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## “SOMETHING EVERMORE ABOUT TO BE” The Transformation of Hope in the Romantic Era

*Hope, once a theological virtue and potential secular vice, features in the eighteenth century as a neutral element of secular psychology. This hope comes in the Romantic era to underwrite a new, semi-secularized virtue: the hope, more or less detached from revealed religion, for more life, a better or the perfected condition of the individual or of the species in time or eternity. This new and indeterminate hope directs us, however, towards a receding horizon. It is hope that aims beyond hope, and beyond conceptualization.*

Hope is a double-edged concept in the Western tradition: on one hand, it is an emotion, and its contrary, typically, is fear.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, hope of a specific kind is one of the three theological virtues (along with faith and love), and its contrary is despair. As a theological virtue—the anticipation of sharing eternally in the glory of God—hope is always a good thing in Christian cultures. It is not something one can have too much of. It is also not misdirected: although any relationship to the future involves us in uncertainty, eternal life can nonetheless be considered as a certain outcome by people of faith.<sup>2</sup>

As a secular emotion, hope is more clearly related to assessments of an unknowable future. And depending on its intentional object, it may also be morally problematic. Hope has been judged as either a good or bad thing depending both on its object—is that which one hopes for worthy or not?—and also on the likelihood of that object’s attainability—is one’s hope reasonable or not?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas primarily opposes the passion of hope to despair, and only secondarily to fear; see Robert M i n e r, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae Ia2ae 22-48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 215-30, 226, 238-39. However, hope appears as an emotion opposed to fear in the mechanistic analyses of the passions found in Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, and others. This tradition is reviewed by Jayne M. W a t e r w o r t h, *A Philosophical Analysis of Hope* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 32-40. For Waterworth, hope is not clearly an emotion, as it lacks the “characteristic feelings” associated with other emotions: for example, “cowering in fear” (41); contra Aristotle, who in *The Art of Rhetoric* (I.xi.5) finds a pleasurable sensation in hope, Waterworth argues that it is not “necessarily the case that one who hopes should experience any hedonic tone at all” (57).

<sup>2</sup> Terry E a g l e t o n notes that “the Anglican funeral service speaks of the ‘sure and certain’ hope of resurrection. Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Heinrich Rengsdorf write of ‘confident waiting and trustful hope.’ The truth is that Christians have hope not because the future is obscure but because it is in some inscrutable sense well founded” (*Hope without Optimism* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015], 82).

Moralists, notably the authors of Ecclesiastes, and Juvenal in his tenth Satire, have presented most worldly hopes or wishes (the two concepts are closely linked<sup>3</sup>) as a vain enticement, since no worldly relationship or possession can secure satisfaction. The Stoic Seneca, in his more temperate moods, recommends “let us restrict the range of hope” in order to avoid disappointment and anger.<sup>4</sup> Less moderately, he advises against hope altogether: “cease to hope...and you will cease to fear.”<sup>5</sup> Jumping ahead nineteen hundred years, Nietzsche sees the remnant of hope in Pandora’s box as the greatest of evils: “For what Zeus wanted was that man, though never so tormented by the other evils, should nonetheless not throw life away but continue to let himself be tormented. To that end he gives men hope: it is in truth the worst of all evils, because it protracts the torment of men.”<sup>6</sup> In Poland, Tadeusz Borowski, imprisoned in Auschwitz and Dachau from 1943 to 1945, wrote of his concentration camp experience: “Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers.”<sup>7</sup>

My purview in this essay is what happens to hope in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My argument is this: hope, once a theological virtue and potential secular vice, features in the eighteenth century as a neutral element of secular psychology—that is, as part of a mechanistic account of human nature compatible with the new science. This hope comes in the Romantic era to underwrite a new, semi-secularized virtue: the hope, more or less detached from revealed religion, for more life, a better or the perfected condition of the individual or of the species in time or eternity. This new and indeterminate hope directs us, however, towards a receding horizon. It is hope that aims beyond hope, and beyond conceptualization: William Wordsworth’s

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755) defines “to hope” as “to live in expectation of some good” and “to expect with desire”; he lists among the definitions of “to wish”: “to have a strong desire,” and “it has a slight significance of hope.” William F. Lynch, S. J., sees wishing as necessary to hoping: “When I begin to discover what my wishes are I am well on the way toward hope. When I cannot wish, I am moving towards despair” (*Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974], 24, cf. 129-31).

<sup>4</sup> *In vicinum spes exeat*: from Seneca, *De Ira/On Anger*, III. vii., in the Loeb Classical Library edition *Moral Essays*, 3 vols., edited and translated by John W. Basore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), vol. 1, 272-73.

<sup>5</sup> Quoting the Stoic (“our”) Hecato, Seneca writes, *Desines, inquit, timere, si sperare desieris*: from Seneca, Epistle V, in the Loeb Classical Library edition, *Epistles: 1-65*, ed. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), section 71, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Tadeusz Borowski, “Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter),” section v, in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, edited and translated by Barbara Vedder (New York: Viking Penguin, 1967), 121-22.

“something evermore about to be”;<sup>8</sup> Percy Shelley’s hope for a hope realized beyond “its own wreck,” and for “arts, though unimagined, yet to be”;<sup>9</sup> John Stuart Mill’s imaginative hope that arises on the far side of his rebuttal of all arguments for immortality. While Romantic-era hope doesn’t supersede or displace the orthodox theological virtues, it does supplement or vie with them, and thus figures in what has been called the modern “differentiation” between religious and secular modes of authority.<sup>10</sup>

#### ILLUSION—OR VIRTUE?

Seen from a different angle, however, the differentiation between modes of authority in the West is as old as Christian humanism, with its imperfect integration of Christian and pagan frames of reference. Something of the friction between these two frames may be seen in the dialogue poem “On Hope,” written jointly by Abraham Cowley and Richard Crashaw in the mid-seventeenth-century.<sup>11</sup> Cowley’s stanzas (4 out of the poem’s 10) arraign hope according to classical and especially Stoic topoi: hope is a cheat, an illusion; a companion to fear; a prelude to disappointment and anger. Hope is “Fortune’s cheating Lotterie” (line 51) and “Brother of Feare!” (line 71). In response to Cowley’s witty revisiting of classical authority, however, Crashaw provides interlaced stanzas (a preponderant 6 of the poem’s 10) in praise of hope as a theological virtue. Hope sails above Fortune and the stars (lines 61-4); it is “*Faith’s* sister!” and “*Feares Antidote!*” (81-82). Unsurprisingly, Christian hope—revealed as “True Hope”—gets to close the poem: “True *Hope’s* a glorious Huntress, and her chase/ The God of Nature in the field of Grace” (89-90).

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 6.542 (1805 version) in *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979). Further quotations from Wordsworth are from this edition, and appear in the body of my text.

<sup>9</sup> Percy Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, III.iii.56, and V.574, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977). Further quotations from Shelley are from this edition, and appear in the body of my text.

<sup>10</sup> On the modern era’s “differentiation” between forms of cultural authority, and the relation of this to nineteenth-century literature, see Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 28-29 and passim; Joshua King, *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 6-8, 135-7.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from *The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw*, ed. George Walton Williams (New York: Norton, 1970), 71-74. Williams, in his editorial headnote to the poem, remarks that “On Hope” was probably written in the late 1630s or early 1640s, when Crashaw and Cowley were both at Cambridge.

What true hope anticipates, of course, is eternal and spiritually perfected life. It also provides a foretaste of this anticipated state—hope is “our earlier Heaven!” (41)—and may even seem to collapse the present into that future, chronological time (*chronos*) into spiritual timelessness (*kairos*):

Sweet *Hope!* Kind cheat! Faire fallacy! by thee  
 Wee are not where, or what wee bee,  
 But what, and where wee would bee: thus art thou  
 Our absent presence, and our future now. (67-70)

The question Crashaw raises in these rhymes is a cognitive one: how can we know, now, what eternal life will be like, and without this knowledge, how can hope be our future now? The object of Christian hope is *determinate*—eternal life—but it is also *unspecific*, as we can never know what that life will be like. (Hoping for a worldly good, by contrast, can be both determinate and specific.)

Not that lack of knowledge can keep us from *imagining* future life. Jacob Sider Jost has argued that, in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hell and divine judgment recede in importance, and heaven is increasingly imagined in terms of chronological time and individual personality. In contrast to a “theocentric heaven...in which human pleasures and relationships were subsumed in the overwhelming presence of God,” John Bunyan and the *Spectator* papers popularized “a more humanized heaven in which licit human pleasures and relationships, particularly ties of kinship, marriage, and friendship, continue in a new form.”<sup>12</sup>

#### “SOME HAPPIER ISLAND IN THE WATRY WASTE”?

However, this prosaic view of heaven—and, more generally, making assumptions about an afterlife—were not without detractors. In Alexander Pope’s well-known lines from *An Essay on Man* (1733-1734), eschatological hope is a virtue natural to all, its proper object being determinate (eternal life) but unspecific: we don’t know what eternal life will be like. Pope gently ironizes an American Indian who hopes—just as many of Pope’s fellow Europeans did—for a “heaven” that looks like an improved version of his life on earth:

<sup>12</sup> Jacob S i d e r J o s t, *Prose Immortality, 1711-1819* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 25. For a contemporary Christian reprise on the theme of imagining heaven, see Marilynne R o b i n s o n, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004): “Although the Bible has much to say about final judgment, it offers no definitive picture of life after death. Yet fewer than one third of the American people—29 percent—admit they have no ideas on what is one of the most ambiguous subjects in Biblical revelation...To say a subject is ambiguous is not to say someone cannot form ideas on it, or shouldn’t, nor is it to say even that it is possible to *avoid* forming ideas on it” (146-47); cf. 166.

Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;  
 Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore!  
 What future bliss, he gives not thee to know,  
 But gives that Hope to be thy blessing now.  
 Hope springs eternal in the human breast:  
 Man never Is, but always To be blest:  
 The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,  
 Rests and expatiates in a life to come.  
 Lo! the poor Indian, whose untutor'd mind  
 Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind...  
 Yet simple Nature to his hope has giv'n,  
 Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler heav'n;  
 Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,  
 Some happier island in the watry waste,  
 Where slaves once more their native land behold,  
 No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold!  
 To Be, contents his natural desire,  
 He asks no Angel's wing, no Seraph's fire;  
 But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,  
 His faithful dog shall bear him company. (Epistle I: 91-112)<sup>13</sup>

In an irony of Pope's lines, his Indian, humbly content “To Be” in an afterlife, seems more like eighteenth-century Protestant readers of Addison and Steele than does the Christian who here seeks “Angel's wing” and “Seraph's fire”—a baroque fantasy that seems quite un-English by 1730.

Forty-five years after Pope wrote his lines on hope, Samuel Johnson creatively misread them, contributing to hope's earthward turn in the later eighteenth century. Pope had addressed the afterlife; Johnson applies a couplet of Pope's (taken out of context) to mortal life, and human psychology.<sup>14</sup> I quote from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) and his entry for April 10, 1775:

He this day enlarged upon Pope's melancholy remark, 'Man never is, but always to be blest.' He asserted that the present was never a happy state to any human being; but that, as every part of life, of which we are conscious, was at some point of time a period yet to come, in which felicity was expected, there was some happiness produced by hope. Being pressed upon this subject, and asked if he really was of opinion, that though, in

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Alexander P o p e, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (London: Methuen, 1950, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).

<sup>14</sup> Claude Rawson was the first to remark that Johnson “secularizes and psychologizes” Pope's lines: R a w s o n, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and our Time* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 44. Rawson's larger point is that “the world of the *Essay*, with its fresh, infectious delight in the conventional coherences of a theodicy, has no relevance for minds [like Johnson's] to whom Discord was a psychological condition rather than a philosophical problem” (44).

general, happiness was very rare in human life, a man was not sometimes happy in the moment that was present, he answered, ‘Never, but when he is drunk.’<sup>15</sup>

Consciousness of the present moment is painful, Johnson claims, unless either the present is supplemented by futurity, or consciousness is abated by liquor. Drunkenness is stasis, while hope propels us and provides some tenuous, future-oriented “happiness” or pleasurable consciousness. Johnson is not moralizing here, satirizing human wishes—something he partly does elsewhere, notably in his poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, an imitation of Juvenal’s tenth Satire, and in the sermon he ghost-wrote on Ecclesiastes 1:14, “all is vanity and vexation of spirit.”<sup>16</sup> Yet even in these apparent satires, Johnson has been called a “satirist manqué,” one for whom the distance necessary for satire collapses in sympathy with all-too-human nature.<sup>17</sup> For Johnson worldly hopes might be illusionary, but they are at the same time the only palliative for the ache or emptiness of the existential present.

In Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, Johnson speaks of hope as part of a social psychology in which desires prompt endeavors that are fundamentally self-interested. In doing so, he situates himself in the line of a mechanistic project that extends from Thomas Hobbes, for whom happiness is a psychological matter rather than, as for the ancients and Thomists, an ethical assessment of the life that is good or proper for human beings (*eudaimonia*). Hobbes maintains at the outset of *Leviathan* (1:11) that “felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still the way to the latter”; there is, in his psychological model, no ultimate aim of life, no contentment or repose.<sup>18</sup> Hobbes’s mechanistic psychology, as developed by Locke and Mandeville, informs Johnson’s secular view of human nature just as it does David Hume’s.<sup>19</sup>

However, in a clear example of the differentiation of religious and secular spheres of authority, Johnson, in the sermons he ghost-wrote for others, addresses hope as a theological virtue. He does so most memorably in a gallows sermon he wrote for a preacher in Newgate prison: “To the greater part of those whom angels stand ready to receive, nothing is granted in this world beyond rational hope;—and with hope, founded on promise, we may well be satisfied.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 617-18.

<sup>16</sup> This sermon appears as Sermon number 12 in Samuel Johnson, *Sermons*, ed. Jean Hagstrum and James Gray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 127-36.

<sup>17</sup> Walter J. Bates, “Johnson and Satire Manqué,” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W. H. Bond (New York: Grolier Club, 1970), 145-60.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 75.

<sup>19</sup> See Adam Potkay, *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), 61-75.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Sermon number 28, *Sermons* 306; my following quotation is from 308-9.

“[H]aving declared and confirmed our faith by the holy communion, we deliver ourselves into...[God’s] hands, in firm hope, that he who created and redeemed us will not suffer us to perish.” But Johnson writes this way in sermons, not in periodical essays or philosophical tales or other secular genres. For him, secular hopes and theological hope, psychology and eschatology, remain as distinct and incommensurate as they did for Cowley and Crashaw.

#### HOPE WITHOUT AN OBJECT

The line blurs with Wordsworth and what, conventionally, we call the Romantic era in Britain (circa 1790-1830s). Wordsworth, as we will see, projects a new kind of quasi-theological, imaginative hope, and the basis of this transcendent hope is the psychology of secular hope. Let me first note that Wordsworth is remarkably non-judgmental about worldly hopes, even far-fetched ones. We are, for Wordsworth, hoping beings. Hope rarely appears as a vice, even when its effects are potentially or manifestly catastrophic. In the collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), witness the tenderness and glee of Wordsworth’s *The Idiot Boy*, a ballad that troubled his collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge because in it Wordsworth apparently condones the proud and dangerously unrealistic hopes that Betty Foy places in her feckless boy, sending him out on a nocturnal mission to fetch the doctor for their perilously sick neighbor.<sup>21</sup> In the event, the mission does not succeed (as anyone but Betty could have predicted), but the poem nonetheless has an improbable comic denouement. Conversely, in the manuscript poem *The Ruined Cottage* (1798-99), Margaret’s exorbitant hope (for her husband’s return) is a sickness unto death; yet, as Wordsworth’s narrator presents it, this fatal hope is made to seem as natural as the weeds that invade Margaret’s cottage grounds. Wordsworth later incorporated *The Ruined Cottage* into his long dialogue-poem *The Excursion* (1814), in which irrational hope afflicts, in addition to Margaret, the Solitary and the Solitary’s wife. Through these characters, Geoffrey Hartman observes, Wordsworth “shows...the inhuman or too human strength of hope.”<sup>22</sup>

But in Book 6 of the 1805 *Prelude*, hope as an ineluctable part of human psychology segues into a new kind of quasi-theological hope. Having reco-

<sup>21</sup> “In the ‘Idiot Boy,’” Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 17, “the mother’s character...is an impersonation of an instinct abandoned by judgement... [T]he idiocy of the *boy* is so evenly balanced by the folly of the *mother*, as to present to the general reader rather a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage, than an analytic display of maternal affection in its ordinary workings.” Quoted from Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 volumes in 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:48-49.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 302.

unted his experience of crossing the Alps (in the year 1790) without being aware of it—an immense anti-climax to imaginative expectations that may or may not have been inordinate—Wordsworth, writing in 1804, apotheosizes the imagination and the hopes to which it gives rise:

Imagination!—lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my song  
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,  
 In all the might of its endowments, came  
 Athwart me....  
 In such strength  
 Of usurpation, in such visitings  
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense  
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us  
 The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
 There harbours whether we be young or old.  
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home,  
 Is with infinitude—and only there;  
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
 And something evermore about to be. (*Prelude* 5:525-42 [1805 text])

Over the past fifty years, this passage has received more commentary than perhaps any other in *The Prelude* thanks to its centrality to Geoffrey Hartman's highly influential 1964 study of Wordsworth's poetry.<sup>23</sup> For Hartman, the key term in the passage is "Imagination," that is, the visionary imagination opposed to nature and the senses; Hartman's larger argument is that Wordsworth, as a poet, constantly negotiates between the opposing claims of nature, on one hand, and the transcendent or "apocalyptic" imagination, on the other. However, Hartman prefaces his quotation of this post-crossing the Alps passage with a terse, pregnant sentence: "Wordsworth [here] descants on the Pauline definition of faith" (as "the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen" Hebrews 11:1). But what is the faith or the hope expressed here? Jonathan Wordsworth, for one, could find none: "Wordsworth's language cries out for a transcendental interpretation, but at this period he has none to offer."<sup>24</sup> Suffice it to say that for Wordsworth imagination is linked to hope, and hope with infinity, the promise of "something evermore about to be." How far have we come from Pope's line, "Man never Is, but always

<sup>23</sup> Hartman quotes this passage in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 46; he sets forth the Wordsworthian opposition between nature and imagination in his chapter "Synopsis: The Via Naturaliter Negativa," 31-69.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, "Wordsworth's Borderers," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 183.

To be blest”? The key difference between the two poets is that for Pope hope has a determinate object—eternal life—even if that object should not be (although it is) specifically imagined. Wordsworth’s, by contrast, is a radically indeterminate hope, having no clear object and perhaps no proper object at all. Indeed, it is hope for some life that is not yet, that is always about to be in infinite projection.

Conceptually, this strains sense. With Wordsworth, hope comes to have a value apart from the thing hoped for or believed in—which, arguably, makes no sense outside of the Christian context that he presumes without affirming. Wordsworth blurs or occupies both sides of the line between hope as emotion and as theological virtue; his disallowance of simple binaries is what Simon Jarvis calls his “poetic thinking.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, I have written elsewhere on Wordsworth’s “advancing Paul’s theological virtues in a manner that allows them to pertain to a detheologized ethics as well as to Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> I might add that Wordsworth’s poetry was consequently much esteemed in the Victorian era by readers of evangelical faith and of no faith at all.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, from one angle Wordsworth’s work may be seen as a *de*-differentiation between religious and poetic modes of authority in the nineteenth century.

As Wordsworth aged, however, he grew more akin to his Christian audience. In the last stage of composing *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s brother John drowned, and the poet’s correspondence reveals his struggle to accept Christian hope in eternal life.<sup>28</sup> His first effort to do so appears in the thirteenth and final book of the 1805 *Prelude*, where he records as the culminating intuition of his mind’s progress: “The feeling of life endless, the one thought / By which we live, infinity and God” (13:183-4). Re-written for the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, these lines become doctrinally Christian: “Faith in life endless, the sustaining thought / Of human Being, Eternity, and God” (14:204-5). Between the first and final versions of these lines, Wordsworth fully defended the theological virtues, not in his own person, but through the character of the Wanderer, in Book Four of *The Excursion* (titled “Despondency Corrected”).<sup>29</sup> In response to the misanthropic Solitary’s account of his political and familial disappointments in the French Revolutionary years, the Wanderer urges “faith, / Faith absolute

<sup>25</sup> Simon J a r v i s, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-32.

<sup>26</sup> Adam P o t k a y, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 181.

<sup>27</sup> On Wordsworth’s Victorian reception, see Stephen G i l l, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Robert M. Ryan, *Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan W o r d s w o r t h, “Wordsworth’s Borderers,” 183-7; see also *The Prelude*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, 468, n. 6.

<sup>29</sup> W o r d s w o r t h, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell *et alia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

in God, including hope, / And the defence that lies in boundless love/ Of his perfections” (4:21-24). Of the Solitary’s dead family, the Wanderer maintains:

I cannot doubt that They whom you deplore  
 Are glorified; or, if they sleep, shall wake  
 From sleep, and dwell with God in endless love.  
 Hope,—below this, consists not with belief  
 In mercy carried infinite degrees  
 Beyond the tenderness of human hearts:  
 Hope,—below this, consists not with belief  
 In perfect Wisdom, guiding mightiest Power,  
 That finds no limits but its own pure Will. (4:187-95)

But the beliefs that the Wanderer urges on the Solitary are precisely those that the Solitary, by his own account, does not have.<sup>30</sup> In the end, the Wanderer’s despondency is not “corrected,” or even much alleviated, by the Wanderer’s faith. Lovers of poetry will also notice that the Wanderer’s sermonic discourse lacks the thrilling ambiguities or “poetic thinking” of *The Prelude*’s finer moments. Wordsworth here makes poetry out of beliefs rather than, as he earlier did, beliefs out of poetry.

#### HOPE THAT CREATES FROM ITS OWN WRECK THE THING IT CONTEMPLATES

It’s no wonder that the atheist Percy Shelley was “much disappointed” with *The Excursion*, while Mary Shelley remarked: Wordsworth “is a slave.”<sup>31</sup> As Wordsworth’s erstwhile disciple, Shelley re-affirms in his own poetry a hope for the future that, though without determinate object, trails clouds of glory from Christian ethics. Wordsworth associated hope with “effort, and expectation, and desire”—a kind of active, preparatory waiting—while Shelley, by contrast, associates hope with love, forgiveness, longsuffering, and martyrdom, his atheism not detracting in the least from what he understood as Christ’s social gospel. In his *annus mirabilis*, 1819, Shelley repeatedly imagines a perfected humanity rising, Christ-like, from wreck or slaughter, the crushing of its hopes in the ordinary world. In Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*, the Chorus of Spirits sings to the longsuffering Prometheus that in the unredeemed world “the tender hopes” of “the best and gentlest” generate only “aerial joy,” mon-

<sup>30</sup> See Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 168-70.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Shelley records in her journal: “Shelley...brings home Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, of which we read a part; much disappointed. He is a slave” (quoted in Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 320).

strous “Love,” “Pain” and “Ruin” (I.772-88)—but that all this shall change through Prometheus’s act of forgiving his tormentor, Jupiter. Jupiter’s fall, in Act III, ushers in a new age of freedom, peace and joy, but Shelley gives the poem’s last stanzas to Demogorgon, the personification of causal Necessity, who counsels the reader in the way to recover freedom should it ever again be lost (as Shelley thought it was in 1819):

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
 To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;  
 To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;  
 To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates... (IV 570-74)

The most curious thing about these difficult lines is that Hope, quasi-personified, must come to ruin before the object of hope can be realized. Indeed, Hope appears to wish for its own (preliminary) extinction: Hope appears to wish for infinite woes, for hopelessness. Note how different, and more logical, Demogorgon’s first line here would be if “Hope” were prefaced by “even”: “To suffer woes *e’en* Hope thinks infinite.” Or if “Hope” were replaced by one of its contraries: “To suffer woes which *Fear* thinks infinite”; “To suffer woes Despair thinks infinite.” But for Shelley, the only frame of future projection is hope, and only if hope (almost) dies will it bear fruit.<sup>32</sup>

Paradoxically, hope must be realized beyond hope. In another poem of 1819, *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley literalizes the process of Hope creating “from its own wreck the thing it contemplates”: here fully personified Hope, who “looked more like Despair” at the pageant of Anarchy, prepares to die:

Then she lay down in the street,  
 Right before the horses’ feet,  
 Expecting, with a patient eye,  
 Murder, Fraud and Anarchy. (98-101)

Only thus prepared for trampling does Hope create the “better day” (91) that is hoped for: a mysterious “Shape arrayed in mail, / Brighter than the Viper’s scale” (110-111) (green being the traditional color for hope) ascends from between Hope and her foes, and this emanation quickens “Thoughts” in the “prostrate multitude (125-26). Anarchy dies and Hope arises, revived, orating in praise of freedom. But, Hope explains, hoped-for freedom will come

<sup>32</sup> Cf. John 12:24, Revised Standard Version: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

through non-violent resistance and mass martyrdom—the death, if not of hope, then at least of many of the hopeful:

And that slaughter to the Nation  
Shall steam up like inspiration,  
Eloquent, oracular;  
A volcano heard afar. (360-63)

Shelley's urging his readers to expect—or, indeed, hope for—certain carnage (or anarchy) as a prelude to possible improvement may seem ill-advised, masochistic, an instance of what Milan Kundera called, in a different context, “moral exhibitionism.”<sup>33</sup> But, more generously, Shelley's hope beyond hope might be interpreted as an affirmation of human values—including love and hope, freedom and peace—in an otherwise hopeless situation. The situation of England in 1819 might seem a long cry from that of a tribe or nation facing the possibility its own extinction, but for Shelley, in Hebrew prophetic mode, that is what it seemed to be. Recent writers have dubbed the hope of the truly hopeless “radical hope” (Jonathan Lear) or “expressive hope” (Jayne Waterworth)—and it may be possible to re-examine Shelley in the light of this philosophical and ethnographic literature.<sup>34</sup>

For Shelley, as for other proponents of radical hope, there are possibilities beyond what currently can be imagined, and a certain amount of wrack and ruin must be endured before the imageless good can be realized. Shelley con-

<sup>33</sup> Kundera's public dispute with Vaclav Havel concerns the Czechs' possible course of action after the Soviet invasion of August, 1968. “Havel states that no hope has survived, and yet unlike in most people in him this arouses neither resignation nor despair but, on the contrary, an intensified hunger for action. But what good is action if no hope has survived?... Such an action pursues only two ends: 1.) to unmask the world in its irredeemable amorality; 2.) to certify its agent in his unalloyed virtue. Thus an originally purely moral stance (the rejection of an unjust world) is inverted to become pure moral exhibitionism. The desire to publicly exhibit his moral luster has outweighed the desire to change things for the better.” From Milan K u n d e r a, “Radicalism and Exhibitionism,” translated from the Czech by Tim West, p. 5, web: [https://www.academia.edu/2503525/Radicalism\\_and\\_Exhibitionism\\_Milan\\_Kundera](https://www.academia.edu/2503525/Radicalism_and_Exhibitionism_Milan_Kundera) (checked 11/28/2016). West translates Kundera's *Radikalismus a exhibicionismus*, originally published in *Host du domu* (March 1969): 24-29.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan L e a r's *Radical Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) examines the response of the last great chief of the Crow tribe to the imminent ruin of his tribe's way of life, and his hope in an inconceivable future for his people; his “radical hope,” for Lear, “anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it” (83). On Lear's work, see also Terry E a g l e t o n, *Hope without Optimism*, 112-15. Jayne Waterworth uses the phrase “expressive hope as a symbolic act” to characterize Viktor E. Frankl's response to life in concentration camps: Frankl exhorted his companions, “they must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and meaning” (quoted in W a t e r w o r t h, 105). Frankl's “expressive hope,” Waterworth concludes, “persists to express value in the face of ...catastrophe” (107).

ceived of that good end primarily as the perfected human community, mankind in futurity, and his primary concern is with the species, not the individual. His view of communal life as life continuous, a kind of collective immortality (arguably suggested by elements of Wordsworth’s verse<sup>35</sup>) will be more explicitly developed in the writing of a later disciple of Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill, who argues in his essay *Utility of Religion* (c. 1854) “that if individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short; its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with indefinite capability of improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur and aspiration.”<sup>36</sup>

I anticipate my turn to Mill because both he and Shelley are professed atheists who share, in addition to hope in the mortal future, a tentative hope in posthumous, eternal life. In Shelley’s early epic *Queen Mab* (1813)—a poem made famous by the exclamation, “There is no God!” (VII:13)—Mab instructs the soul of Ianthe (Shelley’s first wife, Harriet) in two types of immortality. The first is a kind of psychological equivalent to immortality that will find a place in perfected mortal life; Mab foretells a future in which

Here now the human being stands adorning  
This loveliest earth with taintless body and mind...  
Him, still from hope to hope the bliss pursuing  
Which from the exhaustless store of human weal  
Dawns on the virtuous mind, the thoughts that rise  
In time-destroying infiniteness...  
And man, once fleeting o’er the transient scene  
Swift as an unremembered vision, stands  
Immortal upon earth... (VIII:198-211)

Shelley provides a footnote to this last line, explaining that “if...the human mind...should become conscious of an infinite number of ideas in a minute, that minute would be eternity,” and that perfected sensibility will approach such a “time-destroying infiniteness”. But sensing that Ianthe might nonetheless fear physical death, Mab suggests—as Shelley will repeatedly suggest—that death is perhaps not what it appears to be: “Fear not then, Spirit, death’s disrobing hand/.../ ‘Tis but the voyage of a darksome hour, / The transient gulph-dream of a startling sleep./ .../ Are there not hopes within thee, which this scene / Of linked and gradual being has confirmed?” (IX:171-81).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See P o t k a y, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 173-81.

<sup>36</sup> John Stuart M i l l, *Three Essays on Religion*, ed. Louis J. Matz (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009), 127-28.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the “Conclusion” of *The Sensitive Plant*: “It is a modest creed, and yet/ Pleasant if one considers it, / To own that death itself must be,/ Like all the rest,—a mockery” (lines 13-16); see also

## “SIMPLE HOPE”

John Stuart Mill will come to affirm this hope in eternal (and higher) life as what at the end of *Theism* (c. 1873), he calls “simple Hope,” that is, hope without certainty or even faith.<sup>38</sup> In this essay written in the last year of his life, Mill first debunks at length various a priori evidences of theism, from the argument for a first cause to the ontological argument, and also evidences of immortality, including the indissolubility of non-material soul and the argument from desire. He ultimately concedes, however, that just as there is—contra Darwin—“one of the lower degrees of probability” for the intelligent design of the universe, so is there “the possibility of a life after death” as “a boon which this powerful Being who wishes well to man, may have the power to grant, and which if the message alleged to have been sent by him was really sent [i.e., through Christ], he has actually promised” (208). Mill allows that there is nothing irrational about such imaginative hope, skeptically maintained: “it is possible to form a perfectly sober estimate of the evidences on both sides of a question and yet to let the imagination dwell by preference on those possibilities, which are at once the most comforting and the most improving” (209). Mill then elaborates on the moral usefulness of hope in the order of the universe and in posthumous life: “The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling. It makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings.... [T]he benefit consists less in any specific hope than in the enlargement of the general scale of the feelings; the loftier aspirations being no longer in the same degree checked and kept down by a sense of the insignificance of human life” (211).

The conclusion of *Theism* is Mill’s final testament to Wordsworth’s unspecified and morally uplifting hope. Hope, after Wordsworth, is an emotion attended with virtues, if it is no longer a theological virtue. In the last sonnet of *The River Duddon* sequence (1820), Wordsworth summons the theological virtues, but subordinates them to the feeling of more, perhaps eternal, life:

And if, as tow’rd the silent tomb we go,  
Thro’ love, thro’ hope, and faith’s transcendent dower,  
We feel that we are greater than we know.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of feelings or affect to our hopes and projects is what Mill, by his own account, learned from Wordsworth’s poetry. Mill’s *Autobiography*

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*Adonais*; and the essay “On Life” (composed 1819): “Whatever may be his [man’s] true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution” (476).

<sup>38</sup> Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 208. Subsequent citations appear in the body of my text.

<sup>39</sup> *The River Duddon* sonnet number 33 (“Conclusion”), in William Wordsworth, *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems, 1820-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 75.

(Chapter 5) recounts a spiritual crisis in the author’s twentieth year, when he realized that his grand “object in life”—“to be a reformer of the world”—did not really *matter* to him: he recognizes that the realization of his object would be, to him, no “great joy or happiness.”<sup>40</sup> Mill retains his vision of the good, but he sees that its gradual attainment wouldn’t be a good *for him*; it is not something he wishes or hopes for. Mill offers as a “true description of what I felt” a couplet from Coleridge: “Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
/ And hope without an object cannot live” (116). What awakens hope in Mill is his experience of first reading Wordsworth:

What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they... seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. (121)

What Wordsworth gave Mill, as a young man, was hope for mankind. What Mill discovered in old age, and in Wordsworth’s footsteps, was the hope, more or less independent of revealed religion, in more life, a better or perfected condition of the individual and of the species in time *and* eternity.

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<sup>40</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. John M. Robson (London: Penguin, 1989), 111-12. Subsequent citations appear in the body of my text.