



# Unbeginnings: The Fragment as a Round Space

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*For Anthony Johnson*

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**Palavras-chave:** Gaston Bachelard, Machado de Assis, Gertrude Stein, Brenda Hillman, imagologia, «estrutura anelar».

Machado de Assis's novel, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1880; [Epitaph of a Small Winner, 1952]) begins with the following lines:

I hesitated some time, not knowing whether to open these memoirs at the beginning or at the end, *i.e.*, whether to start with my birth or with my death. Granted, the usual practice is to begin with one's birth, but two considerations led me to adopt a different method: the first is that, properly speaking, I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing, a writer for whom the grave was really a new cradle; the second is that the book would thus gain in merriment and novelty. Moses, who also related his own death, placed it not at the beginning but at the end: a radical difference between this book and the Pentateuch. (1952: 5)

What de Assis introduces here, as the title of the chapter also indicates, is a protagonist concerned with the death of the author, that is, the protagonist's. What is interesting from the outset is that the eventuality of the author's death presents us with the possibility of considering the materiality of space within which death is a marker of a kind of writing that itself becomes marked-off from presence. This is to say that, if the protagonist dies first and then writes about it, the writing that is being

produced can be thought of as material only insofar as it comes to signify its presence in the absence of beginnings. While this may sound paradoxical, what de Assis suggests with his technique is that the only way in which the protagonist can proceed with his story is if he situates himself, and hence his story, in the material, rather than immaterial space of *unbeginnings*. Unbeginning as a space mediating between beginnings and endings, and presence and absence, is an attractive topos which betrays on the one hand Bras Cubas' commitment to «speaking properly» and his desire to make his writing improper. The assumption here is that if he merely were to tell his story from beyond the grave, his narrative would acquire an oracular tone, and thus lose its intended realism. If he, however, were to position himself in relational terms to death and writing – as he does indeed by undoing his absence – the narrative would acquire – as it does indeed – a material signification. Thus what the reader experiences in following the narrator who *unbegins* his story is what can be termed death by fragments.

The book unfolds over 160 fragments each varying in length and composition. The fact that the narrator is acutely aware of his being dead is reflected in his concern with both form and content. While his death is presented as conforming to the formal constraints of the fragment, thematically death is rendered as a philosophy of the negative. As the last fragment illustrates:

This last chapter consists wholly of negatives [...] a person will conclude that my accounts showed neither a surplus nor a deficit and consequently I died quits with life. And he will conclude falsely; for, upon arriving on this other side of the mystery, I found that I had a small surplus, which provides the final negative of this chapter of negatives: I had no progeny, I transmitted to no one the legacy of our misery. (ibid.: 209)

The three-structured levels here, 1) the plurality of negatives, passed through 2) the singularity of the negative through 3) the transmission of the negative, end the narrative in a circular movement which further circumscribes a round space. What makes this space round is the fact that the negative is given back to the *unbeginning* where negativity actualizes the nothingness suggested in the last lines of the book. What is interesting about the space of the *unbeginning* is the fact that it imposes itself as a round fragment in the middle of the narrative. There is a fragment half way through the book which illustrates the presence of discourse as it materializes itself on the page through punctuation marks whose function is to mark the absent voice. This materialization points to two interrelated instances: 1) the presence of negativity as it passes through nothingness, and 2) the presence of death as it questions its own absence. The fragment is called: «The Venerable Dialogue of Adam and Eve» and consists of full stops, and occasional exclamation and questions marks. The names of the supposed participants in the dialogue are named alongside the arrangement of the

dots in a stanza-like form (the metonymic reference to Adam and Eve is thus reversed). In places, the exchange is also marked by the entire absence of any markers, thus leaving an empty space followed by the name of the interlocutor. I reproduce the fragment here in its entirety for the sake of clarity:

...?	Braz Cubas
....	Virgilia
	Braz Cubas
.....	
.....	
	Virgilia
.....!	
	Braz Cubas
.....	
	Virgilia
.....	
.....	
.....	
	Braz Cubas
.....	
	Virgilia
.....	
	Braz Cubas
.....	
.....	
.....!	
..!.....	
.....!	
	Virgilia
.....?	
	Braz Cubas
.....!	
	Virgilia
.....!	

This passage clearly illustrates the space of the *unbeginning* and suggests a poetics of roundness. The parallels drawn between nothingness and speaking nothing, suggest that the three narrative instances recurrent as themes in the book, namely, dying to tell, writing for posterity, and talking things to their death have mythical proportions.

Characters in biblical stories such as Adam and Eve and Moses prefigure a past which is recast in a fragmentary poetics. What the ellipsis in the above example illustrates is that the remains of talk are laid bare as bits and pieces. These pieces gain signification in the reconstruction of totality as fragment.

Critics claim that Machado de Assis was influenced by Laurence Sterne, to the point of plagiarism – here taken both literally and figuratively<sup>1</sup>– but whereas one can advance the argument that Sterne was more interested in how beginnings can begin in the middle of a *complete* text, I would say that de Assis is interested in how beginnings, without eradicating their status as beginnings, or turning them into traces of middle parts, can act as or embody unbeginnings. This is where the fragment comes to rescue. But not any fragment.

The form of de Assis's book testifies to the author's commitment to the round space of the fragment as it is gained not only from playing with the constraints of genre, but also from assuming the role of the suspicious writer who writes against the grain of countable and quantifiable linearity in favor of circularity. The book presents itself as a novel, it follows the character's development from childhood to the point of death, but at the same time it also performs the writing of small epitaphs both *in absentia* and *in lieu* of the narrating author. It is curious to note here that the translator chose to translate the concept of the memoir (which suggests totality from the point of view of genre) into the *forma brevis* of the epitaph. This indicates that what we are reading (at least in English) is a mediated form, a memoir which never quite takes off, and thus finds itself, as the first pages show, in a state of fragmentary *unbeginning*. The fact that the book was also composed in the form of dictation (de Assis's wife did the actual writing) furthermore draws our attention to the materiality of language: the more one comes closer to the signifier *death* the less unknowable it appears. The language of dictation thus places emphasis on the texture of the text, its sound, shape, size, beat and rhythm. The book unbeginns even before it begins with its fundamental decision to not begin. As this decision negates itself, it turns into indecision. But I am getting ahead of myself without explaining. In the following I intend to look at the notion of the fragment, round space, and materiality, in order to argue that the concept of *unbeginning* has to do with a fundamental potential of negation which affirms its space in roundness.

The fragment can be said to be one of the few genres that establishes itself as a poetics from the start. The fragment comes as a whole package, as it were, insofar as what forms this poetics is precisely a question of where it begins. However, insofar as the fragment may begin in the middle or at the end of a text, its beginning forces the

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<sup>1</sup> See the recent study: *The Author as Plagiarist: The Case of Machado de Assis*, (João Cezar de Castro Rocha, ed., Capa Mole, 2006)

critic to become a master of suspicion. The first impulse is to see the fragment as a detachment from a whole, a residue or a remnant. As such, the fragment may be thought of as an ending rather than beginning; a vintage vestige which may mark the end of an era. On second thought the fact that the fragment begins here or there, has more to do with a poetics of topos than totality. This can be formulated thus: the fragment begins in separation but ends in space. To perceive the fragment as separation yet imagine it as space are two activities as antithetical as presence and absence. Here I want to perform the task of the suspicious critic and propose that the poetics of the fragment – that which marks a beginning against the grain of beginnings – is a space of roundness in which the fragment is imagined as an interruption which unites such Aristotelian poetic devices such as beginnings, middles, and ends in a movement of circularity. Insofar as the process of detachment indicates mobility rather than stability, being suspicious of the place the fragment comes to occupy – if it ever settles in any stable beginnings, middles, and endings – marks a space of roundness rather than linearity. In the round space of the fragment the suspicious critic does not enter a world of answers but a world of potentialities and processes.

The potential world in which the fragment enjoys the freedom of circularity, the freedom of being found round, and stumbled upon, is a world which stands in an antithetical relation to the world of totalities. What enables us to imagine the fragment itself as a round entity is the fact that the almost-text of the fragment, its potential to actualize a text of origin – never gets to be actualized, as originality itself is without origin. Remnants, then, become supplements in the Derridean sense which go all the way around linearity. The function of the poetics of the fragment as a topos of roundness is thus to undo linearity in the very process in which linearity attempts to stabilize, according to itself, actual positions for remnants and residues. The fragment's relation to its totality, if there ever is one, is that of roundness in which separation is imagined as an orbiting process of *unbeginning*. Here I want to relate the above example from de Assis's book, along with examples from American literature, to what Gaston Bachelard called «the essential mobility of concepts».

Bachelard's work, with its emphasis on the poetics of space, developed in a book from 1953 with the same title, represents a seminal moment in contemporary criticism that combines notions of linearity with those of roundness. In Bachelard's phenomenological world, in which the materiality of words can only be perceived, apprehended, and heightened through making recourse to experiencing roundness in various degrees, what makes concepts mobile – for instance concepts that describe stages of development in the human cultural consciousness, is not a «deductive or an additive pattern» (Gaudin in Bachelard, 1971: xxxiv) but one that emphasizes movement and progress. Bachelard's philosophy is thus also a philosophy of suspicion, only, unlike other masters such as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, his thought on

suspicion is informed by potentialities rather than actualizations; roundness rather than linearity. His statement as to what he would like to create in his philosophy emphasizes potentiality at its most round point, (if roundness has a rising point, which I think it does when it indicates a potential): «I should like to develop a philosophy that has no point of departure» (ibid.: xxxiv). What we find in this line is a fine example of a fragment which begins in *unbeginning*. Insofar as philosophy never takes off, yet articulates an experience of the undecidable, it creates a space which gives Bachelard room for his claim that «being is round» (Bachelard, 1958: 234). This round being, or the phenomenology of being, according to Bachelard, establishes itself in its roundness while at the same time developing in it (ibid.: 240). Insofar as being thus becomes becoming, and becoming becomes being, the dialectical relationship between being and becoming is mediated in the round space of the philosophy that has no point of departure.

Here I want to further illustrate how two writers address three stages in the poetics of the fragment related to *unbeginning*, roundness, and material potentiality. These writers continue the modernist impetus of authors such as Machado de Assis pointing to the workings of the imagology of the sign, as represented through the creation of identifications rather than identities.

I begin with Gertrude Stein.

Nowhere is the question of *unbeginning* addressed more masterfully and more poetically than in Gertrude Stein's *The Making of the Americans* (1925), a mastodon of a book that fills almost 1000 pages. Given the book's thematic structure – which presumes to tell the story of every American that has ever lived – the fact that the narrator never gets past beginning suggests that the many pages in fact form a rather large literary fragment. After setting the tone by informing the reader that «we all begin well», Gertrude Stein makes recourse to at least 24 instances of beginning her long narrative. What throws Stein's discourse into the space of *unbeginning* is not so much the obsessive repetition of telling us that now she will begin, again, but the fact that prior to the beginning proper, the beginning of each instance of beginning is cast first as a description; «a little description» to be more precise. The beginning of narrative thus stumbles over the beginning of description which is set aside from the narrative voice by constituting itself as the materiality of repetition. The lines that follow form a specific rhythm and cadence, thus relying on a sound pattern which indicates that while beginnings only seemingly exist in genres that have to do with memoirs or family sagas, as in Stein's case, they are in fact bound to an experience and articulation of the undecidable.

What makes *The Making of Americans* a perfect example of *unbeginning* and thus a fragment as a round space is the fact that the articulation of the undecidable gets the work stuck in what Bachelard calls «a philosophy of the cosmic imagination» which looks for centers of cosmicity. As Bachelard further puts it: «Seized in its center and

brevity, the mere designation of this roundness is astonishingly complete» (ibid.: 258). Whatever roundness Bachelard talks about here is translated by Gertrude Stein into relations of being to becoming. I quote here one moment of *unbeginning* that circumscribes the roundness of the fragment which, on the one hand, undoes the notion of brevity and hence closure (the little, or short descriptions) and, on the other hand, engages on a path of identification with time rather than space (Stein makes the point here that for a story to work, one must first frame it in time and only then give it space):

Now again to begin. The relation of learning and thinking to being, of feeling to realising is a complicated question. There will now be very little talking of such way of being. As I was saying some have it in them to have slowly resisting as their natural way of being can have learning and thinking come quickly enough in them. This is then not bottom being in them. It is bottom being in some of such of them. This is very clear now in my knowing. Now to begin again with it as telling. (Stein, 1995: 299)

Insofar as it never becomes clear as to what or whom Stein is talking about, in spite of her claim to clarity for what she says, we can assume that the function of deixis in this text is to point not so much to signification but to the process that has signifiers float around. The text begins by never taking off, and thus constitutes itself as a floating negation of beginnings. Stein produces a poetics of subversion by challenging the excluded middle and end of *The Making of Americans*. The beings that Stein intends to describe by orbiting them circularly and thus undoing their individual narrative in a space that unbegins become cosmic beings in Bachelard's sense. They become potentials of signifying repetitions; they become an iconosphere, which is to say that they function in a total image world whose distinctiveness at any given time is given by an interlinked series of signifying objects present in it. Anthony Johnson develops Jan Bialostocki's first elaboration on the term iconosphere, and points at the distinction between the psychological or internal world of images that we conjure in our heads and the material and exterior world of images that are conjured by the iconosphere. According to Johnson,

[T]he iconosphere connotes [...] a mapped world of possibilities from a particular period which has been realized in material form: whether it be in paper, parchment, wood, silk, canvas, clay, stone, plastic, film, or even digitized and encrypted in binary code. Shored up against the irrecoverable horizons of knowledge which were available to past minds, the iconosphere of a period consists of the traces that have survived, in whatever form, from individuals of that passing world. (Johnson, 2005: 52-53)

What is interesting about Johnson's idea of the iconosphere is that it relies and depends on agency. For example the mapping of the material signifying objects in writing, such as words in a specific order, punctuation, tone, and imagery, enters in a relation where it is the world of possibilities that determines the mapping of the various identifications we make in relation to what we read. Thus we do not pass judgment on the material identity of particular objects as we see them in themselves, but rather turn towards their immaterial reification. When Gertrude Stein proclaims that now she will begin, she means to say that now she will *imagine* a beginning as a possibility for the potential materialization of a story. This suggests that in the iconosphere a text is always in a state of *unbeginning*, from whence it coerces both the writer and the reader to construct notions out of the available elements. These notions are fragments of the iconosphere and as such they emulate the round form of this total image world. Stein's genius consists of her realizing that the fragment which begins in the *unbeginning* must occupy a round space. Thus the point in Stein's narrative of *unbeginning* is that the understanding of such dimensions as the iconosphere can only take place in the fragment as a round space. Stein does not see her beings as something other than beings, and this is what makes her work a material network of operations within the iconosphere. The following lines illustrate:

[...] Always from the beginning there was to me all living as repeating. This is now a description of loving repeating as being. (Stein, 1995: 294)

[...] To begin again then with some description of the meaning of loving repeating being when it is strongly in a man or in a woman, when it is in them their way of understanding everything in living and there are very many always living of such being. This is now again a beginning of a little description of it in one. (ibid.: 297)

[...] In the beginning then, in remembering, repeating was strongly in the feeling of one, in the feeling of many, in the feeling of most of them who have it to have strongly in them their earthly feeling of being part of the solid dirt around them. This is one kind of being. This is mostly of one kind of being of slow-minded resisting fighting being. This is now a little description of one. (ibid.: 298)

[...] There are so many ways of beginning this description, and now once more to make a beginning. (ibid.: 300)

[...] Sometime there will be written a long history of such a beginning.  
(ibid.: 302)

What Stein does here is capture the iconosphere of a world that signifies through repetition its passing us by. The making of Americans in the image of iconospheric beings marks a potentiality which confers the fragment the status of unbeginner. This is to say that an unbeginner fragment that unbegins itself in a work is beyond interpretation. Taken as such, we can make the inference that if something were to



mark the iconosphere unambiguously, then that would have to be precisely such a fragment: a fragment which must never be interpreted, only repeated. This is the very working of the iconosphere: its signifying objects are repeated objects which begin in an unidentified time, and end in an identified *unbeginning*. Here the value of Gertrude Stein not making sense is roundness, insofar as the objects and beings she refers to are caught in «the essential mobility of concepts», to use Bachelard's phrasing. As the objects in an iconosphere cannot stand still, their movement is bound to create noise, traces, and clashes. What we identify, then, is the process, not the identity of things in themselves. Stein's message seems to be *that what goes a/round comes a/round*, which means that in the *unbeginning* concepts are beyond interpretation.

Round Gertrude Stein, then, I begin again, which is to say, or she would say, I unbegin.

With Brenda Hillman.

In her latest and fifth collection of poems, *Loose Sugar* (1997) Brenda Hillman divides her poems into five sections that have to do with space in relation to time and time which returns space to itself. A look at the table of contents: «space/time», «time/alchemy», «alchemy/problem», «problem/time», «time/space» quickly suggests an interest in circularity which is furthermore enforced by the two epigraphs that commence the work: one is a quotation from Stephen Hawking on the meaning of «space-time»: «*The four-dimensional space whose points are events*» and the other is taken from a collection of ancient Gnostic texts in The Nag Hammadi Library: «*And what you see outside of you / you see inside of you...The Thunder: Perfect Mind*» (author's emphasis).

From a formal point of view it is clear that Hillman's concern is with how time begins, how long it lasts, and where it has us in space. The sections are all interlinked: the last word of each section spills over into the first word of each next section, thus forming a round space which defies linearity. What is desired is an alchemical process that would integrate words on the loose. Playing with the format of having writing on the page that aligns itself according to the genre of poetry such as rhythm, meter, and broken lines, Hillman allows words that do not seem to fit the poetry pattern to exist on the page at the bottom and in the margins, marked by small typeface. The obvious function of these words, which form complementary thoughts and quotations that counterpoint the poems, is to disrupt and alter the ideas articulated in the poems proper. It is as if the poems are being paid a visit by these improper guests that ultimately culminate in a transformation of their status as marginal intruders into what Hillman herself calls «six visitor fragments» (Hillman, 1997: 35). These «visitor fragments» which visit the «time/alchemy» section in parenthesis are untitled lines and dropped randomly on the page. What this technique suggests more subtly, is that the fragments are intended to unbegin the story of different events and their

consequences in terms of their global or local impact, such as the presence of American soldiers in countries not their own, depression after the Gulf War, the homeless generation, and strenuous relationships between mothers and daughters.

The speaker in Hillman's poems is deeply concerned with the asymmetry between time and space, incompleteness, fragmentariness, and the compulsion to «stop making sense» (ibid.: 11), and often takes on the persona of Hillman herself. This substitution results in observations that invite the reader to consider her own status in relation to unbeginnings. As she puts it: «even if your preferred mode is fragment, you need syntax / to love» (ibid.: 109). The exclusion of the article hints at an imperative tone: fragment, as in fragment your reading, and writing, and then love the fragment. All those who prefer the fragment, loose ends, interruptions, and gestures that articulate potentials that open unto realizations towards learning and knowledge, are demanded to consider the time/space relation as an iconosphere whose operating matrix is that of the round fragment: we make sense of the world's distinctive features by letting ourselves become repetitions of fragments of knowledge and learning from the past. The quoted line comes from a poem called «Remembering Form» in which Hillman considers various ways in which form needs a beginning and the beginning needs an opening. However, as «form is not something we remember doing» (ibid.: 109) the next page on which the reader expects to see another poem is left blank (this blank page is part of the structural form of the book and features in the table of contents, as if a poem, yet in parenthesis: (blank)). This indicates that form should not be considered for its capacity to frame and further be framed, but rather for its going around remembering. The blank page is materialized through roundness as another *unbeginning*. After the blank, one last poem takes off and closes the book with a return to the visitor who comes «not an invention, but / an axis of something already invented- » (ibid.: 111).

Hillman articulates the significance of the fragment as a round space when she negates the significance of linearity. «I disagreed with the concept of the 'line'- » (ibid.: 98), she informs us, thus suggesting that when linearity is in counterpoint it must begin in the *unbeginning*, in circularity. Other critics make this point even clearer. In his essay on Hillman's collection of poems «When you are Loved» Anthony Robinson proposes, that «the barrier to understanding is the gap in the circle that doesn't exist» (Robinson, <http>), thus thrusting both reader and writer in the round space of the fragment. Quotations such as the line: «A *Beginning may be imagined but it is not the real beginning*» (Hillman, 1997: 91) from the poet Beverly Dahlen, which Hillman uses in her final section, suggest that the relation between beginning and end is not a dialectical relation but a relation based on a synchronic interdependence: if the beginning is dependent on the end and thus must enter a relation of synchronicity, then it is not a real beginning. Consequently, it must be termed «unbeginning». Here

is where the alchemist is called upon whose task is set by Hillman to create a pudding while eating it. What is hinted at is that only women and mad men are up to the job, which is to say that they can and must begin in the *unbeginning*. In his discussion of Hillman's borrowing of ideas from Paracelsus and other Gnostic texts Jack Foley, following George W. McRae, makes the observation that the line «The Thunder: Perfect Mind» introduces both a split and an interdependent duality in the mobile concepts which only the female voice is capable of articulating. Says Foley:

As a "revelation discourse by a female figure," writes MacRae, "The Thunder: Perfect Mind" is "virtually unique in the Nag Hammadi library." Loose Sugar is of course also a "revelation discourse by a female figure," and a Gnostic to boot. But, even more significantly: "The title appears to be double," writes MacRae, "The Thunder" is not syntactically related to "perfect Mind" but is separated by a mark of punctuation (:). (Foley, <http>)

A split such as is suggested here is represented by Hillman as the relation of materiality to concepts such as time and space: separations, unions, and their synchronicity are introduced by straight dashes, slanted dashes, and bent dashes. Hillman's poetry slashes through dashes... and crashes.

I want to conclude here with a reference to a poem in her collection tellingly titled: «The Unbeginning» from the final section «time/space». This poem, which anticipates one of the best lines in her book: «The feminine might bend the light—» (Hillman, 1997: 111) demonstrates that the fragment as a round space is a relation of materiality to the event in which nothing has begun but the beginning.

(I—unbegin: Hillman's poem— here:  
with—rounding/up: the/argument:  
and/draw (the reader's: attention) to  
(the fact) that my/last/line:  
is—a repetition/in a paraphrase form (of a Mallarmé maxim):  
«nothing has taken place but the place».)

«—or, maybe you could just  
give up on beginnings. After all,

this notion that things start  
and end somewhere  
has caused you so much trouble!»  
(*ibid.*: 93)

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**Abstract:** Modernist and postmodernist writing has always been preoccupied with points of beginning in narrative and poetry. When narratives never seem to take off they articulate the impossibility of beginning as a desire to elude linearity. My essay argues that by bending linearity through inflection and hence through fragmentation a round space is created. I suggest that the round space of the fragment constitutes a moment of what can be termed *the unbeginning*.

**Resumo:** A escrita modernista e pós-modernista sempre se preocupou com estratégias de abertura na narrativa e na poesia. Quando as narrativas parecem não querer «descolar» exprimem a impossibilidade do começo enquanto desejo de eludir a linearidade. Este ensaio sustenta que, ao infringir a linearidade através da inflexão e portanto da fragmentação, cria-se um «espaço redondo». Sugiro que o «espaço redondo» do fragmento constitui um momento do que pode designar-se por *não-começo*.