

Deceptive Demeanours

Hope: A Literary History, **Adam Potkay**, Cambridge University Press, 422pp, 2022, £29.99 (hardcover)

Cheerfulness: A Literary and Cultural History, **Timothy Hampton**, Zone Books, 267pp, 2022, £22 (hardcover)

Of the three cardinal theological virtues expounded by St Paul – faith, hope and charity – it is the middle term that has proved most intractable to the spirit’s grasp. Is hope the fugitive trace of decayed volition, a remnant of the archaic realisation that things were not within human control? Or is it the ennobling presentiment, as in the first book of Corinthians, that a divinely ordained better settlement is on its way? Perhaps it lies somewhere between the two, entangled in the barbed wire of its own contradiction. Hope might be the yearning that something might happen, even though it clearly probably won’t, or it could be the elevated feeling that comes from knowing, without evidence, that it will?

Adam Potkay’s authoritative literary survey of the career of hope since Classical times makes it clear that what the ancients understood by the term is not at all what the Renaissance, the Enlightenment or the past century would discover in it. So profound have its transmutations been that it could be argued that what Sophocles or the writer of Ecclesiastes recognised it to be is simply not the same thing as the vital fluid that, for Alexander Pope, springs eternal in the human breast, or that Max Brod, in conversation with Kafka, could declare finally non-existent. The author of *The Trial* demurred: there is plenty of hope for God, he pointed out, just not for us.

George Steiner once remarked that only the twentieth century could have appended the epithet ‘dirty’ to the idea of hope – in Jean Anouilh’s 1944 version of the perennially hopeless story of Antigone – but Potkay begins his survey by pointing out that hope was not considered a valuable or dignified emotion in the Classical era. For the Greeks, hope is self-

deceiving, in that it leads to false perceptions of likely outcomes. It is the enemy of rational thought, brings with it its soul-corroding counterpart – the fear that what is hoped for won't happen – and undermines that pacific enjoyment of present conditions that might make for happiness. And what people hope for tends to be worthless anyway, as those who already have it often try to convince them. Vanity of vanities. There is nothing new under the sun. That which is wanting cannot be numbered. And so forth.

The alternative to futile hope would be Horace's *carpe diem*, making the most of what there already is, to the extent of seeing even the occluded potential in it. When all the other evils have been released from Pandora's jar, according to Hesiod, what is left is hope. But is hope the last evil, or is it the saving grace? In Aeschylus' dramatic account of the myth of Prometheus, the Titan's first gift to humankind, before the bestowal of fire for which he is condemned, is hope, conventionally portrayed as blind because it is a product of our inability to see the future. The Chorus celebrates Prometheus for his benevolence, and yet the thought continues to nag at the Greek intellect that, as Aristotle proposes, where there is no hope, there is no fear. For Socrates, hope is pleasurable enough in itself, but only in the anticipatory sense that Keats will spot in the Grecian urn, by which time it has shaded anyway into what Christian liturgy recognises as sure and certain expectation.

In the eighteenth century, Potkay shows, hope has become a social and political virtue, one possessed of a serially self-perpetuating nature, as Joseph Addison, writing in *The Spectator* in 1712, puts it: 'one Hope no sooner dies in us but another rises in its stead... we have no sooner gained one Point but we extend our Hopes to another.' The trick is to prioritise, and to remember that only religious hope can make us properly contented. The Anglo-Dutch philosopher, Bernard Mandeville, defines hope as the act of 'wishing with some degree of Confidence, that the Thing wish'd for will come to pass'. And here surely is the crux. To what extent does hope rely on at least a partial expectation of its fulfilment? It is the spiritual evidence that the present is not yet good enough. Are there not small mercies, though, reasons for a man to be happy with present circumstances, not least because circumstances hardly ever preclude hope?

Boswell's Johnson will have none of it. 'Never,' he snaps, 'but when he is drunk.' The status of intoxicants as the bridge between solace and hope is a path not taken by Potkay's book.

At a certain point in the post-Romantic age, hope becomes more of a problem than a boon. 'Worse than despair / Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope,' declares Shelley's Beatrice in *The Cenci* (1819). Best be done with the whole shitshow while we can. 'Hope is the worst of all evils,' Nietzsche affirms in *Human All Too Human* (1878), 'because it prolongs the torments of man'. Potkay quotes the Holocaust witness Tadeusz Borowski defining hope as the enemy of the inmates of Auschwitz. In a collection of short prose works, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1946), he wrote, 'It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity'. This is precisely the opposite existential impulse to the one enunciated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), where hope is also equated with resignation, but we are invited to imagine Sisyphus happy in his eternal torment.

Futile hope can be a potent weapon in the hands of the powers that be. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is handed a sealed cache of reference letters, addressed by the president of the college from which he has been expelled to possible benefactors to help him find employment. When he is eventually shown one of the letters by the well-disposed son of one of the referees, it turns out the advice to interested parties is to keep deferring him with unfulfilled hope. As the invisible narrator later summarises this, the message is 'Please hope him to death, and keep him running'. This was Nietzsche's point exactly. In the same era, hope received its effective last rites on the stage, not only in Anouilh's 'dirty hope', but in the uncharmed lives led by Beckett's remnants. This is the only passage of analysis in Potkay's entire work where the nuances seem lacking. He bluntly declares that Godot will never come, which is precisely what Vladimir and Estragon cannot say. The messenger boy's reliable appearance each day to say that he will surely come tomorrow cannot be discounted so easily, but what hope has turned to here is the obligation to believe, which is something else entirely.

Real belief has no need of the wager of wishfulness. When the

fourteenth-century mystic Mother Julian declared that all manner of things would be well, she wasn't crossing her fingers. In an incisively argued recent work, *Hope without Optimism* (2015), Terry Eagleton distinguished the sunny-sided belief that things will likely turn out for the best from the radical conviction that they could be unimaginably better. The demonstrator being battered by embassy staff inside the diplomatic compound is not an optimist, but has by no means ceased hoping. Adam Potkay's intellectual chronology of hope is an indispensable *vade mecum* through disputed territory. In the face of a politically disintegrating world, perhaps the only attainable hope is to reach something like the aerial propitiation experienced by Maupassant in a hot-air balloon in the 1880s: 'We no longer have any regrets, any projects, or any hopes'.

Assuming hope to be worth the guttering candle, it must surely emerge from a disposition suited to recognising and cultivating the positive. Call it not optimism, certainly, but perhaps cheerfulness. Enter Timothy Hampton with a reflective literary and cultural study that is every bit as rigorous and as suggestive as Potkay on hope. Cheer, Hampton reports, is first of all an inclination of the face (from the Old French *chiere*, precursor of *visage*). Initially a neutral body part that always needs a qualifier, it leads eventually to expressions such as 'making a good face' to denote the outwardly welcoming demeanour of hospitality, and the largesse that goes with it. In Pauline exhortation, cheer is a social duty of the community of believers, which includes their mutual generosity, but Hampton points out the linguistic transfer by which a range of terms in the original Greek becomes transmuted into the *bilariter* (merrily) of the Latin Vulgate, and then 'cheerfully' in the Coverdale and King James Bibles. Cheer assists civilisation and supports faithful fellowship.

In early modern physic, it was believed that physical stimulants – drinking, kissing, the pleasure of sociable company – could promote a cheerful state of mind that would last beyond the immediate occasion. Spinoza saw it as a matter of rational self-control, while Hume thought that any social scene was illuminated by the arrival of somebody with a cheerful nature. In Adam Smith's harmoniously regulated society, cheerfulness drives the economy. There is no doubt about the question in a social advice volume of the 1760s, *The Polite Lady*: its advice on the sunny

disposition, boiled down to its residue, is ‘pretend to be cheerful, and you will be’. Fooling others, you may well fool yourself. In a productive analysis of Jane Austen’s characters, Hampton reflects on the degree to which cheerfulness is an unquestioned virtue, although their author is already alert to what may be the facile nature of such a belief. When Mrs Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is described as possessing ‘that sanguine expectation of happiness which is happiness itself’, it comes with the countervailing effect that her sorrows are equally unalloyed.

That sense that every emotional action must have an equal and opposite reaction haunts the plots of Shakespeare’s tragedies, where gaiety is often the pivot that presages the plunge into disastrous events, just because, like hope, it can be such a deceptive demeanour. Montaigne also sees happiness as the other side of the present, located elsewhere, away from home, in freedom from obligation, rather than a plant that flourishes in one’s own native soil. The motivation for it begins to matter. In the poetic tradition represented by Milton and then Wordsworth, Hampton argues, ‘cheerfulness as the compensatory response to disaster can only be a mistake’. When his son Luke leaves the pastoral homestead and falls into dissolute ways in the city and an eventual forced emigration, Wordsworth’s Michael returns to his simple life in the hills, his wife Isabel to a life of exuberant domestic duty, their common loss glossed over rather than seen for the tragedy it is.

In modern experience, cheerfulness is what one struggles to regain after finding its moral status as a goal in life to be suspect and flawed. It has migrated from the spiritual realm via the psychological to the purely aesthetic, and thence to modern homily, shedding existential ballast as it flew. Hampton teases out the internal contradiction in American society whereby buoyant spirits have become ‘a form of self-consolation, an affective tool that can reconcile you to drudgery’, and yet remain officially ‘the character trait of the rugged individualist’. The cheerfulness applied like an emotional poultice in Georgian England, in pursuance of social attunement, has been debased into the coinage of the self-help industry, where it derives not from conversation, community or art, but from working on ourselves. Since the world obstinately refuses to deliver it, we must produce it *ex nihilo* from within our own souls. The godfather of self-

improvement, Dale Carnegie, in advising young men to stand up straight, hold up their heads, fill their lungs, shake hands firmly, and grin like they mean it, was already, in 1936, building a robust, athletic Valhalla with just a hint of fascism: ‘We are gods in the chrysalis’.

Potkay cites the Essex philosopher Béatrice Han-Pile as arguing that hope is not voluntary. We cannot will ourselves to it. This seems at least arguable, but the point could be applied with cast-iron certitude to cheerfulness. ‘The more you call on it,’ Hampton wisely concludes, ‘the less power it seems to have.’ In his most recent theoretical work, *Surplus-Enjoyment*, Slavoj Žižek argues that we can only enjoy where we have exceeded the bounds of pleasure, but that surfeit is precisely what alienates us from our own happiness, a contemporary blueprint of Blake’s palace of wisdom that is reached by the road of excess. In any case, the contexts in which cheer is called forth may be what render it dubious. The ‘compelling charm’ that Erich Auerbach notes about Gottfried Keller’s works of the 1850s, that his serene cheerfulness... is able to play its game of benign irony with the most incongruous and repulsive things’ had turned to sheer ideology in the century that removed the benevolence from all irony.

Attempting to throw a bridge between these two excellent books, we might wonder whether cheerfulness is the fertile ground needful for hope’s propagation, but neither author would argue such a simplistic nostrum. Hope more surely emerges from the dark and from decay, where it blooms at all, the fungal growth rather than the flower. This is the tenor of T.S. Eliot’s observation of the suffering souls in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, that precisely in their suffering lies their hope of redemption. In a more messianic vein, Walter Benjamin, concluding his 1925 essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, famously remarks that ‘[o]nly for the sake of the hopeless have we been given hope’. Hope is not an inherent quality of universal suffering, but a belief in the possible cancellation of it. As to cheerfulness, don’t make me laugh.