

HOPE: A LITERARY HISTORY

Hope for us has a positive connotation. Yet it was criticized in classical antiquity as a distraction from the present moment, as the occasion for irrational and self-destructive thinking, and as a presumption against the gods. To what extent do arguments against hope remain useful? If hope sounds to us like a good thing, that reaction stems from a progressive political tradition grounded in the French Revolution, aspects of Romantic literature, and the influence of the Abrahamic faiths. Ranging both wide and deep, Adam Potkay examines the cases for and against hope found in literature from antiquity to the present. Drawing imaginatively on several fields and creatively juxtaposing poetry, drama, and novels alongside philosophy, theology, and political theory, the author brings continually fresh insights to a subject of perennial interest. This is a bold and illuminating new treatment of a long-running literary debate as complex as it is compelling.

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PREFACE

Hope seems to be everywhere. The pop artist Robert Indiana followed up his iconic “Love” series of the 1960s with a “Hope” series beginning in 2008. In 2019, I walked by the six-foot Hope sculpture, steel painted bright red and blue, then in midtown Manhattan. On lawns where one once found Christmas “Joy,” “Hope” signs more often reign, and in 2020 some have remained on display throughout the seasons. The word appears on bags advertising a Swedish clothing line several museum-goers displayed at the Museum of Modern Art. We might say of hope what the character Gwendolyn says of the Victorian buzzword “earnest” in Oscar Wilde’s play on the importance of that word (rather than the virtue it represents): “it has a music of its own; it produces vibrations.” Hope for us is as vibratory as it is unclear.

As an emotion, hope was criticized in classical antiquity, Eastern and Western, as an illusion, a distraction from the present moment, the occasion for irrational and self-destructive thinking, and a presumption vis-à-vis God or the gods: in short, a vice. To what extent do arguments against hope remain therapeutic or otherwise useful?

Here I have personal testimony, for what it’s worth. I found support in the classical sources when my late wife, Monica, was dying from a terminal illness. Her preliminary diagnosis gave her roughly a year of life, and we accustomed ourselves to this probable timetable, while

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sympathetic to friends who continued to hope for recovery based on divine intervention or anecdotes about some other person who had, against the odds, outlived a diagnosis. But the improbability of any such event, and the empirical evidence of my wife's decline, led us to eschew hopes or, in my wife's case, worldly hopes. We discontinued experimental medical therapy that her physicians would have extended because it seemed a prolongation of her suffering and also, in terms of any utilitarian calculus for how medical dollars could best be spent, a misuse of public resources. In this situation, I found helpful the classical arguments against hope therapeutic, recurring to them often. Monica, a devout Catholic, died with religious hope, and with tremendous composure, troubled only by moments of anxiety about not being slated for purgation and salvation. I started work in earnest on this book as a tribute to her.

Hope is part of our natural makeup. Sometime after Monica passed away, I started to imagine, as she had encouraged me to do, new relationships and courses of life. I started reading newspapers again, something I had given up – along with any interest in politics – while my wife was dying. And I rediscovered in the uncertainty that reigned around me that hopes and fears are practically unavoidable, temper them as one might with philosophy. We are, partly for our own good, hoping creatures.

But under what conditions can hope be considered an unqualified good? Only, I believe, as part of religious life. Or in relation to a progressive political tradition grounded in the French Revolution, aspects of Romantic literature, and the prospective orientation of the Abrahamic faiths.

This book examines the cases for and against hope found in literature from antiquity to the present. My

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use of “literature” is inclusive, in keeping with an earlier understanding of the term. Poetry, drama, and novels, mainly in the Western tradition, are at the forefront of my literary history, but I engage as well with philosophy, theology, and political theory. My emphases are on the ancients’ criticism of hope, which I stress to unsettle our facile trust in it, and on the Romantics’ transformation of religious hope into something less determinate, more pervasive, and still very much with us. I have written a dialectical history of hope, proceeding by point and counterpoint but building toward no clear synthesis or resolution. In its irresolution it distinguishes itself from earlier treatments of hope in literature written under the aegis of Marxist theory, with the clear endpoint of the classless society of peace, prosperity, and, starting in the 1960s, disinhibition. This book is only marginally about utopian writings, which in their finest literary form are not tied to futures many of us would want.

Hope: A Literary History does not contain a continuous argument about hope, nor is it a comprehensive history – on a topic so broad, I don’t believe such a history could be written. My Introduction is more an overture, announcing the main themes I will develop, than a road map setting out the exact path I’ll be taking. My subsequent chapters are roughly chronological, but also thematic. They span from antiquity and medieval Christianity through to literary Modernism, with a center of gravity in nineteenth-century Romanticism. These chapters are interconnected essays, which can be read independently of one another, but which illuminate each other and have a cumulative force. The authors on whom I focus are, quite simply, those who I’ve found have the most interesting

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things to say about hope, and say them in the most interesting manner. Of course, there are gaps. I hope other scholars might fill them in, and that my omissions will be treated as venial rather than as mortal sins.

I began this book as a tribute to a late loved one, and so it stands. As it happened, I finished the book during the Covid-19 pandemic, which I hope it will also memorialize. I had all along intended a section on Camus' novel *The Plague*, the story of a North African epidemic and its hero's devotion to work without hope of ultimate success. Suddenly the novel was the subject of essays and op-ed pieces in venues including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Times*, and *Opera News*.¹ The effects of the pandemic on utopian or progressive thought were brilliantly captured by the Portuguese novelist Gonçalo M. Tavares in his daily "Plague Diary" for May 2020:

List of utopias

Replacing utopias that occupy a lot of space with micro-utopias.

A utopia you can carry around in your pocket.

A miniature; capable of being practiced by a solitary little creature.²

I like the touch of "practicing utopia" – something always being learned, never achieved. Tavares suggests to me as well the necessity for working toward a smaller footprint on the planet, one that if we can't achieve humanely for ourselves, nature will accomplish for us.³

Less than three months after the outbreak of coronavirus came the resurgence of the US Black Lives Matter movement alongside civic political unrest that spilled onto the streets following the death-in-custody

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of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis. Again, it seemed the uncanny repetition of what I was writing on: Ralph Ellison's depiction, in *Invisible Man*, of the police murder of the character Tod Clifton, and the riots that followed. Some of the more destructive aspects of the summer-of-2020 riots were apparently incited, according to the *New York Times*, by "explicitly violent anarcho-socialist networks that rode on the coattails of peaceful protest."⁴ I was now back in the Russia of the 1860s, Dostoevsky's *Demons* in hand. The backlash against hope among some African-American intellectuals, under the banner of Afro-pessimism or Black Nihilism, is itself a dialectical response to the overcharged claims made earlier on behalf of political hope. There are limits on what (peaceful) hope can and cannot do. Hope can be a motive, but it can also be a drug.

As a literary scholar, my greatest hope may not be for the future, but rather in the past, in the great books which, always receding, reward reengagement. My pious hope is for the continued ability of the literary achievements of the past to guide and inspire; to transcend, if only partially, the catastrophes they may register.⁵ I learned to curate the Western canon through masters including Eric Auerbach and A. O. Lovejoy, M. H. Abrams and Martha Nussbaum, along the way picking up as many languages as I could. Inviting a still broader conversation, I have sprinkled my early chapters with ancient non- (or pre-) Western writing, and also contemporary voices. My book ends in the 1950s, however, as I am most comfortable with authors who wrote before I was born. I hope others might help me to move the conversation forward.

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Let me conclude with part of a poem. No less a pessimist than late Thomas Hardy looks to the past for its continued ability, however diminished, to feed and restore. Hope persists in his poem “In Tenebris” (composed 1895–86), through his revived medieval word, “unhope”:

Black is night’s cope;
 But death will not appal
 One who, past doubtings all,
 Waits in unhope.

In Hardy’s wintertime poem of bereavement and empty heartedness, death is awaited with an unhope that seems in context not entirely hopeless. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives “unhope,” a word listed as obsolete, four illustrations, three from sermon literature, 1225–1477, and the last from Hardy’s poem. In Hardy, the word rhymes with night’s “cope,” the long ecclesiastical garment worn by Church of England priests during Holy Communion. Tied to this garment and sacrament, unhope is not simply an uncovering or exposure. Its privative “un” preserves the nominal “hope,” just as the “uncool” of my generation affirms the cool. There *is* hope, it seems, just as there is a Church, ecclesiastical history, English philology, and the Psalm from which Hardy draws the poem’s Latin epigraph (in the KJV, “My heart is smitten, and withered like grass”).⁶ It is hope *in* the past, not only a lament for hope that has passed. There is only not hope for the poem’s speaker in his moment of speaking: a dramatic situation. In other poems, Hardy attributes hope – as well as charity and patience – to birds.⁷ But birds have no such things without poets.