Subjective Contingency and Autobiographical Writing[1]

Abstract

This paper deals with the role of *contingency* in the genre of autobiography. The notion of contingency varies in meaning as it appears in logic, rhetoric, theology or literature. The semantic focus point is the relation between that which exists by chance and that which exists by necessity. In literature the fundamental ambition of many autobiographies is to transcend the ephemeral 'conditions humaines' and give the individual life an interpretation of necessity. Readings of autobiographical writings of St. Augustine, Montaigne and Breytenbach attempt to show how this ambition develops through history and meets it limits.

Résumé

Dette arbejdspapir handler om den rolle *kontingens* spiller i den selvbiografiske genre. Begrebet kontingens varierer i betydning når det bruges i logik, retorik, teology eller litteratur. Betydningskernen er relationen mellem det der eksisterer af tilfældighed, og det der eksisterer med nødvendighed. I litteraturen er den gennemgående bestræbelse i mange selvbiografier forsøget på at overvinde de temporære betingelser for menneskelig eksistens og give det individuelle liv en fortolkning som gør det nødvendigt. Læsninger af Augustins, Montaignes og Breytenbachs selvbiografiske tekster forøger at vise hvordan denne bestræbelse udvikler sig gennem historien og møder sine grænser.

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Contingencies

According to philosophy, contingency, in the strict sense of the word, means that which exists without formal necessity. Thus, in the entire fabric of modal logic contingencies refer to chance. From one point of view chance is superfluous, cut away by Occam's razor, but on the other hand it is crucial because it marks out the limits of the laws of necessity, whatever their foundation may be. In Aristotle this limit is examined, for example, in his rhetorical argument, the *enthymema*, or in types of knowledge other than the theoretical or scientific one, as for example, in practical knowledge, *phronesis*, or in art, *techne*. Aristotle quotes Agathon: 'art loves chance and chance loves art.'[2] Later, in Thomas Aquinas, the investigation moved from science in the Aristotelean sense to the reflections on divine providence in theology. Chance is a real component of human life, but is overruled by divine providence, although this instance may be both invisible and incomprehensible to humans.[3] In modern, mathematically-founded Newtonian science, chance challenges the limits of mathematics to express the laws of nature and is investigated in the mathematics of probabilities.[4] Thus, contingency always expresses the threshold between what can be known with necessity and what has to be grasped on the basis of ordinary experience or belief. And, at the same time, contingency always challenges our capacity to express this knowledge or belief.

In a less strict sense of the term contingencies are all things ephemeral. This is a common sense corollary to the various philosophical meanings. If something only exists according to the conditions of human experience, *de facto* as it were, then it, *eo ipso*, is of the temporal nature. Hence, contingent phenomena always call for a reflection on the oppositions between durability and

[2] Aristotle: *Nichomachean Ethics* book VI. R. McKeon (ed.): *Introduction to Aristotle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.
[3] Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica* I, qu.22 art.2 (http://www.newadvent.org/summa)
[4] Laplace, Pierre-Simon de (1836). Introduction. *Théorie analytique des probabilités. Œuvres complètes* 7. Paris: Gauthier-Villars. v-cliii.

ephemerability and between one-time aspects and general or universal aspects of human life and experience.

In both cases literature and art – art in a more narrow and modern sense of the word than Aristotle's – constitute an essential part of the reflexion. In the first case, because through art and literature we are able to express the complex of experience of something which undeniably exists but without doing so of necessity in any sense of the word, and in art and literature we are also able to express ourselves in such a way that we cannot avoid acknowledging this fact, out of artistic necessity as it were. This insight, then, gives human life a necessity of an existential nature. Greek tragedy constantly confronts us with this type of necessity as great art has continued to do ever since. In the second case, art may transform the ephemeral nature of experience into the durable form of art, an experience that has been part of the poetic heritage since Orpheus dropped his harp and continues being so whenever the mind-blowing relation between life and death is articulated in art.

Of course, literature and art confront us with a range of the intricacies of human life that is more encompassing than contingencies. But this problem, rooted as it is in philosophy and thereby in a highly reflexive mode of expression, draws upon literature in a particularly emphatic fashion, language being the reflexive medium of expression *par excellence*.[5] Autobiographical writings deal with a specific case of historical contingency - a fragile individual life which, nevertheless, is able to reflect on its temporary nature as a subject. Any piece of autobiographical writing, therefore, is embedded in two contexts, a *referential* one: that of the life it refers to, and a *discursive* one: that of the narrative trajectory to which reference is made through reflection.

The two contexts are interdependent. As a reference never *is*, but is *made*, it is only through discourse that we can decide whether the referential details are true or not, which we, *ipso facto*, can never

[5] David Bell: *Circumstances. Chance in the Literary Text.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

know by necessity; and as a discourse never just *runs - dis-currit* – but is intentional, is discourse *about* something, then it is only through a reference that the discourse acquires an intentional orientation that ensures its communicative efficiency, which we, nevertheless, can never be sure of without reaching out to a reader or listener. So, through the mutual relationship between reference and discourse it becomes evident that they both evoke or produce a destabilizing contingency that makes autobiographical writing an ongoing project in search of a stable *foundation* beyond both reference and discourse. This search is a unified attempt to turn the objective circumstantial nature of human life into existential necessity and to transcend our short-lived existence through the durable form of writing.

Thus, I do not intend to discuss the limits of autobiography as a genre. I am interested in sketching its foundational project as articulated in three autobiographical writings having fuzzy genre boundaries. The three texts are Augustine's *Confessiones* from about 400 AD, Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* from 1580 and Breyten Breytenbach's *Dog Heart* from 1998.[6] They all share an autobiographical *reflection* with foundational ambitions. From this perspective the two usually posed questions will not be asked: 1) does the text offer a true testimony of a life and a time? and 2) how does the text answer the question: 'Who am I'? - Of course, the identity issue[7] can never be omitted when we consider autobiographical writing, nor can its reference. But here the foundation of identity is more important than the specific identity acquired through the autobiography, and the decision concerning the truth and falsity of the events related to us is insignificant when compared to the writer's manner of trying to keep the interplay

[6] Augustine: *St. Augustine's Confessiones*. London: Heinemann, 1961; Michel de Montaigne: *Essais*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962; Breyten Breytenbach: *Dog Heart*. Cape Town: Humans and Rousseau, 1998.
[7] Robert Langbaum: *The Mysteries of Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 1977; Karlheinz Stierle and Odo Marquardt (eds.): *Identität*. München: Fink, 1979; Charles Taylor: *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

between actual experience and discursive construction an open game.

Instead, I will investigate how the texts, implicitly or explicitly, focus on three basic problems:

- How is the contingent life *anchored* in order for its contingency to be transcended?
- By which *capacity* does the writer or the subject bring about this safeguarding of his ephemeral life?
- What are the *conflicts* and contradictions ensuing from these attempts?

The Role of Memory

In St. Augustine's *Confessiones* the author turns to God to solve the problem of the foundation of his temporal existence. He makes a detour via the notion of memory, the basic requirement for any autobiographer and the topic of book X of the *Confessiones*. His ultimate goal is to answer the question: how can we remember God and thereby be ourselves. How can I be myself by remembering God? That God exists as the supreme being, goes without saying. So, my passing life can be seen through God by my remembrance of God, and then I can go beyond my temporary existence and truly come into existence. The strange fact is that Augustine's argument ends in the extreme opposite position: God approached through memory vanishes. As soon as the I, first, tries to define what memory is in order to be clear about what remembrance of God means, and then, secondly, tries to talk about it, then God as the indubitable trans-temporal and necessary existence disappears and the I is left with its own permanently repeated invocations as the only guarantee of its existence. Thus, in Augustine, the ultimate foundation is God, the writer's means to approach it is memory, and, as we shall see, the conflict following from this strategy is the placelessness of God – the foundation can be found nowhere.

Nevertheless, place is pivotal point in Augustine's discussion. Place is crucial both to classical epistemology based on Aristotle's principles of physics and to the classical notion of memory and the rhetorical *ars memoria* based on imagined places.[8] In book X memory is first related to things we remember from sense experience and place in the storehouse of memory in our mind, making them thereby durable because they can be called forth again by an act of will. Second, Augustine notes that we also remember mathematical principles without any sense experience and thereby without location. But they are still located in our minds. Augustine does not know how this happens, but simply states that this is where they are. Anyone who argues against this fact they is just stupid he states dogmatically, without any argument.

But Augustine's logico-rhetorical subtleness begins to show when problems unsolvable by logic emerge. We can also remember that we are able to remember and remember that happiness is good without having experienced it and even continue to remember it without feeling it, he says. More strangely, we can remember that we are able to forget and also that we actually have forgotten something. When we finally remember something once forgotten, we may also remember that we had forgotten it in the first place. This is strange. If forgetting is loss of memory – which is the basic classical definition - how can we then remember it, and still claim that memory is located in the mind when what is in there is really not there because it is the forgetting we remember? Thus, we are able to remember things that have no place either inside or outside our mind.

At this point subtleness becomes a problem, not a problem-solving weapon in the use of logic: if God is not in my memory but

[8] Herwig Blum: *Die antike Mnemotecknik*. Hildesheim: Olms, 1969; Harald Weinrich: *Lethe. Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*. München: Beck, 1997; Frances Yates: *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

still has to be remembered, then God comes dangerously close to forgetting:[9]

> Great is the power of memory; a thing, O my God, to be amazed at, a very profound and infinite multiplicity: and this thing is the mind, and this thing am I. What am I therefore, O my God? What kind of nature am I? […] Yea, I will pass beyond this capacity of mine which is called memory, […] Yea, I will soar beyond mine own memory, that I may find thee – where, O thou truly Good, and thou secure Sweetness? Where shall I be able to find thee? […] See now how great a space [quantum spatiatus] I have coursed over in my memory seeking thee, O Lord; and I found thee not outside it. For I found nothing at all concerning thee, but what I have kept in my memory, ever since I first learnt thee. […] But whereabouts in my memory is thy residence, O Lord? Whereabouts there abidest thou? What kind of lodging hast thou there framed for thyself? What manner of shrine hast thou builded for thyself? […] Where did I find thee, that I might learn thee? For in my memory thou wert not before I learnt thee. In what place therefore did I find thee, that so I might learn thee, but even in thine own self, far above myself? Place [locus] there is none; we go backward and forward, but place there is none.

From the reassuring analysis of memory in relation to sense experience and mathematical principles Augustine recognizes now, accompanied by an endless series of open questions, that the memory that leads to the ultimate insight, that is of God, cannot locate him, but is inseparably linked to the memorizing and questioning subject. His presentation is splintered in invocations, questions and passionate outbursts exposing a troubled identity. Through this whole process Augustine, inadvertently but also inevitably, has to realize that to remember God, and thereby to grasp the foundation of his own identity, means, more than anything else, a process of forgetting. He remembers something that has never been in his mind. He cannot refer to God who is outside experience. God only becomes present for him as the foundation of his existence, making it necessary and a part of a larger picture,

[9] Augustine, op.cit., 121-123, 141-145.

when invoked through the ongoing enunciative and thereby subjective process when the I addresses him. His discourse explodes in open-ended questions. In this sense the individual contingent life cannot be anchored outside the discourse that carries out the anchoring process. The foundation established through memory collapses because of the very nature of the memory actualized to establish it. Contingency is there to stay.

The Will and the Body

In his *Essais* Michel de Montaigne tries to rely on human nature to find himself, not human nature as such, or as god-given, as is the case in Augustine who seeks his identity vis-a-vis God. Montaigne seeks the nature of the individual being Michel. This quote is composed from "De la solitude":[10]

> Or la fin, ce crois-je, en [= de la solitude] est tout'une, d'en vivre plus à loisir et à son aise. […] Or, puis que nous entreprenons de vivre seuls et de nous passer de compagnie, faisons que nostre contentement despende de nous; desprenons nous de toutes les liaisons qui nous attachent à autruy, gaignons sur nus de pouvoir à bon escient vivre seulss et y vivre a nostr'aise. […] Il se faut reserver une arrière boutique toute nostre, toute franche, en laquelle nous establissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retraicte et solitude. […] la plus grande chose du monde, c'est de sçavoir ester à soy.

Montaigne sets out to find his true self in necessary isolation from disturbing human interaction in his 'arrière boutique' where he indulges in scriptural meditation, reading and writing. But in order to see the true person behind the quotidian manners and appearances he has to rely on his will more than on his memory. Of course, he shares details from his personal life with the reader. But the *Essais* are basically about how he, through the power of his will, tries to master language and body to make his true self emerge.

[10] Montaigne, op.cit., 232-236.

Those with only a "volonté delicate"[11] will have difficulties in finding themselves in isolation.

Fantasy poses one problem for the will ("De la force de l'imagination"[12]). It is an intoxicating experience for him to be together with sick people, he admits: he becomes sick himself in spite of his will to react more reasonably. Retirement from the world solves part of the problem. But, as Augustine also had experienced, the male body has its involuntary emissions and physiological reactions that the will cannot control, existing in splendid isolation, simply as part of being alive. Being alone with the body, only trying to submit it to the power of will and reason, proves to be futile.

Another problem is reading, which should be a deliberate mental activity. The good reader does not get overstimulated, he states in "Des livres."[13] Stick to the classics where you have notes and prior-knowledge that keeps you calm and makes you forget your actual condition, is the advice he gives to himself. But to no avail. Reading requires good health and forces you to concentrate on your bodily condition in order to be also well fitted for purely mental reflection; it requires concentration on age, illness, frailty, hunger, sexuality etc. – all the things of this very body that escape control.[14]

A third limit to the unrestricted power of the will is writing, which is obviously under the will's control. But as soon as he writes, he is engaged in a project of communication and thus reflects the society he has deliberately withdrawn from. To withdraw and still want to return, though indirectly through writing, is "une contradiction ridicule,"[15] he says, nevertheless practicing this contracdiction as he goes on writing. This is not a sophism on my

[11] Ib., 237.
[12] Ib., 95ff.
[13] Ib., 387-400.
[14] Ib., 240, cf. Christopher Lawrence & Steven Shapin (eds.): *Science Incarnate. Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998.
[15] Montaigne, op.cit., 239.

part. He is aware of it. He ought to erase the traces like an animal hiding itself in its hole, he exclaims.[16] But speaking and writing *is* to leave traces, and time to write was what he wanted to obtain in his solitude. At a certain point in "Du dementir" Montaigne entirely gives up arguing.[17] He cannot stop writing – the book is part of him just as much as he is part of the book he is writing. So the most delicious joy *is* to actually leave traces of oneself – to engage "à un registre de durée, de toute sa foy, de toute sa force."[18] The will to life itself, reaching out to others, is greater than the will to control the distance to others, but is only revealed by practicing the will to control it. His true self is a self 'à dementir,' that is contingent, relying on others through the need to communicate in order to leave traces.

Thought and spiritual meditation in splendid isolation do not do the work all by themselves. Quite the contrary. Reading turns out to be a bodily-conditioned and thus fatiguing process that requires bodily care – upon which he comments on almost every page preoccupied as he is over and over again with his health. The reading and writing experience underscores then, in spite of his deliberate solitude, his dependence on others and disrupts the necessary solitude. And when alone, he has to express himself to find out about himself, and thereby rely on a shared medium of communication. The very way in which he tries to stabilize the self through meditative solitude, actually undermines it. To rely on human nature means to rely on others in order to be oneself. To anchor his identity in an assumed sameness of his own individual nature, his particular Michel-ness, through a willful cultivation of solitude, nevertheless orients him inevitably toward the contingencies of social life through the very means with which he tries to control his withdrawal – reading and writing.

[16] Ib., 242.
[17] Ib., 648.
[18] Ib., 648.

Writing and Experiment

In his recent memoirs, *Dog Heart*, Breyten Breytenbach confronts us directly with writing and language without making a detour through God or human nature, memory or will power:

> To cut a long story short: I am dead. […] To write is to make memory visible, and this memory uncovers a new landscape. When the tree of writing is shaken all manner of things come crashing down – fruit, empty tin cans with exotic labels, birds still calling out their names, birdnests, books, bicycles, even dead resistance fighters or a lamed angel hiding among the leaves from the wings of darkness. […] The dreams of the dead cannot die. […] Just as you cannot survive without dreams, you cannot move on without memory of where you come from, even if that journey is fictitious. Is what we call identity not that situation made up of the bits and pieces which one remembers from previous encounters, events and situations? [19]

From the start, Breytenbach questions memory in presuming that the memorial process and its content constitute a backward reconstruction, or rather follows its own logic of dreaming where, as in Freud, "The world doesn't really have a past and a future."[20] Hence this logic turns past and future into one extended presence, articulated by his own memorial writing process, based on his forgetting of who he 'really' was – which is why he claims that he is dead. "The human is an angel who unlearns the remembrance of nothingness,"[21] he states in a phrase that might have meant consolation for Augustine. But Breytenbach does not want to anchor his contingent life in a metaphysical and divine power like Augustine, or in an assumed human or individual nature according to Montaigne's precedent or in the mode opened by the tradition of *Bildung*. His autobiography constructs a kind of contingent coherence, but only by referring to selected events, great and small,

[19] Breytenbach, op.cit., 9, 16-17.
[20] Ib., 119.
[21] Ib., 17.

never to a total vision of oneself, as Augustine and Montaigne sought in their different ways. Past experiences have no autonomous status with respect to the present fragmented bewilderment, but are only there when and if they meet present needs. Breytenbach's point of departure is not, as in Montaigne, the fact that I exist and can try to find out about the permanent foundation of my identity in my inner nature, nor, as in Augustine, the fact that God exists and that I, then, can find out who am I as God's creature. They both had to realize that the presupposed stable ground under or in our existence dissolves through the memorial act of discourse that brings it forth.

Instead, Breytenbach begins with the paradoxical fact that he does not exist – he is dead it is said on the first page, killed by a dog, He only comes into existence through the memorial process of writing from memories selected because of their function, not in the objective past he refers to, but in the subjectively experienced present he is part of, and which makes the past *his* past here and now. So, memory and the coherence of the self are only momentarily there, through the discursive process and conditioned by it. It cannot be anchored in any objective past or beyond human experience and discursive processes. The elements of memory are arbitrary fragments absorbed by the discursive process. The foundation of the contingent existence is only to be found within this existence itself, in the articulation of it in a shared medium that lifts it out of the private isolation of its singular events but not beyond its inherent and necessary contingency. The capacity to set this discursive process in motion is what is required by the writer – memory and will are but components of this process.

Breytenbach's text brings into the open what has been a disturbing undercurrent in the texts of his predecessors: autobiographical writing does not produce a transcendence of contingency, but rather constitutes an *experiment* with its foundation. This experiment unfolds through writing as a collective

and shared human condition, and its continuation is the only foundation that an autobiography can offer to the contingency of human life: "We cover a wide field from past to future to where the two are knotted in the living memory thread of writing. Writing is always the present time finding its tense."[22]

Encounters in Memory Lane

Contingency is a way of seeing life as the mode of existence of passers-by. In Memory Lane they meet each other in their attempt to overcome the contingency of their lives by employing different memorial strategies and inspired by the same basic strive for finding some constitutive durability in life. Somewhere there *must* be a stable foundation beyond the contingent life of myself and my fellow human beings. However different the strollers of life and memory may be, they all share a common experience of the futility of the final outcome of their aspirations. But they also find a common ground in another experience – the process of trying to pursue the unattainable goal is the closest you come to reach it.

Autobiography is one such attempt, and one of the most challenging because the author invests his own existence and his most profound capacities in the project. In spite of the permanent reoccurrence of such a project across the contingent manifestations of human culture through history, it also reflects the changing historical conditions of the project. Here I have briefly outlined three examples – Augustine's written memory of his own essential being through a self-defeating reference to God, Montaigne's undefatigable memory of himself through references to the ephemeral details of his own life and thoughts, trying to stabilize them through written reflections, and Breytenbach's punctual memory to selected parts of life, not in order to overcome their evasive fragmentations but to expose their contingency through an experiment in writing, thus emphasizing the contingent process of

[22] Ib., 30.

writing as the most fundamental point of reference in the human attempt to cope with the inevitable contingency of life.

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