

FUTURE-FOUNDING POETRY

Topographies of
Beginnings from
Whitman to the
Twenty-First
Century



SASCHA PÖHLMANN

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Future-Founding Poetry

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Edited by Reingard M. Nischik
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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: On How to Begin, and Where	1
1: Whitman: Beginning American Poetry	37
2: Williams: Beginning Again	104
3: Hughes: Urgent Beginnings	157
4: Rukeyser: Communal Beginnings	203
5: Ginsberg: Defiant Beginnings	256
6: Future-Founding Poetry after 9/11	304
Conclusion: On Where to End	353
Notes	357
Works Cited	383
Index	401

Introduction: On How to Begin, and Where

Here we begin: not to let purposes transcend making.

—Ann Lauterbach, “Before Recollection”

AMERICAN POETRY IS a good place to begin, both to begin *with* and to begin *in*. Its cultural context, the very imagination of America itself, has for centuries relied so heavily on tropes of beginnings and futures that they have become stereotypical. America is undoubtedly *the* place of beginnings in modernity, the very site of the future: the New World, the land of opportunity. America has served and continues to serve this imaginary and symbolic function, having been subjected as a concept to a US-American nationalization, and examples of its construction in cultural artifacts all over the world are too numerous, varied, and indeed familiar to be listed here at length. Remarkably, the most well-known instances are also those that are most often misrepresented, for example John Locke’s famous statement in the *Second Treatise of Government* that “in the beginning all the world was America” (22), which is much less of an aphorism when considered in its context and quoted in full, since it refers to an America that was characterized by the absence of that which has since come to define it to a significant extent: “Thus in the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now; for no such thing as money was anywhere known” (22). Other instances of the imaginative construction of America as a place of beginnings have come at a great price, and many beginnings have been made at the cost of those who had already begun in America: when Alexis de Tocqueville states in *Democracy in America* that “those coasts so well suited for trade and industry, those deep rivers, that inexhaustible valley of the Mississippi—in short, the whole continent—seemed the yet empty cradle of a great nation” (30), he does so after having declared the other civilizations on that continent to be quite uncivilized and “*only waiting*” (30) for the true beginning of civilization that would be made by the Europeans. Yet there would only be more beginnings after that, especially in the context of US-American nation-building: the creation of the American republic itself was framed as nothing less than a new beginning of everything. As Thomas Paine puts it in *Common Sense*, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand, and a race of men perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains,

are to receive their portion of freedom from the event of a few months" (120). In these words, Paine provides the paradigm of future America that has become one of the most firmly rooted tropes in its discursive construction. It is not only beginning *again* but *having the power* to do so that matters to him and will continue to matter to America in centuries to come; Paine emphasizes that beginnings, even world-changing ones, are *made*. As such profoundly human phenomena, beginnings can be violent and peaceful, positive and negative, and they can be quite different from what they begin or what results they produce; they can create more beginnings and potential as well as nothing but finality. This complexity of beginnings is of central concern in this study, and I will consider a particular field of cultural production where it is negotiated as part of a larger imagination of the future, but also a field that curiously lacks critical attention with regard to beginnings and futurity. This site of the imagination is American poetry, and more precisely American poetry from Walt Whitman to 9/11. I will argue first that Whitman has himself begun a poetic mode that I will theorize as "future-founding poetry" with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, continually developing it further throughout his literary career; second, I will argue that this has resulted in a continuum of future-founding poetry that can be traced through the twentieth century into the twenty-first, and which underwent various and indeed radical transformations but still always formed a strong undercurrent of poetic production in the United States that is of considerable aesthetic as well as political significance.

I define future-founding poetry as poetry that aims to actively mark and perform a beginning that is relevant to a combined imagination of both present and future. This is based on the assumption that the future is not simply somehow *there*, just like place is never just there, but that it is a concept that needs to be actively constructed, produced, and maintained in imaginative and material processes. In short, it needs to be founded, and this can take various forms. The merit of such a theorization of future-founding in American poetry is that it opens up new complexities with regard to issues that are as well established as they are often simplified: this means especially the cliché of American newness, but also nationalized narratives of beginnings that have been addressed especially in the early works of American studies. By offering a theory of future-founding, this study hopes to provide a framework in which the presentation and performance of beginnings can be analyzed beyond more reductive notions of newness, progress, and originality, which sharpens our view to aspects such as sustainability, changeability, or risk, that have often been neglected in favor of those ideas. This theory of future-founding therefore works to recognize a variety of attitudes toward the future in their complexity of different elements, and not as dominated by a single concept of newness; furthermore, it also aims to detach such

notions and constructions of futurity and the practice of beginning from the national and nationalist discourses that they have often come to be associated with, and which they have often served, especially in the case of the United States. Instead, I hope to show that they can undermine rather than reaffirm national constructions of identity, and that the beginnings of the future-founding poetry discussed here potentially and actually exceed and challenge the limits of the national. Beginnings may have been heavily nationalized and inscribed accordingly in an attempt to make them synonymous with Americanness itself, and some of the poetry discussed here has undeniably participated in this process, but at the same time future-founding poetry also resists such an exploitation by a dominant national paradigm and rejects its limitations for other conceptualizations of identity and community. In other words, future-founding poetry undoubtedly plays its part in a larger cultural attempt to claim futurity (and newness, progress, etc.) as American and nationalize beginnings themselves, yet it also—and more so, in my opinion—opposes this process as an undue limitation imposed on conceptualizations and imaginations of futurity, and it also works to liberate the future and the beginning from the national rather than fuse them for good. This postnational approach deeply informs my theorization and analysis of future-founding poetry, even if it may not always be foregrounded in it.

While I may be almost exclusively concerned with American poetry here, I do believe that the analytical concept of future-founding can also be applied to other texts, and that it offers a viable way of thinking about cultural artifacts in general with regard to how humans imagine futurity itself—asking questions of what we think the future is, how we think it relates to the present and past, how long or short we think it is, how much we care about it, how we imagine it without ourselves, where we imagine it, what we can, should, or must do for it, how it affects us, and how we affect it. In addressing these questions with regard to American poetry, my own theorizations and interpretations will be influenced by a text that is itself future-founding, and which I consider to be one of the most important works on the subject of the future in Western philosophy: Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope*. Its importance lies not so much in its conclusions but rather in its enabling function, in what it begins and what it makes possible to begin in turn, as it envisions a philosophy that "*will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge*" (7). As Bloch seeks to gain such knowledge about the "anticipatory [. . .] on the basis of an ontology of the Not-Yet" (13), he provides a set of philosophical tools for thinking about futurity itself, and his abstract conceptualization, along with its political implications, is a fruitful beginning for any project that considers the questions above. This is how *The Principle of Hope* is important to the task at hand; I will neither adapt its aesthetics nor even consistently refer

to it throughout this study, but I will nevertheless acknowledge it as a conceptual (if not temporal) beginning for my thinking about beginnings in American poetry here.

Written between 1938 and 1947 in Bloch's US-American exile, *The Principle of Hope* was produced at a time in which the future of the whole world was at stake like never before, yet it stubbornly resists fatalism or pessimism by holding on to potential precisely at that exceptional historical moment of crisis: "But ages like the modern one, in which history, perhaps for centuries, stands in the balance, have the feeling for the Novum in the extreme, they sense what future is, with bated breath, by working to promote what is approaching, the approaching possible" (288). At this point in time when humanity was facing a considerable threat of finality, Bloch defines it according to its very relation to the Not-Yet: "Man is that which still has much before it" (246; *Der Mensch ist dasjenige, was noch vieles vor sich hat*, 284),¹ and he describes human existence without potential as a death-like state: "Where nothing more can be done or is possible, life stands still" (224). In contrast to the cultural pessimism of works like Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Bloch then explores the nature of optimism in his text, arguing that humanity must first of all learn to relate to the future in the present, a singular task that is a matter of life and death:

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (3)

This is not the definition of hope I will use in this study, since it is misleadingly far from a more common usage of the term. Bloch's definition of hope is largely congruent with my notion of future-founding, and as such it must be distinguished from hope as a term that denotes wishful thinking about the future rather than an active process of affecting or cultivating the future in the present. Bloch highlights the fact that such active hope is work, that it requires a conscious and deliberate intervention rather than a passive desire without any consequence. He usefully distinguishes between wishing and wanting, stating that "in wishing there is not yet any element of work or activity, whereas all wanting is wanting to do" (46), and that for this reason "the wish remains even where the will can no longer change anything" (47). His notion of hope, just like the concept of future-founding, includes this insistence of changeability

and agency, and both are allied with wanting rather than wishing: "Wishing can be undecided, despite the definite imagined goal to which it eagerly looks forward; conversely, wanting is necessarily active progress towards this goal, it goes outwards, has to measure itself exclusively against things given as real" (47). At the same time, wishing is an integral part of such wanting, since "though there may be wishing without wanting, namely feeble, inactive wishing which exhausts itself in the imagination or is impossible, there can be no wanting that is not preceded by wishing" (47). Yet such "feeble, inactive wishing" is precisely a connotation of hope as the term is used today, and this is the sense in which I will use it in my study to distinguish it from future-founding as a more active engagement of the future in the present.

As Bloch inquires into the relation between the present and the future from a Marxist perspective—a philosophy that to him "at last adequately addresses what is becoming and what is approaching" (9)—he seeks to reconcile human agency and material conditions in bringing about change in the world by affecting the future in the present. Speaking not of "merely contemplative reason which takes things as they are and as they stand, but of participating reason which takes them as they go, and therefore also as they could go better" (4), Bloch identifies potential as an integral part of the actual world, an excess of what could be that affects what is, and this duality is particularly evident in the irreducible presence of the future in the present. To Bloch, "thinking means venturing beyond" (4; *Denken heißt Überschreiten*, 2), beyond the present of "what already exists" (4; *Vorhandenes*, 2) into a future that is not merely the "vacuum of an In-Front-of-Us" but always already connected to said present, so that we grasp "the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion, although to be revealed the New demands the most extreme effort of will" (4). Thus, "primarily, everybody lives in the future, because they strive, past things only come later, and as yet genuine present is almost never there at all" (4). Bloch's consistent refusal to think present and future separately is highly important to my theorization of future-founding, since the whole notion of beginning cannot be conceptualized in reference to only one of the two terms. Accordingly, Bloch understands the future not as separate from the present but rather as "the unclosed space for new development in front of us" (8; *den unabgeschlossenen Entstehungsraum vor uns*, 6), a space that is defined in relation to the present but is neither identical with it nor fully accessible. He argues that there is something that "contains the future in the Now-topicality" (297; *das Zukunfthaltige der Jetzt-Aktualität*, 346) and "participates in the darkness of the lived moment" in a way that "constitutes the *most essential characteristic of the future*: being sealed off from contemplation, but also still relatively unknown to tendency-lore" (297; *der Betrachtung verschlossen, aber auch der Tendenzkunde noch relativ unbekannt*, 346).

The future is unknowable and inaccessible to perception (not contemplation, as the translation has it), but it is not so far removed from the present as to make it entirely undetermined by it. On the contrary: the future “itself contains unmastered Now, i.e. darkness, just as the Now itself still contains unopened future, i.e. newness, and surges forward to meet it” (297); present and future thus coexist in mutual dependence, each containing traces of the other. Conceived this way, the combination of future and present opens up a space that exists between the extremes of complete uncertainty and complete determinism; the future is neither wholly disconnected from nor wholly determined by present, and this state makes potential itself possible.

According to Bloch, a pure present without a future is an incomplete reality because it lacks potential: “Reality without real possibility is not complete, the world without future-laden properties does not deserve a glance, an art, a science any more than that of the bourgeois conformist” (223). Importantly, potential is never fully disconnected from the actual, just like the future is never fully separate from the present, a connection that makes future-founding and beginning possible in the first place: “*The Possible is partially conditioned material*, and it is possible only as such” (226). It is “that which is not fully conditional, is that which is not settled” (246–47): if it were fully conditioned, it would become the necessary, and if it were unconditioned, it would no longer be possible. Bloch envisions potential as situated between “contingency” and an “enclosed necessity no longer capable of variability” (234), and both the individual and his or her world are fundamentally characterized by it:

Outside, [. . .] life is just as little finished as in the ego which is working on this outside. No thing could be altered in accordance with wishes if the world were closed, full of fixed, even perfected facts. Instead of these there are simply processes, i.e. dynamic relationships in which the Become has not completely triumphed. The Real is process; the latter is the widely ramified mediation between present, unfinished past, and above all: possible future. Indeed, everything real passes over into the Possible at its processual Front, and possible is everything that is only partially conditioned, that has not yet been fully or conclusively determined. (196)

In this situation between uncertainty and determination—which I will return to in theorizing future-founding—it is possible to create what Bloch calls “a future-laden definiteness” (235; *zukunftstragende Bestimmtheit*, 271) by making a beginning in the present that will affect the future, and which invests the present with an element of futurity. For Bloch, potential is located precisely where present and future overlap: “The Real Possible begins with the seed in which what is coming is

inherent" (237–38). Yet this beginning must be *made* and cultivated continuously, since the "real Possible in seed and inherent propensity is [. . .] never an encapsulated finished entity which, first existing in miniature, simply has to grow out. Instead it proves its openness as really developing unfolding, not as mere spilling out or folding out" (238). Since this development of what is coming is a process, it is never fully determined by the present but always subject to change, while at the same time it is never fully separate from it either, so that what unfolds in the future is always still related to that seed in the present.

In this contact zone of mutual influence, future-founding or beginning can be conceived of as a "*directing act of a cognitive kind*" (12; *Richtungsakt kognitiver Art*, 10), a deed in the present that relates to the future and thus folds both onto each other. Bloch explicitly includes aesthetics in his theorization of such acts, arguing that the utopian imagination of the possible has found a home in literature before philosophy, although the latter is now adding its own qualities to the mix: "Literature has understood the symbolic region of the real Possible more clearly than previous philosophy owing to its figurative nature, but philosophy incorporates this region with strictness of concept and seriousness of connections" (240). He argues that "great works of art" are marked by an inherently future-founding quality as they point beyond their own present and "essentially show a realistically related pre-appearance [Vor-Schein] of their completely developed subject matter. The glance towards prefigured, aesthetically and religiously experimental being is variable within them, but every attempt of this kind is experimenting with something that overhauls, something perfect which the world has not yet seen" (14). Bloch reads this anticipatory imagination as not merely an idealist escapism from the material world but rather as an aesthetic intervention into reality as well as a product of this reality: "The concrete imagination and the imagery of its mediated anticipations are fermenting in the process of the real itself and are depicted in the concrete forward dream; anticipating elements are a component of reality itself. Thus the will towards utopia is entirely compatible with object-based tendency, in fact is confirmed and at home within it" (198–99). This is not just a question of incorporating aesthetics into Marxist dialectic materialism; it is a recognition of art as a major site of "making conscious of the Not-Yet-Conscious" and the "forming of the Not-Yet-Become" (127), or in other words the proper realm of a future-founding imagination that fuses aesthetics with politics.

Even if one leaves Bloch's immediate Marxist framework, the future-founding imagination that inquires into the conceptualizations, circumstances, and conditions of futurity itself appears eminently ethical and political in many ways. For example, one may have to radically redefine one's notion of democracy—of liberty and equality—if it includes those who are not alive yet and grants them rights all the same. Outside the

sphere of poetry, the perfect symbolic manifestation of such a future-founding imagination and its various philosophical, aesthetic, ethical, and political implications is to be found in the “Clock of the Long Now,”² also called “The 10,000 Year Clock,” a clock designed to work for ten millennia—a feat of engineering based on a future-founding imagination, a beginning made in the present that radically reenvisions its relation to the future and challenges our notions of community across time, of duration, semiotics, sustainability, influence, responsibility, and temporality itself. One might say this is the clock Whitman would have liked to build with his future-founding poetry, inquiring into the very meaning of time and futurity in doing so, and beginning a 10,000 Year Poem (or rather many more years) for anyone who would care to continue working on it to make sure it keeps ticking in his or her lifetime and beyond.

I will first conceptualize future-founding in chapter 1 with reference to Whitman’s poetry and prose in order to establish its imaginative basis as thoroughly as possible; I will then consider how poets after Whitman made use of this foundation by building on it very differently, by making changes to it, or even by trying to bring it down and replace it. While each of these chapters (with the exception of the last one) centers around the works of a single poet, these should be considered to be exemplary rather than exceptional; they are certainly not the only poets writing in a future-founding mode, but they are the ones I consider to be especially illustrative of the various concerns such a mode may include. Chapter 2 addresses the modernist future-founding poetry of William Carlos Williams, and particularly his long poem *Paterson*, in order to show how he struggled to begin *again* after Whitman, and how future-founding changes as poems explicitly present themselves as linguistic artifacts and emphasize their own poetic status. Chapter 3 considers how the poetry of Langston Hughes carries out aesthetic and political future-founding work in the African-American context of the Harlem Renaissance and the “red decade” of the 1930s, aiming for urgently teleological rather than iterative beginnings while stressing their performativity. Chapter 4 addresses the issue of future-founding strategies with regard to Muriel Rukeyser in order to establish how she adapts them within a feminist imagination that claims the ability and power to begin for women in a patriarchal society that pretends otherwise, and how she makes and marks communal beginnings in the context of her socialism and pacifism. Chapter 5 focuses on Allen Ginsberg’s update of the Whitmanian mode for a countercultural future-founding imagination that opposes the bleak futures of nuclear war or environmental catastrophe alike, making defiant beginnings in an endangered world in which the option to always imagine another future can no longer be taken for granted for humanity. Finally, chapter 6 finishes the study with a look at how the future-founding imagination was reinvigorated in the twenty-first century in

poetic treatments of 9/11, often directly referencing Whitman as a model for contemporary beginnings.

I would like to be able to offer the reader a generalizing statement that would explain the cultural function of future-founding poetry or its importance in particular contexts, for example by saying that future-founding poetry is always a response to crisis, yet this would simplify matters too much and reduce poetry to a merely responsive art that mirrors the world rather than construct it. It is certainly true on an important yet superficial level, and the story of American future-founding poetry could indeed be told along the lines of crises: the Civil War for Whitman, the First World War or the Great Depression for Williams, Jim Crow racism for Hughes, the Spanish Civil War for Rukeyser, the nuclear age and the Cold War for Ginsberg, and finally 9/11 for just about everyone. Yet such a list already demands its own ironic undertone, and it quickly reveals itself as insufficient. For example: Whose crisis is the Cold War? Who has *not* been affected by an imagination of the futurelessness of global nuclear destruction after the Second World War? While crises certainly play an important role for future-founding poetry, they cannot be reduced to being its origin. In fact, it makes much more sense to consider future-founding poetry in the light of Alan Gilbert's statement that "time is always in crisis" (*Another Future* 14), and this permanent crisis is the one that motivates future-founding poetry and is addressed by it, not a single political, social, aesthetic, or philosophical crisis that is then simply replaced by the next one. The future is always in crisis because it *is* the future, because it is always ahead and thus always in question, yet this is precisely what makes future-founding both *possible* and *necessary*. If the future were *not* in crisis, it could not be affected in the present, and it would not have to be; at the same time, this permanent crisis of the future also implies that there *is* a future at all, and that there is potential in what is to come.

This study on future-founding poetry is fundamentally concerned with two particular cultural notions of space and time, as both its subtitle—"Topographies of Beginnings"—and its central theoretical term indicate: places and beginnings. Especially the latter is at the center of this analysis of American poetry since Whitman, and even though beginnings will admittedly be somewhat privileged, they should never be regarded as separate from place. Beginnings are at the same time a particularly modern concern and an undertheorized concept, and their imagination in modernity is as complex and important as it is neglected from the point of view of philosophy and literary and cultural studies. The very term *modernity* implies a beginning, and many of the crucial concepts connected to its large frame of reference share similar semantics and connotations, for example the Renaissance, the Reformation, the "discovery" of the New World, and so on. The concept of modernity is fundamentally based on an imagination

of beginnings as it implies a new cultural stage in human history and a rupture with what came before; at the same time, modernity struggles to present itself as an ongoing process of perpetual beginnings, not a singular revolutionary event but a continuously renewed contemporaneity. While its internal contradictions in fact strongly support Bruno Latour's provocative statement that "we have never been Modern" (46), one can still argue that, in a less precise use of the term than Latour's, that Western cultures have been modern for centuries now, and relatively recent declarations of post-modernity have only emphasized the modern desire for beginnings.

If this desire has a privileged cultural site that is as obsessed with beginnings as it is with its self-definition as fundamentally modern, it is the United States. When Terence Martin identifies a "protean importance of a sense of beginning in American literature and culture" (ix) in *Parables of Possibility: The American Need for Beginnings*, he is not pointing out American specificities of a more general need for beginnings but rather identifies an incessant imagination of beginnings as one of the very defining elements of US-American culture. Of course, there is nothing new about this insight, and nothing seems more trite than another affirmation of American newness, or in Irving Howe's phrase, "a renewal of the new" (18). Yet I maintain that there are some crucial conceptual differences between beginnings and newness that make the former term highly useful and productive where the latter is not any longer, and American studies may profit from a consideration of beginnings where a consideration of newness offers little fresh insight. Although the concepts are of course related, beginnings are nevertheless distinct from the new in a variety of ways, as the following general definition hopes to show.

In theorizing the concept, I will draw heavily on the most important and most famous study of beginnings to date, Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, but will also expand his use of the term significantly, which is often limited by his focus on literary production and reception in the field of prose; the fact that this seminal work was published already in 1975 but has, despite its limitations, hardly sparked any further theorization of the concept whatsoever is an indication of how much there is left to be desired when it comes to a philosophical or aesthetic treatment of beginnings, and how little cultural studies have paid attention to it. In literary studies, considerations of beginnings are often restricted to the material beginnings of texts and books; while there is of course much to be gleaned from the paratextual framings of texts, as for example Christian Quendler's excellent analysis in *Interfaces of Fiction: Initial Framings in the History of the American Novel from 1790 to 1900* shows, and while every reader knows that first lines always deserve special attention, there is much more to beginnings in and of literary texts than that. This will become clear in a dissection of the term into multiple meanings, which will also set it apart from the new.