or react to each other as they do – particularly in the unexpected or non-canonical situations that constitute stories.[28]

Narrative tends to exclude strictly causal explanations because of 'narrative gaps': Peter Johnson cites Gallie's acknowledgment that

> there are contingencies in life – unforeseeable disaster, accidents, windfalls, losses and so on – which create discontinuities in sequences of events and in the development of character.

Johnson points out that "For Gallie, the preparedness to 'wait and see' is essential if we are to grasp what such contingencies amount to when seen in the context of life as a whole": and Gallie himself says that

> what is contingent eg. coincidental or unpredictable is, of course, per se unintelligible. But in relation to a man's life, or to a particular theme in a man's life, it can be understood as having contributed to a particular, acceptable and accepted, conclusion.[29]

As a comment on Conrad's *Chance* has it:

> On the one hand ...chance seems an alogical category that cannot fit our causal lines of explanation. But when chance is the explanation, institutionalized as the operational principle, it is a first cause, a prime mover, and inverts the classic oppositions of reliable/unreliable, truth/fiction, rational discourse/imaginative narrative, order/chaos.[30]

The novels read here are particularly good instances of the understanding that purpose can arise *from* contingency, chance or coincidence.

4. The political is characterised by (among other things) the unpredictability of outcomes – the political chooser (the decision-maker, the policy-maker, for example) cannot perfectly know, cannot fully envisage, what the outcomes will be.[31] Thus Weber's remark that "The final result of political action often, no, even regularly, stands in completely inadequate and often paradoxical relation to its original meaning".[32]

The "constant contingency of politics" is, in Hannah Arendt's view, a consequence of the uniqueness of individuals. It is not clear, however, that conventional political theory (or even all radical or post-modern theory) allows for this understanding or is capable of offering a full account of the ubiquity of contingency, chance and coincidence (as factors in human – and thence political – life). Commenting on Arendt, Margaret Canovan notes that both the tradition of political theory and contemporary political science tends to generalize in terms such as system, structure, class and role: while this is "undoubtedly illuminating", it "presupposes a particular view of the human condition" which is "partial, distorting as well as illuminating". Where such terms are emphasized, and "human individuality and action correspondingly neglected", then "the natural trend is to a deterministic picture of life within which events ought in principle to be predictable and forces calculable". ("And yet", Canovan adds, "political events constantly stagger the onlooker by their unpredictability".)[33]

That political action can have unforeseen results, or, more precisely, that the results of political actions cannot be fully predicted, is a result not necessarily, or not only, of bad judgment or of imperfect knowledge (or of the sheer scope of, the range of potential 'beneficiaries' of, political decisions) but of the intervention, beyond the knowledge or control of the chooser (whether free-standing or embedded), of contingency.

Steve Buckler speaks of the 'enigmatic quality' of public action, and its irreducible contingency. For both of those reasons,

> To say fully why one did things as one did and not otherwise is, given the character of public action, akin to, and as impossible as, saying fully why one is who one is and not other.

This works against "the kind of generalized classification presupposed in any full explanatory account".[34] That being so, it is not, perhaps, surprising that Buckler instances drama as explanatory, as I cite novels for the same purpose: works of literature may be better than theory at capturing 'the spontaneous and unique nature of actions', and the stories of the characters responsible for those actions.

Novels show that much of what appears to be a matter of choice is actually subject to arbitrary intervention – contingency and coincidence – or that choice, the capacity required for action or agency, takes up, or follows from, chance incidents or occasions. In *Leviathan*, the element of chance in the plot, and Sachs's reactions preclude rationality as understood theoretically.[35] And *Mao II* shows how 'rational' decisions may stem as well from chance or accident as from rational decision-making, and, indeed, that in actual situations the two become inextricably mixed. Neither Sachs nor Gray are, apparently, men who consider their options, weigh advantages and disadvantages, to arrive at rational, considered, decisions. But as both characterizations suggest, 'going with' the contingent does not necessarily hinder political action, or adversely affect political outcomes.

5. Even where radical theorists accept the ubiquity of contingency, there are still particular problems. I have already noted that such theory quite often takes a pessimistic view of contingency: that it is to be avoided or, at best, to be negotiated, coped with. For example, Connolly's remarks quoted above emphasize disasters - 'the death of a parent, the intrusion of war', that which is 'dangerous, unruly, and obdurate'; and similarly Young takes Connolly to be referring to "our ultimate human fragility in the face of mortality, disease and disaster". However, not only do novels show that even the direst events – death and near-death, for example – can be opportunities for action, or for the development of characters who turn to action[36], but narrative accounts also allow that less dramatic (or negative) contingent occurrences may also – and more often – have their effect: and that effect may impinge directly on political behaviour.

In the novel the contingent just *occurs*, in the plot (as in 'real life'). Theory wants to *resolve* it, to explain and explain away; for literature it *remains* contingent, and open. The contrast is well made by Stuart Hampshire's contention that

> The experience that carries a person beyond the successive routines of experience is initiated suddenly and unpredictably ... However carefully a person deliberates, in Aristotelian style, about the ends of action, assessing what most makes life worth living, he ought always to be open to surprises, discoveries, and uncertainties.[37]

Theory needs to accommodate contingency: novels not only show this to be the case, they also show how that might done.

The Narrative Process

(Fictional) narratives violate the systematic nature of theory: they remind theory of the sheer *messiness* of much lived existence: but they also – co-incidentally – unite the fragments, through emplotment, the process of narrative construction.

There is a sense in which much of what is said about narrative is underlaid by a notion analogous to political usages of control. The ordering process of narrative in action – construction, selection, arrangement – equates to control of the elements of narrative, demonstrating the capacity for achieving a complete(d), organized whole. While in terms of narrative *content* chance and coincidence upset the flow of events, disturb expected directions in the development of character and action, narrative *form* incorporates contingency within an ordered whole.

Novels 'contain' contingency by way of emplotment, whereby isolated events are placed within a developing network of further acts. An account of narrative in relation to the social sciences speaks of "constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*". The distinction from other forms of explanation is that meaning is not attributed by categorization:

> narrativity precludes sense-making of a singular isolated phenomena. Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal or spatial relationship to other events. Indeed, the chief character of narrative is that it renders understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) *parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices.[38]

Thus, for instance, in *Leviathan*, as the story unfolds events are placed, reported by Sachs and interpreted by Aaron. And in that process, the plot – the pattern of these events within the narrative (including the disturbed time sequence consequent upon the combination of Aaron's conjectures and Sachs's occasional appearances and corrections of the story as Aaron understands it)[39] – 'explains' the changes in Sachs' identity which we know to have been occasioned by chance occurrences.

It is particularly significant here that narrative accounts are *retrospective*. Contingencies are then assimilated into the story (of a life, of instances of political agency) by way of relating them to, 'relating' their place in, an ongoing narrative - as, for instance, in the example cited above of Sachs' understanding of his life 'back to the beginning'. Quentin Skinner has noted the extent to which justifications of actions are made retrospectively: narrative fictions both show this to be the case and (thereby) justify the incorporation of narratives and narrative method into 'theoretical' accounts of politics.[40] However, an understanding and acceptance of retrospective narration does not entail a teleology nor a supposition that pre-determined outcomes determine the narrative process.

In his essay *Contingency and Poetics*[41], Gary Morson discusses the conventional view that literary works are 'closed worlds', where everything in the work contributes to the end in view (to the author's intention). Then 'chance' "intrudes only to be tamed", and anything that apparently does not "emerge from the causal chain", "yet accomplishes what the design requires".

This treatment of contingency by a literary critic would appear to contradict and negate my argument here. However, having developed an argument from Aristotelian poetics in various ways related to the literary reading of texts, Morson turns to a problem not dis-

similar to the issues I raise here. Despite theories of causality and necessity, "the future is not guaranteed ... The world is rife with contingency and the unpredictable, the future is anything but given in advance". There are, he suggests, three possible responses to our experience of contingency. It is only apparently such, 'in reality' subsumed to a greater design; or we advance by coping with it as best we may (a Darwinian response); or contingency is part of a world characterised by 'causality for the most part', where "causality flows only from the past and present to the future, but includes no backward causation". And that latter view allows at least some works of literature to be compared with 'real life' (as I have been doing here).

Morson admits that "poetics in its many variants" does not allow for this – hence, for example, his earlier emphasis on closure. But some novels do demonstrate his point – these are "works which operate by process rather than by overall design". Unity (coherence) is achieved by "forward, rather than backward, causation"; and "the unity we sense is that of a coherent process. We sense not an overall structure but a more or less regular heuristic". Such works display 'aperture' rather than closure – there are endings but no *final* accounting (the story could continue). And in this 'process literature',

> the story as it has developed is one of many possible stories ... if it were possible to play the tape over again, there are many points where something else might have happened.[42]

Two points relevant to my discussion arise from the later stage of Morson's argument. Firstly, and in general, the type of novel relevant to political theory is, I would claim, the 'open' work as Morson characterizes it. That is, those social scientists who strive after the first of Morson's options on causality – a kind of 'god-guaranteed' causality – *also*, if they turn to literature at all, are likely to favour the realist novel with plot, (leading to) denouement, (leading to) closure. But recognition of the limitations of causality (or, acceptance of 'for the most part' causality – and probability rather than predictability) should sit more comfortably with the non-realistic novel – 'process literature' as Morson would have it.[43]

Secondly, as my usage of 'emplotment' is intended to emphasize, it is the *process* of arranging events into a coherent narrative, rather

than the understanding of *plot* as overall design with a pre-determining effect on the story being narrated, which is significant. *Leviathan* is especially helpful in this respect in its foregrounding of the narrative process. That Aaron is a confused, unreliable narrator, prone to misunderstandings, hasty judgments which have later to be revised, and to an inability to decide which versions of events are 'true', makes the point very plainly. *Leviathan* is presented as a (exaggeratedly) *closed* narrative: in 'plot' terms, we know the end at the beginning. However, the 'narrative within a narrative' structure shows the process of construction; and the internal narrative is open. Paradoxically, although Aaron begins at the end, as it were – and in that respect is almost a parody of the omniscient author – it becomes only too evident in the course of the novel that he gets things wrong, *does not* see connections, *does not* see what is coming.

Narrative can 'contain' contingency, not in any sense of explaining it away, or of subordinating it to (pseudo-scientific) theories of causality or to (pseudo-psychological) notions of intention and motivation, but in that it acknowledges it as a factor in human lives – simply, makes it part of the story. The point for political theory is that political life is also prone to contingency, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. And novels may, at the least, help in the understanding that this is so.

Conclusion

Life is full of contingency; and not all contingency is malign. Much political activity (the actions of political agents) springs from responses to contingency - more than from reasoned judgment? Narrative shows how the contingent can be incorporated into a coherent story, by the process of emplotment, *and* restores the element of reason and judgment by way of retrospective telling, *accounting* for the place of contingency and its effects.

Fictional accounts depict characters whose fulfilment, or, identity, is achieved precisely by way of their response to the contingent. I query whether these accounts are 'merely' fictional, or whether they present valid pictures of human behaviour and 'motivation' that are

applicable politically. Are the plots of novels like *Leviathan* and *Mao II* (too) contrived – or (along with other fictional narratives) are they more 'life-like' than many detached theoretical accounts of the possibility of action? Auster is quoted as saying that

> there's a widely held notion that novels shouldn't stretch the imagination too far. Anything that appears implausible' is necessarily taken to be forced, artificial, 'unrealistic'.[44]

A sense of 'implausibility' may stem from the part chance and coincidence play in these novels: but to find this implausible may be to deny the extent of chance in 'real life'.

One 'conclusion' to be drawn from readings of these novels is that, in addition to the obvious, that life is indeed prone to contingencies (and that, therefore, the fictional is not necessarily as 'fictional' as all that), political life is like that. And that being so, the absence from many theoretical accounts of an equivalent to the contingent elements of emplotment present in (fictional) narratives is problematic for political understanding, for political theory.

'Dealing with contingency' carries a double sense, of 'seeing to', or of 'playing with'. The former suggests that contingency is a problem, the latter, 'dealing with what's dealt', acting on the basis of the cards in one's hand, is potentially both more open and more prone to risk.[45] Political theory does not always deal well with contingency; to the extent that politics treats contingency as abnormal or outside of its own normal sphere of operations, as it were, then the novel, with its account of the contingently-induced behaviour of political agents, is likely to be more realistic, and therefore more helpful in this respect, for political understanding, than the theoretical account.[46]

Notes

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1 'Contingency' may mean several things: the common dictionary definition is that which is "neither necessary nor impossible"; theoretical discussions characterize it as that which escapes control, the disordered, the random; my literary readings associate it with coincidence and chance, the unpredictable or unexpected; all of these (not incompatible) meanings are relevant, and referred to, at various points in my discussion.

2 Cf. J.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1975), 166: when time is regarded, in the secular outlook, as "the domain of pure contingency", there is no place for temporizing, and action is necessary because one doesn't know what fate will bring and so the assumption is "that unless acted upon, it will bring change *to one's disadvantage*"(my emphasis).

3 Cf. William Connolly *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 141: Connolly identifies some of the elements involved in a "contemporary devaluation of the future available to our civilization", including "the capacity to launch nuclear holocaust"; and cf. John Dunn *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981-1989* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 210: Dunn is pessimistic about the capacity of modern political theory to cope with the political choices consequent upon and the hazards facing human kind – economic mismanagement, and environmental and nuclear disasters – he comments on the "imprudence in the politics of advanced capitalist societies", for example in "the question of safety in the design of energy installations".

4 Indeed, inasmuch as the political is defined as 'the art of the possible', as a process of adjustment to the unexpected and unforeseeable, and political society is characterised as secular and timebound, then politics itself is bound up with contingency: cf. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 8, and passim.

5 I focus here on this kind of (mis)understanding of contingency: the concept has received more positive attention from theorists such as Merleau-Ponty or Deleuze, and notably in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*; cf. Connolly's comment on Rorty that "It is notable to me that the issue of the resentment of contingency gets little play in his recent work", William Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 226n11.

6 It may be maintained that the opposition of narrative and rational choice theory is invalid – that the latter is not incompatible with 'telling stories, indeed that the ordering of priorities may entail just that: thus, for instance, (ostensibly) sub-optimal choices can be explained by reference

to more complex choice-making processes than are prima facie apparent – a different and more complex story needs to be told – cf. George Tsebilis *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990): Tsebilis's is a nice example of an attempt to contain 'irrational' decision-making within a given theoretical mode; my focus on contingency, however, directs attention to those situations where there is no 'choice' available, or, where 'choice' is not an appropriate term at all; and cf. Emery Roe, *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* (Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1994).

7 [unsigned review], *New Yorker*, 9 November 1992, 147; cf. Dennis Barone, 'Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel' in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, edited by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1-26, 15: "'Anything can happen': this phrase occurs in all of Auster's books and these books are examinations of struggles to find one's way, to make sense of this fact", and Barone quotes Auster's remark that "chance is a part of reality" (25n3); and cf. Pascal Bruckner, 'Paul Auster, or the Heir Intestate' in *Beyond the Red Notebook*, 27-33: Auster, he claims, loves "coincidences that rhyme the most remote, improbable events. He excels at sprinkling his characters' adventures with correlations, which have no a priori meaning, but to which the story gives unexpected consequences"(29); cf. Eric Wirth, 'A Look Back from the Horizon' in *Beyond the Red Notebook*, 171-82, 175; Arthur Saltzman, '*Leviathan*: Post Hoc Harmonies' in *Beyond the Red Notebook*, 162-70, 164; Peter Kirkegaard, 'Cities, Signs and Meanings in Walter Benjamin and Paul Auster: or, Never Sure of Any of It', *Orbis Littterarum, International Review of Literary Studies*, Copenhagen, 48 (2-3), 1993, 161-79, 176.

8 Saltzman, '*Leviathan*: Salzman follows this observation with a query – "how then can one be responsible in a mysterious, unpredictable world?" – a relevant political question.

9 Mark Osteen, 'Phantoms of Liberty: the Secret Lives of *Leviathan*', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14 (1), 1994, 87-91, 91.

10 Daniel Aaron, 'How to Read Don DeLillo', *South Atlantic Quarterly* [Special Issue, The Fiction of Don DeLillo, edited by Frank Lentricchia], 89(2), Spring 1990, 305-319, 308.

11 Philip Horne, 'It's Just a Book', L*ondon Review of Books*. 17 December, 1992, 20-21.

12 That is, political theory might be expected to address how things actually are, or could be, rather than abstractions: and see Quentin Skinner on 'trivial instances', p.17 below.

13 Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 142.