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Title	Introduction: No Future
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Publication date	2016-06-01
Original Citation	Renfrew, A. and Ní Dhúill, C. (2016) 'Introduction: No Future', Poetics Today, 37(2), pp. 241-248. doi: 10.1215/03335372-3481919
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://read.dukeupress.edu/poetics-today/issue/37/2 - 10.1215/03335372-3481919
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Download date	2026-11-06 11:05:41
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/11076



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Introduction

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> "Apart from that," Ulrich went on, "I already have two files full of written proposals of a general nature. . . . One of them I have headed: 'Back To—.' The fact is, there are a remarkably large number of people informing us that in earlier times the world was in a better way than it is now. . . . I had to give the second [file] the heading 'Forward To—.'"
> Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

> There is no future in England's dreaming.
> John Lydon, "God Save the Queen"

The humanities, it may be fair to say, have been dominated by the past. The historical mode of inquiry was central to the initial process of disciplinary formation, subsequently remaining a significant element in the self-definition of most, if not all, disciplines. Recent years have witnessed, however, a dual process of revival and innovation that has once again established the past, along with its traces, uses, and meanings, as the dominant object of inquiry. On one hand, a revival of a broadly positivist history as such, most certainly not confined to history departments, has arisen in response to the passing of the "age of theory," which transformed literary (and historical) studies in the twentieth century. On the other hand, memory studies, the most significant progeny of the encounter between theory and history, has displaced the

Poetics Today 37:2 (June 2016) DOI 10.1215/03335372-3481919
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positivist historical focus on past events onto an intensified concern with their present construction: it purports to deal not primarily with what *was* but with what *is* remembered or (re)constructed. The result has been not only a reinvigoration of broadly historical inquiry across the full range of humanities disciplines but also the domestication of sophisticated ways of understanding the past as a temporal *and* conceptual category. In this context, even if we were able to ignore the longer temporal arc of evolutionary biology, with its commitment to establishing determinants of "human nature" via the neo-Darwinian narratives of adaptation and sexual selection, it is clear that the past remains a powerful gravitational field of explanatory promise for the full range of humanities disciplines and beyond.

The future, on the contrary, awaits a consolidated field of inquiry that would take it up in any similarly systematic way. In the social sciences forays into futurology and forecasting are an outgrowth of modernity's desire to render the future governable through regimes of planning—not, therefore, the most propitious context for the emergence of relationships to the future that would honor its unknowability. In (or at least on the margins of) the humanities the simultaneous allure and fear of the unknowable has fueled the persistent impulse to "manifestize," to settle the future in advance or at least to set the coordinates for its arrival. This is directly related to the emergence, across the boundaries of the humanities and social sciences, of what is in fact the closest thing to a "consolidated field" for inquiry into the future: utopian studies.

Acknowledging that utopia does not provide—does not seek to provide—a blueprint for future societies, scholars of utopia have emphasized instead its creation of a space of dialogue between history and possibility. Visions of utopia constantly go beyond their own ostensible referents: the possible worlds they sketch point to the failures, potentials, and tendencies of the actual world. Hence the shift, in modernist discourses on utopia, from the image of utopia as *place* (whether colony or island, whether "no place" or "good place") to an insistence on utopian *time*—a time after or outside history, a time when the wreckage of history is redeemed.

Or not. In the gradual "dystopization" of the imagined future throughout the twentieth century, the utopian desire for a rational social order is reworked as dystopian nightmare, the cities of the present figured as the ruins of the future, the perfecting of the human body dramatized as a process of dehumanization. While science fiction may lend vividness to a future imagined in such negative terms, the dystopian "no" to the future is a complex one containing a critical impetus that is disruptive of closure and certainly allows for the recuperation of a utopian remnant. Few dystopias are unremitting; most gesture, through the tensions and contradictions of their

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narratives, to an alternative, more desirable future, one to which the dystopian world itself serves as negation or foil. The nightmare is powered by and bound to the disappointed dream; whether in its utopian or its dystopian inflection, the practice of "social dreaming" retains critical urgency precisely by returning us to the all-too-nonutopian present.

Significant historical alternatives to the embrace of the future implicit in utopia (however critical) have tended to remain on the margins of academic discourse. Utopian studies is necessarily eclectic in its methodologies and objects, productively infected by the mix of generic features it describes: it is distinguished by a utopian attitude or propensity among its scholars and their materials rather than by a unified approach. Broader still (and still more academically marginal) is nihilism, the ambivalent position that seeks to negate all possible futures in the name of an irretrievably worthless present and past, while at the same time reserving the possibility of a renewed "post-value" world, a world in which the future will be remade without any restricting allegiance to the morass of the past: future as continuation reviled in the name of future as rupture. The punk proclamation of "No Future," which brought nihilism to the heart of the cultural mainstream, dispensed with much of the ambivalence of nihilism in favor of a more literal, one-dimensional refutation of all possibility, an implicitly violent call for an end to centuries of illusion, a dramatic staging of the redundancy of any lingering notion of "Western civilization."

Over the past forty years or so, in the era of neoliberalism and globalization in politics and economics and of postmodernism in culture, the nihilism that originally begot No Future has gradually recast itself as a fundamentally (pro) creative phenomenon, driven not *just* to negate and destroy but rather to prepare the ground for and to ensure the viability of an entirely novel form of consciousness that will somehow be free of the failures and illusions of the past. There is a future, but it will only be worth living in, it will only truly arrive, if inherited structures—of political organization, of culture, of thought—can be consigned conclusively to a past that will be confirmed in the act of consignment as "outlived." As a form of "creative destruction" not confined to the economic domain, nihilism seeks (dialectically) to transform itself into a utopia.

The implications of these various conceptualizations of futurity can be expressed as a contradiction—or as a task. What is at stake in the critique or refusal of certain kinds of future? What kind of intellectual approaches might effectuate a turning away from (or neutralization of) the past that would not imply an embrace of the future? How can a simultaneous concern for and alienation from the future find an outlet that does not require us to turn, once again, toward the past? And what, finally, do the demands of

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futurity imply for the variously neglected or, worse, *domesticated* question of our conceptions of presentness? It is from these questions that the present volume's sense of No Future derives. Of the essays gathered here, some are conditioned by a conception of the future as a realm of deprivation and negation, a sort of canceled present; others examine different areas of future-making practice under the sign of its disruption, failure, or refusal. In others the temporal axis is itself placed under question, so that past and present do not flow toward, give rise to, or promise any kind of future, but rather futurity itself is envisaged as retrospective, constantly turned toward its own past, or the future is repudiated by dint of its extrapolation from a present that is experienced as either permanent crisis or diminishment.

At its formally logical extreme, the injunction to bracket both past and future proceeds from a grammatical, as opposed to a conceptual or ideological, proposition: there *is* no future, just as there *is* no past. There is no past, in the spirit of memory studies, because past events are retrievable only through present acts of remembrance and reconstruction. And there is no future, because the future can only ever be apprehended as an orientation—it is something we project, anticipate, construct, or refuse from the perspective of the present. There *is* only a constantly renewing present moment; the categories of past and future are conceptual or even rhetorical figures that allow us to situate that present moment in ways that are not ceaselessly destabilized by the present's condition of perpetual change.

This conception of the present carries with it two core implications, which in turn generate problems of their own. First, the present must be understood not as static but rather as a constant repositioning of the location of consciousness—as, precisely, a condition of perpetual change. No Future is not a prescription for chronicide, inscribing everything into a perpetual, temporally denuded present. Second, the relational dynamics between this "node of perpetual change" and what we call the past, on one hand, and the future, on the other, are fundamentally incomparable: the past and the future both "inform" or "shape" the present, but each in entirely different ways. The "data" available in the present concerning past events expand as the present renews itself, for example, and the relationship between past and present has generated a particular lexical set which expresses some of the flavor of that relationship: loss, mourning, retrieval, commemoration, and so on. By contrast, in the relationship between the present and the future, past-plus-present appears to be amalgamated into a unified "given"—although it is not and cannot be. This new, provisional "given" stands in relation to a future condition that is constantly "posited" anew, reflexively casting the light of contingency also on the present. This relation generates quite a different

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lexical set: projection, speculation, unfolding, and, perhaps more tellingly, hope, anticipation, enlightenment, utopia.

The continued presence of the past—through legacy, memory, reconstruction, trace—is somehow more graspable than the latent presence of the future, its hiddenness in and unfolding from what Ernst Bloch (1985: 338) calls "the darkness of the lived moment." The future, for all its unknownness, is present as an *idea* or *horizon* that has a determinant influence on present thought and action. And on this horizon in turn are grouped the consequences, intended and unintended, of acts and processes of the present in assemblages of such complexity that it is increasingly difficult to establish the role—or even the presence—of human agency. Futurity's presence, especially where its horizon is perceived as catastrophic, invites us simultaneously to invest in and suspend notions of causality and temporal progression that we have managed, in the main, to domesticate in relation to the past.

If our relationship to the past tends toward domestication or "naturalization" (where outright consignment to oblivion is not an option), the effect of futurity on experience of the present may be described in terms of *automatization*—a failure to be present in and for the present itself. The attempt to recover the present from this condition of automatization could begin by repudiating the projection of consciousness into a future that may never come. Much as critical memory studies makes us aware of the uses and abuses of the past by exposing its construction through narratives that can inhibit its strangeness, so might critical reflection on futurity restore the future's unknowability, allowing us to inhabit the lived moment's darkness to the full. The anticipatory practice of "knowing" the future through projections—utopian or otherwise—may assist in bringing a particular future into being. Yet what is gained through such projections is more often than not offset by what is lost: immersion in and awareness of the concrete actuality of the here and now.

The operation and effects of this can be exemplified in ostensibly disparate ways; the analogy with financial "futures," for example, is eloquent of the manner in which the bartering of the present for an implicitly immaterial future not only conditions or determines present experience but also has the potential to destroy any sense of the present as an experienced reality. Similarly, the comparison of utopia and nihilism in this relation brings home the cruelty of the paradox: utopia, in its impulse to counter the destructive force of a nihilism that posits no restitution in the "beyond," is transformed into an impulse to destroy the present. Finally, this paradox can also be observed from the perspective of the literary avant-garde in conditions of modernity. For Georg Lukács (1977: 48), the fundament of the avant-garde's mission is a

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form of realism uniquely capable of capturing "tendencies of development that only exist incipiently." Thus the avant-gardist quality of a work of art—and hence its ability to perform the prefigurative function—can fully be perceived only by some future consciousness, "only after the passage of time" (ibid.). Art requires the "sanction of future history" (Poggioli 1968: 171). No phrase is more suggestive of the temptation to allow the present to be almost entirely overwritten by the future—and thus, paradoxically, to occlude and undermine the openness and alterity of the future itself. In each of these examples, the gesture of refusing the inevitability of one future in order to proclaim another in fact accentuates the many ways in which the present is refused or diminished. The terminal signification does not in fact relate to the future: No Future must ultimately be read as No Present.

The determination of conditions of late modernity by the conjoined figure No Future/No Present pertains not just in the humanities or in academic discourse more broadly; it is definitive also, and with consequences more deleterious, in all areas of public and private life that are the nominal and increasingly tenuous objects of academic discourse. Contemplation of the future under the sign of its suspension is no less critical when placed in the context of those often arduous negotiations with futurity that play out in individual biographies than it is against the backdrop of neoliberalism and globalization in politics and of "postmodernism" in culture (terms that increasingly appear synonymous). The most obvious and most drastic example is the refusal of such negotiation altogether, the cutting short of one's own possible future through suicide. Such an act—which refuses the future outright rather than negating or suspending it—forces consideration of futurity onto the rather more naked horizon of mortality. The fact that the future, at the individual existential level, *is* to have no future, no longer to exist, certainly takes the gloss off some of the more seductive purchasable futures on offer. The anti-utopia of death—the "strongest counter-blow to utopia," in another of Bloch's (1985: 15) formulations—may present the conclusive cancellation of the future and the ultimate stumbling block to any attempt to affirm it. As long as victory over death remains "unimaginable," the non-negotiable horizon of mortality may be invoked to rob certain utopias of their potency—for better or worse.

More subtly pervasive is the stigmatization of old age, which, in rendering older people increasingly isolated and invisible, marginalizes the inevitable future of individuals and generations. Similarly, reproduction and its absence—whether willed or otherwise—also have implications for conceptions of futurity. On one level, the heteroreproductive logic that aligns, even equates, children with futurity is disputed and disrupted not least by queer theory; on another, a hegemonic reproductivity might in itself be

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perceivable as a kind of futurelessness or foreclosure insofar as it refuses the possibility that nonreproductive sexualities and sensibilities might be generative of futures in other ways and of other kinds. These are just some of the locations of subjectivity from which No Future gains critical traction: not *this* future, not on *these* terms.

Such largely private struggles to make one's own future livable, let alone desirable (or just conceivable), take place against the backdrop of an increasingly catastrophist collective imagination and a social world of diminished and diminishing possibilities. We are daily invited to choose our apocalypse from a range of available options—ecological, nuclear, religious fundamentalist, military-industrial, social-cultural (various narratives of "demise"). At the same time, and fueled by the more or less roughly sketched possibilities on this dystopian horizon, discourses proliferate around *stabilization* and *sustainability*, both of which frame the future in terms of the embattled continuation or rescue of a present that could be feasibly and defensibly perpetuated. The sheer otherness and inscrutability of the future are thereby foreclosed; its violent eruption into *other than this* is countered with an essentially conservative effort to endorse and preserve *this* ad infinitum: "keep calm and carry on." In this context, positive future-oriented affects—hope, confidence, desire, anticipation—lose ground to negative ones: anxiety, stress, despair, cynicism. We could speak of a contemporary discursive and experiential ambience, from the media to the workplace, that privileges negative affect with regard to the future even as—or precisely because—the virtues of perfectibility, optimization, and "positive thinking" are everywhere extolled by the dream machines of consumerism alongside the paradoxical exhortation to "mindful" calm.

The simultaneous difficulty of imagining the future on its own terms and anchoring oneself in consciousness and experience of the present may be another manifestation of the temporal parochialism that besets posthistorical subjects in an information-saturated, "lossless" age—the age of nonpresence, of the No Present. The widespread technophilic narcissism that stages and captures passing moments with a view to the gratification of a retrospective gaze can scarcely be said to embrace either the darkness of the lived moment or the radical uncertainty of the future. Rather, what is dramatized by ubiquitous practices of self-documentation is the seemingly irresistible drive toward a quiescent, consuming, and consumable subjectivity which offers itself up willingly to technologies of surveillance that seek to render the world—and its inhabitants—transparent and thus more easily manipulable. The bemused complaint that my social media feed knows what I want before I do is nothing more than the confirmation that the hookup between cultural capitalism and digitality is complete (further proof perhaps, if such were

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necessary, of the synonymous status of neoliberalism and the postmodern). The implications this may have for critical or radical future-making practices are as yet unclear, but *no* future can afford to imagine itself without at least a detour through this glossy surface. This may be the most banal symptom of the malaise of No Present that No Future seeks to inoculate: to attain, through a refusal of prefabricated desire and experience, a radical consciousness of the present that would no longer be absorbed by the task of prefabrication.

No Present might thus stand as the emblem of global consumer culture in the age of late/postmodernity and neoliberalism. The increasingly uninhabitable and oblivious present is the proper context for the reconceptualizations of No Future offered here, not now in the name of negation, but with the contrary purpose of restoring the present to itself.

The essays gathered in this and the next issue of *Poetics Today* (vol. 37, no. 3) approach No Future from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, drawing on a range of materials to explore literary, philosophical, aesthetic, political, and ideological dimensions of futurity's negation. The essays in the current issue proceed from broadly theoretical perspectives, while the essays in the following issue shift the focus to explicit consideration of No Future's themes and tropes in specific literary contexts. Each essay intersects with one or more aspects of No Future as it is conceived above, although none is bound entirely by the terms of that conception. Taken together, they dramatize the dynamic contingency of a (No) Future suspended between problematic necessity and practical impossibility.

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