



MAXIMILIAN G. BURKHART

IN SEARCH OF LOST BEGINNINGS

The fascination exerted by origins and beginnings is currently preoccupying an interdisciplinary research group at LMU. It is studying the key function of beginnings in the self-perception of modernity. In a range of projects, it particularly seeks to critically examine the thesis of progressive demystification or demythologizing of the world in modernity. The focus of the project lies on constructs of beginnings in cultural discourses as well as in genres and texts.

“In the beginning was the Word.” Thus begins the Gospel of St. John, the last of the gospels – and thus the problems begin as well, for example for the learned professor Dr. Johann Faust, who is devoting himself to biblical exegesis in the loneliness of his study: “‘Tis written – ‘In the Beginning Was the Word’ – / Already at a stand – and how proceed?” It is well known that Faust has studied philosophy, law, medicine and theology – the main disciplines of his age. Yet the considerable sum of his knowledge is of little use in his efforts to understand the beginning. The story of Dr. Faust is situated at the dawn of modernity, a period that is, as Inka Müller-Bach, a professor of Modern German Literature at LMU Munich claims, obsessed with the idea of origins. Unlike her famous literary predecessor, however, Müller-Bach is not alone in her studies. Together with numerous colleagues from the humanities she is determined to take Faust’s inquiry further. In 2006, she launched a DFG [German Research Foundation] research group to this end that focuses entirely on the topic of “Beginnings in (and of) Modernity”. As a first result of this collaborative effort, a volume of essays titled *Am Anfang war ... Ursprungsfiguren und Anfangskonstruktionen der Moderne* [In the Beginning Was ... Paradigms of Origin and Constructs of Beginnings in Modernity] has recently been published. It turns out that there is a multitude of beginnings.

THE HISTORY OF THE FALL OF MAN

All adaptations of the story of Faust always tell the tale of a fall, a fall of man. Faust is a ruthless man of action who is driven by an unconditional will to knowledge, and thus he

tastes the forbidden fruit of alchemical knowledge. His desire to understand the origin of all being takes him and the reader back to the beginning, the origin when beginning itself began – back to the Book of Genesis. “It is one of the peculiarities of *Genesis* that it conflates two quite different accounts of the creation of the world and mankind,” comments Inka Mülder-Bach. *Genesis* narrates not only the divine creation of man, but also his fall. The separation of man and God is due to human desire for knowledge. “The story of the fall of man tells of how diversity arises from unity.” As a mythical story about the beginning, it offers a narrative model that is particularly interesting to scholars in the humanities. “In the beginning was the Word / and the Word was with God / and the Word was God. / The same was in the beginning with God” (John1,1f.).

The beginning and the word are one originally. Yet this unity finally breaks apart after the destruction of the Tower of Babel, when God confounds language so “that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Gen11,8). This lost identity is replaced by difference and the desire to reverse that loss. The original unity of word and reference is broken up, for the word is never identical with what it signifies. Therefore Faust concludes: “I simply cannot prize the word so high / I must translate it differently. / If spirit informs me with its light / then ‘In the beginning was Meaning’ I must write.”

To decipher such scriptural meaning is the major task of theology; accordingly, the anthology opens with an essay on “Discourses of Beginnings in German-language Lutheran Theology of Creation” by Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, professor of Protestant theology. He shows that theological and Creation doctrine are one, an idea that is hard to accept against the background of modern theories of origin such as the Big Bang and evolution. The bottom line of Graf’s argument thus is rather sobering: “The destruction of the concept of Creation entails the dogmatic sanction of a titanism that empowers man as the sole master of our world.” Faust, the titan whose thirst for knowledge leads him to insanity, thus represents the plight and paradoxes of modernity.

Moreover, his confusion has its roots in beginning itself. Not only does the Bible offer two different Creation scenarios, Genesis and the Gospel of St. John, but God himself appears in various functions. His is not only the role of the speaker of the original Word, he is also an artist, a *deus pictor*. Both the Renaissance and the Baroque eras frequently referred to the God who creates man in his own “image” (Gen1,26), in other words, to God as artist. Accordingly, the great 17th-century philosopher Giambattista Vico conceived of his *Scienza nuova* as a theory of images. “In the *Scienza nuova* the beginning of science converges with the science of beginnings,” states Bernhard Teuber, professor of Romance languages and literature. Vico’s ideas, as Teuber argues, have not only influenced the philosopher of science and subjectivity René Descartes decisively. They have also had an impact on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who invokes Vico in his philosophical treatises on the origins of language. If we agree that “in the beginning was the image,” it then follows that in the beginning was either the subject or nature...

IN THE BEGINNING WAS . . . DISRUPTION

In the beginning, or at least shortly afterwards, there was disruption. The unity of word and meaning or of word and image was broken up. That which was originally one and had then become many is called *symbolon* in Greek, since the symbol served as a mark of identification in which the separated halves were reconnected. In the New Testament, Jesus acts as a mediator between God and man. He is able to restore the broken unity. However, this mediating principle seems to have become lost in modernity. What is more, the mediating principle itself becomes a problem, as Inka Mülder-Bach shows with respect to Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*. Eduard and Charlotte seem bored in the initial idyll of their Eden-like garden. They therefore decide to accept first one person and then another among them, after which fate takes a turn for the worse. Only the figure named "Mittler", the "Mediator", seems to be able to restore order to their breaking relationship. Instead of restoring the broken *symbolon*, however, he creates even more confusion. As Mülder-Bach argues, "Mittler" enters as "diabolon" in order to "keep the dialectic of the Fall going".

To be sure, the original fall from grace affected not only the covenant between mankind and God and the relation between man and woman. It also essentially undermined the very foundation of society, i.e. the family. Fratricide not only looms large as yet another possible beginning of human society – when Cain killed Abel – it also triggered a narrative model in its own right. Barbara Vinken, professor of Romance literature, explores this tradition in her discussion of Gustave Flaubert.



► Hugo van der Goes (around 1440-1482): "The Fall". Left panel of the diptych on the Fall and Redemption, 1470. Genesis narrates not only the divine creation of man, but also his fall. The separation of man and God is due to human desire for knowledge. Genesis "tells of how diversity arises from unity," explains Inka Mülder-Bach.

Yet the rift goes even deeper, straight into the I, where it disrupts the subject itself. It is not by coincidence that so many doppelgangers populate the literature of Goethe's time. As Erika Greber, professor of comparative literature, shows in her study on "doppelganger texts", the principle of division and doubling even infects the structure of the text itself. No matter where you look, nothing is as it seems. There is no authentic original in the beginning any more, only forgery.

In a famous passage, Werther, another one of Goethe's tragic heroes, quotes Ossian in order to vouch for the earnestness of his own suffering. Yet the *Works of Ossian*, published in 1765, supposedly a translation of "Gaelic epics and Scottish songs of heroes from bardic prehistory", turned out instead to be a by now well-known forgery by the primary-school teacher James MacPherson. Its status as forgery notwithstanding, MacPherson's Ossian remains essential to this day, and not only in the realm of poetry. As English professor Tobias Döring puts it, Scottish "national self-perception" occurs through it as a "mirror". With a genuine origin lost, even a forged beginning offers opportunities: "Amidst the confusion, MacPherson's Ossian offers modernity a space of freedom, a white foil onto which reinventions of oneself can be projected."

A WHITE SHEET STIMULATES MODERNITY

"Consider the first line attentively," Faust admonishes himself, "lest hurrying on the pen outrun the meaning. / Is it *Thought* that works in all, and that makes all? / It should stand rather thus: – / 'In the Beginning Was the Power.'" Modernity has always been stimulated



◀ "The Dream of Ossian" (1812/13) by J. A. D. Ingres shows a Scottish bard who was said to have lived in the 3rd century AD. In fact, Ossian, a cult figure of the 18th century, was an invention by the Scottish poet James MacPherson (1736-1796).

With a genuine origin lost, even a forged beginning offers opportunities. As professor of English literature Tobias Döring puts it: "Amidst the confusion, MacPherson's Ossian offers modernity a space of freedom, a white foil onto which reinventions of oneself can be projected."

by the idea of the white sheet. It stands for the absolute, autonomous new beginning from nothingness. Quite literally, writing begins with a white sheet upon which poetic force unfolds new worlds. For the French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, the white sheet is the structural principle of his poetry, as Lars Schneider, assistant professor of Romance languages and literature, shows by using concepts of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In a similar fashion, explorers and founders of new communities looked for a *tabula rasa*, and not only in America. By the same token, Annegret Heitmann, professor of Nordic literature, deals with the theme of colonial exploration and territorial appropriation in Scandinavian texts, and Eckhard Schumacher, scholar of German literature, coordinator of the research group and co-editor of the volume, concentrates on the utopia of the New World in German literature. More specifically, he writes about Kafka's famous novel *Amerika* (whose original title is *The Man Who Disappeared [Der Verschollene]*). The novel centers on 17-year-old Karl Rossmann, who is sent to America after having impregnated a servant girl. Though Rossmann is supposed to have a radical fresh start, there is no end to his new beginning, since Kafka's novel remained unfinished. Its faltering start may indeed be symptomatic with regard to modernity's love affair with beginnings. This is particularly true of Germany after the cataclysmic catastrophes of two world wars and the holocaust. Therefore, the volume also includes a critical discussion of the so-called "zero hour," by history professor Martin Geyer. Moreover, Martin Hose, professor of Greek philology, addresses the issue of beginnings in the historical records of Herodotus, while Roger Lüdeke examines the beginnings of his own discipline, comparative literature.

MULTIPLE BEGINNINGS

"Yet even as I am writing this," reasons Faust, "a something warns me we cannot rest there. / The spirit aids me – all is clear – and boldly / I write, 'In the Beginning Was the Act.'" In the end we return all the way to the beginning, which reads: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen1,1). Faust is right, action is in the beginning of the beginning. The Marxists agreed, which is why Leo Trotsky criticized the Russian avantgarde as Johannites, followers of St. John. As professor of Slavic studies Aage Hansen-Löve shows, Trotsky nevertheless presented himself effectively as a second Moses who courageously takes action. The consequences of Trotsky's mentality can indeed be said to measure up to the catastrophes produced by Faust, that man of action who is thirsting for knowledge.

There seems to be no single beginning, then, since it constantly multiplies on closer inspection. Does it follow that this research project on beginnings examines a labyrinth without an exit? Faust would disagree, since he not only phrases the problem but also a possible solution. "In the beginning was the Deed," and ethics, the justification of deeds, has always been *prima philosophia*. It is no accident that the two most important theorists, the idealist Immanuel Kant and Goethe's friend Friedrich Schiller, did not bemoan the fall of mankind. They rather saw it as an opportunity, since it offered, in the words of Kant, the transition "from the tutelage of nature to a state of freedom". Günter Zöllner, professor of

philosophy, follows the traces of the Königsberg philosopher and explores the primacy of practical reason that justifies moral law. He develops a comforting vision of beginnings almost in passing. According to Zöllner, the beginning is where reason dictates itself its laws: “An interpretation of Kant’s formula of the factum of pure reason manages to think the Johannine Logos [‘In the beginning was the Word’] as reason together with the Faustian logos in such a way that the alternative ‘In the beginning was reason’ and ‘In the beginning was the act’ is transferred to the comprehensive programmatic formula of Kantian thought and even that of the normative conception of reason in philosophical modernity as a whole, which could be given as: ‘In the beginning was the rational act’ or also as ‘In the beginning was active reason.’”

The volume therefore offers at least two perspectives on Faust’s titanism, presenting it as god-forsaken hubris on the one hand, and on the other as reason’s critical self-empowerment. One could conclude that everything was still possible in the beginning.

What, then, is the beginning? A white sheet of paper? Zero hour? An “erupted moment”, as Robert Musil puts it in *The Man Without Qualities*? Or is it nevertheless the self-empowering deed? It indeed seems to be an undertaking as modern as it is Faustian to want to understand the beginning, or rather ‘the beginnings’. Dr. Faust’s constant pursuit of understanding, like that of his modern successors in the research project on beginnings, is a pursuit that must necessarily keep failing anew – yet still always finds a way and creates a beginning.

Professor Dr. Inka Mülder-Bach has been chair of modern German literature at LMU since 2002. She is spokesperson of the DFG research group “Anfänge (in) der Moderne” [Beginnings in (and of) Modernity], and is presented here as representative of her colleagues in the interdisciplinary group.
muelder-bach@germanistik.uni-muenchen.de
<http://www.forschergruppe-anfaenge.lmu.de/>

