

SASCHA PÖHLMANN, *Future-Founding Poetry: Topographies of Beginnings from Whitman to the Twenty-First Century*, European Studies in North American Literature and Culture (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), 424 pp.

Sascha Pöhlmann's study of American poetry belongs to a currently growing body of scholarly works partaking in a 'temporal turn' in literary and cultural studies. Pöhlmann carves out a poetic mode within American poetry and poetics which, as he claims, finds a "crucial beginning" (41) with Walt Whitman and can be traced through the poetry of the twentieth and into the early twenty-first century. The author calls this mode "future-founding poetry," appropriating a term Whitman used in his 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass* (17). Pöhlmann defines "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" (2). His theoretical framework explicitly fuses the aesthetic and the political: The poets working in this mode "consider the future as a contested discursive space in which they can and should intervene through their own various symbolic and imaginative practices" (60).

As Pöhlmann sets out to describe a tradition in American poetry that he sees beginning with Whitman, he seeks to avoid constructing a linear narrative; instead he envisions the works of the poets discussed as a continuum of shared aesthetic concerns, connected through "family resemblances" (18). The first five of Pöhlmann's six chapters each center on single, exemplary poets. After first conceptualizing the framework of future-founding based on Whitman's poetry and prose, Pöhlmann turns to the modernist poetry of William Carlos Williams, the African-American poet Langston Hughes, feminist poet Muriel Rukeyser and finally Allen Ginsberg's countercultural future-founding imagination. The last chapter provides an exception to the established structure by tracing the mode of future-founding in the occasional poetry responding to the events of 9/11.

Notably, Pöhlmann favors the term "beginning" over related and established concepts such as "newness" or "originality" to construct his theoretical framework, arguing that the concept of "beginning" enables a more productive model to engage with the poetics of temporality. A beginning, "time that is bounded and marked as meaningful"

(11), denotes a point in time or a span in time; it is an event which points beyond itself and which not merely happens, but is made; beginnings can be repeated (with a difference) and are thus potentially iterative; they are also socially meaningful (12-13). From these conceptual clarifications, Pöhlmann derives the characteristics of future-founding: as indicated by the term "founding," this poetic mode is concerned with the present as well as with the future; future-founding also denotes an ongoing procedure, not a single point in time (22); instead of merely celebrating the new, future-founding poetry contains an element of sustainability (21); as a textual act, "future-founding" also emphasizes the performative and social dimensions of poetry; and it also includes a spatial dimension as "the idea of founding the future strongly implies that it is *emplaced*" (23). While Pöhlmann thus draws attention to the intersections of the temporal and the spatial, he insists that this spatiality is not necessarily connected to a national framework. Though future-founding "may have very strong ties to a national culture, [...] it does not *necessarily* have to, and it may be even strongly work to undermine any sense of the national" (36).

Whitman may seem a logical choice to begin, since "[n]o other poet is constructed so strongly as either a starting point or a turning point in American literary history" (41)—to no small extent, Pöhlmann argues, because of Whitman's own successful and foundational strategies, most prominently gestures of erasure which deny the existence of other aesthetic foundations. The author explores Whitman's poetics by focusing on the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, particularly on the preface, and by providing an extensive reading of the long poem "Song of Myself." The chapter also includes exemplary readings of poems from the volume's deathbed edition, published in 1891-92. Whitman's poetics, as it emerges in Pöhlmann's interpretations, is first of all characterized by openness and the celebration of potential inherent in beginnings and the future. Whitman's texts highlight their performative character and tightly interweave temporal and spatial dimensions. For Whitman, America and the poetic imagination stand in a symbiotic relationship: "the poetry is directly produced by the place, and this place is imaginatively constructed in that very poetry" (51). And yet, he also convincingly argues that to see Whitman merely in a

nationalist framework may be too limiting, as he “celebrates America as a space of potential rather than America as a concrete nation-state” (63); he is “more engaged in individual-building than in nation-building” (64).

The tradition instigated by Whitman and delineated in this study is not one of influence and imitation. Rather, poets in the twentieth century would have to perform their own beginnings. From the canon of modernist poetry, Pöhlmann chooses to focus on William Carlos Williams, and in particular his book-length poem *Paterson* (1946-1958), because Williams represents “the strand of American modernism that did not look toward European models for its own performance of beginnings” (106). The question which poses itself for Williams, Pöhlmann suggests, is how to begin again after Whitman while simultaneously considering Whitman’s model as insufficient for the modernist project and acknowledging his work as an enabling foundation. In distinction to Whitman, who saw, as Pöhlmann argues, his formal innovations as a consequence of his cultural project, Williams is more directly concerned with formal renewal and argues that Whitman had not yet gone far enough (109). Both poets share the aspiration of creating a new American verse, yet where Whitman emphasizes a fundamental openness, Williams insists on the equal importance of control. In his later work, of which *Paterson* is one primary example, this takes the form of the “variable foot,” “a middle ground between rigidity and formlessness” (112).

Writing from an African American subject position in the early twentieth century, Langston Hughes’s project of future-founding poetry assumes a quite distinct, and more directly political quality in comparison to his predecessors. Hughes “uses an imagination of the future to directly affect the present,” as creating a future for African Americans in American society becomes “a political matter of life and death” (157). Pöhlmann reads Hughes’s project as a teleological one: while in Whitman’s and Williams’s aesthetics the deferral and non-fulfillment of the future seem central, Hughes’s work has the concrete goal of social equality for African Americans. The chapter explores in particular “the dream” as a central symbol of future-founding: the motif connects the future, in the sense of expressing hope and desire for change, with the present, the moment of dreaming; it also denotes a sense of agency and activity, as dreaming

is connected to a person or a group (164-65). Secondly, the chapter contextualizes Hughes’s work in the Harlem Renaissance and stresses the significance of locality or place by pointing to the importance of Harlem as a place of beginnings in his poems. Lastly, Pöhlmann also points to the explicitly performative quality of Hughes’s poetry, the way the texts highlight their own nature as speech acts, which bring them particularly close to Whitman’s model of future-founding (188).

If the first three of Pöhlmann’s examples may give the impression that future-founding is by definition a project tied to the construction of a male self, Muriel Rukeyser’s poetry underlines that this must not be necessarily so. Rukeyser, in going against the conventions of what is expected of a woman poet, seeks to inscribe herself into Whitman’s tradition of future-founding. Pöhlmann highlights feminism, pacifism, and socialism as Rukeyser’s central concerns, which, he argues, are connected by her emphasis on the notion of community. While he steers away from stereotypical assumptions which associate men with individualism and women with the communal, he stresses that the role of individual and community in the work of all of these poets is more a matter of emphasis. For the male poets, future-founding is a social event despite their insistence on strong individuality. At the same time, the individual does have a place in Rukeyser’s poetry as well, even if her work often formally works with a first-person plural voice instead of first-person singular.

In its fifth chapter, the study considers Allen Ginsberg’s post-Beat poetry written after the mid-1960s in the context of a “new situation in which finality has become a dominant trope and the future-oriented thought is geared toward a philosophy of risk and pessimism rather than of hope and optimism” (257). Ginsberg, “the proper poet-prophet of the nuclear age” (303), writes in a historical situation characterized by the experience of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the proliferation of the discourse of ecological destruction. Pöhlmann characterizes Ginsberg’s poetry as one of “defiant beginnings,” a mode of constructing the future that resists finality or which keeps fighting “for a viable future in the face of finality” (259). Ginsberg most explicitly dismisses the national framework as a place of beginnings, rather considering a global framework; yet America still figures significantly in Gins-

berg's poetry "as a place that is symptomatic of a *destructive* Western civilization" (264).

Pöhlmann closes his study by showing that poetry responding to the events of September 11, 2001 often works in a future-founding mode. Instead of closing in on individual poets, Pöhlmann considers a range of different future-founding strategies, categorized along the line of oppositional terms: rupture and continuity, cognition and confusion, hope and despair, war and peace, globalism and nationalism. Whitman himself assumes a prominent presence in these texts, as many of the poems directly invoke Whitman's works and the author as a person: in 9/11 poetry, it seems, "Whitman has become an icon of future-founding himself" (339). In a way, future-founding poetry seems to come full circle after 9/11, reaffirming the model established by Whitman.

An implicit thread running through Pöhlmann's study posits the aesthetics of future-founding as anti-nostalgic in principle. "[I]f future-founding has an opposite," the author claims, "it is nostalgia" (48). One may take issue with this statement, perhaps most obviously with regard to 9/11 poetry, which indeed at times seems to invoke Whitman in a nostalgic manner, thereby looking to the past to construct a future. In addition, Pöhlmann excludes detailed readings of other authors—

T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound come to mind—who turn explicitly to the past in their work. These exclusions raise the question of alternative aesthetic strategies of future-founding beyond the Whitmanian model. Yet, to consider them may have led to a different research project and may be the subject of another book. As it stands, Sascha Pöhlmann manages to make a convincing case for the Whitmanian literary tradition of future-founding, which gains its coherence, on the one hand, because the author shows how all of his exemplary poets engage with Whitman's poetic model and, at times, also reference each other. On the other hand, Pöhlmann's framework indeed stresses family resemblances which go beyond specific features of form or content, but can be found in a shared sense of emplacement, as well as the poems' performative character. *Future-Founding Poetry* is a meticulously written study whose carefully constructed theoretical framework highlights the aesthetic strategies of poetic temporality and poetry's inherent political character. The detailed close readings of the poems provide novel perspectives on the individual authors' works as well as on the temporal dimensions of the genre of poetry as a whole.

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