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Hope in Literature

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Toward the end of Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, its protagonist Joseph K., a victim of endless legal machinations proceeding against him for an unnamed crime he did not commit, enters a cathedral and meets a priest. The priest informs Joseph K. that K.'s case is going badly and asks him how he thinks the case will turn out. K's reply is circumspect:

> "At first I thought it must turn out well," said K., "but now I frequently have my doubts. I don't know how it will end. Do you?" "No," said the priest, "but I fear it will end badly. You are held to be guilty. Your case will perhaps never get beyond a lower Court. Your guilt is supposed, for the present, at least, to have been proved." "But I am not guilty," said K.; "it's a mistake. And, if it comes to that, how can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one as much as the other." "That is true," said the priest, "but that's how all guilty men talk."
>
> (Kafka, 1925/1995, p. 210)

The circularity of the priest's logic only adds to the pervading metaphysical worry that clouds the passage: the fear that we are all guilty in some sense, that to have been born is to have erred, that existence itself confers upon us the weight of an unnamed but unforgivable sin. Kafka's relentlessly dark vision of human life offers no solace from this possibility; the novel ends with Joseph K.'s death, and its final line—"it was as if the shame of it must outlive him"—suggests that K.'s mysterious debt, whatever it is, has not been paid (p. 229).

I embark on a discussion of the relationship between literature and hope from this unpromising vantage point to test a proposition. One way to assess how hope inheres in literature would be to divide all literary output into two categories, that of hopeful works and despairing works respectively, and to look for qualities present in the former and absent in the latter. But surely there will be works that elude such categorization; surely, too, we derive hope from literature not simply because and where it manifestly encourages us to be hopeful but for deeper reasons, less immediately obvious but perhaps finally more important. The proposition that I want to test, then, is that literature must contain or reckon with hope, must abjure absolute hopelessness, simply in virtue of its status as literature. This chapter examines whether and how this may be the case. I should also state at the outset that my discussions of various texts in the following pages are inevitably

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specific and selective. I am not here attempting the impossible challenge of being representative of all literature in its several forms, eras, and nationalities.

What Is Hope, and Where Is It in Literature?

To ask of what hope consists of is a surprisingly complex question, since the word is charged with different connotations in the various contexts in which it is used—biological, theological, psychological, and so on. Hope has been categorized as everything from a virtue to a mindset to an instinct, so it will simplify matters to begin with a basic definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2019) defines hope as "desire combined with expectation": It is any orientation to a possible future that both wishes for and (to some degree) counts on its realization. While not itself an emotion, hope's regular positioning as antonymic to fear suggests that it is affectively sticky, a disposition to which species of feeling such as longing or excitement can and often do attach themselves. Both desire and expectation must be present in some form for hope to exist. Absent desire, hope is fatalism; absent expectation, it is fantasy.

Hope is not simply a vague perspective or outlook but an epistemologically grounded position dependent on reasons without which it would fail. "Authentic hope," writes the theorist Terry Eagleton (2015), "needs to be underpinned by reasons" (p. 3). This fact distinguishes hope from optimism, and, for that matter, pessimism, which Eagleton calls "forms of fatalism" since they do not operate on rational grounds (p. 3). Real, meaningful hope also withstands circumstance; as Eagleton writes, "the most authentic kind of hope is whatever can be salvaged, stripped of guarantees, from a general dissolution" (p. 114). Paradoxically, this means that "the exemplary case of hope is tragedy," precisely because it uncovers and exposes what we really hope in and for (p. 115). Hence to begin with *The Trial* and its portrait of the isolated individual stripped of his dignity may prove helpful in clarifying what literature has to say about forms of hope.

While philosophers and theorists have long pondered the relation between hope and literature, surprisingly few works exist that focus primarily on how they intersect. There has, however, been an increase in attention to hope in literature in recent years. Books such as Amir Eshel's *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago, 2013); Sean Austin Grattan's *Hope Isn't Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature* (Iowa, 2017); and my own book *Hope and Aesthetic Utility in Modernist Literature* (Routledge, 2020) all attend in different ways to how writers of various periods or ethnicities produce works in which aspects of hope, from its character to the justification for it, are a central concern. Adam Potkay's study *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge, 2022) provides the broadest survey to date of this phenomenon. As Potkay reminds us, while "hope's positive connotations are now prevalent in the West," the history of literature shows that hope's categorization as a virtue or positive quality developed

historically and is not necessarily intrinsic to it (Potkay, 2022, p. 5). In classical literature "hope is at best problematic," and in the ancient world generally it "tends to be a dangerous thing" (pp. 5, 29). In the work of writers such as Aeschylus and Thucydides, private hopes are often figured as folly; they indicate overreach, a function of the individual's failure to understand his place in the universe. Hope in the ancient world can be linked to hubris—the pride of thinking oneself equal to the gods and thus in control of one's own fate. Sociopolitical forms of hope are more acceptable in antiquity; for instance, as Potkay shows, in both biblical and Roman literary traditions we can discern a form of hope centered on the coming rule of a king who will usher in an age of peace and prosperity (p. 51).

Potkay's book charts out how the rise of Christianity in the West splinters hope into various forms—secular and sacred, personal and political—that appear and overlap in complex ways in literature. Milton's *Paradise Lost* renders hope as tainted and postlapsarian, something associated with Satan and with Adam and Eve after the fall (Potkay, 2022, pp. 120–123). Though Milton allows for Christian forms of hope later in *Paradise Lost*, the epic's ambiguity with regard to the manifold nature of hope seems to prefigure the Romantics, for whom hope becomes a virtue "separable from theology and without a clear basis in faith" (p. 167). Even so, the lineage traced by Potkay makes clear that Christianity, more than any other system of belief, greatly influenced accounts of hope in Western thought, transforming it from something potentially suspicious in antiquity to an ideal still touched, in many later secular accounts, by something of the transcendent.

Potkay's overview of hope in literature reveals the term's malleability, its tendency to assume the qualities of different cultures and take on different emphases in the hands of the various writers who examine and portray it. The changing fortunes of hope show that ideas about hope emerge within and alongside specific historical conditions and the beliefs that attend them. But this does not mean that such ambiguity must attend any definition of hope whatsoever. Rather than collating various literary and philosophical visions of hope, we might adopt a more formalist approach, positing hope not only as an observable recurrent topic in literary history but also as something that might be derived from or experienced in any literary work. It's worth considering, for instance, that the discovery or reinforcement of hope in a text may provide the reader with at least a subliminal "motive for reading," as Rita Felski (2008) calls it; after all, we are inclined to turn to literature and poetry in hard times in part to remind ourselves who we are and what we believe in (p. 14). In her book *Uses of Literature* Felski supplies four main categories of textual engagement into which literature invites us: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock (p. 14). It might make sense to add hope as a fifth category, or, still more provocatively, to suggest that hope is the primary orientation toward reality that makes the others possible. All these positions, though, would presuppose the adoption of a reader-oriented framework that considers hope in terms of how literature *inspires* it in its audience. We could just as well adopt a writer-oriented framework that examines how literature might *express*

hope. But rather than choose one of these to the exclusion of the other, let's begin by observing both the overlap and the distinction between them. It may be that literature sometimes inspires hope precisely by expressing it. At the same time, the two categories need not correspond. We don't necessarily turn to literature in order to find hope, at least not consciously, even if we sometimes discover it there. Moreover, we must avoid the intentional fallacy and refrain from guessing at the dispositions of writers, who anyway need not intend to imbue their work with felt hopefulness in order for it to emerge in the text they create. In fact, works of literature too self-consciously invested with hope or too determined to inspire it risk artistic failure. Even if it is fundamental to literature, hope operates in it at a mysterious remove. We will thus refrain from focusing too exclusively on either writer or reader, turning instead to the text itself, where literature finds its physical expression.

Writing, Literature, and Futurity

Literature, for the purposes of this chapter, is a particular sort of writing. Before we specify what sort, we might observe that there is a sense in which all writing is hopeful whether or not it counts as literature. To write a letter, a prescription, or even a shopping list is implicitly hopeful insofar as it is future-oriented: at the bare minimum, such an action presupposes the belief that the world will be present in roughly the same form when the corresponding action to which the writing points comes to fruition (the letter read, the prescription picked up, the groceries purchased), even though there is technically no guarantee that this will be the case. (Incidentally, it is striking that Herman Melville, in his great short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener," chose to have Bartleby's previous employment be in a Dead Letter Office. In this scenario messages do not reach their addressees, so that writing does not serve its planned purpose, and the hidden hope that subsists in the act of writing is permanently frustrated.) As the poet and essayist Wendell Berry (1991) observes, to think on the relation between writing and time is to realize how many of our linguistic acts imply a form of trust:

> A certain awesome futurity . . . is the inescapable condition of word-giving—as it is, in fact, of all speech—for we speak into no future that we know, much less into one that we desire, but into one that is unknown. But that it is unknown requires us to be generous toward it, and requires our generosity to be full and unconditional. The unknown is the mercy and it may be the redemption of the known.
>
> (pp. 148–149)

The act of writing preserves language for and into an unknown future. Of course, literature, as a special sort of writing, implies a further level of hope. It depends

on what its very production helps ensure: the continuation of the communal values according to which literature is worth writing and worth reading. Each next instance of whatever we agree merits the designation "literature" (a separate question) expresses its hope in the society to come as one that will be receptive to complex forms of meaning, one that will value beauty, one that will not merely read but interpret and not merely interpret but digest. This is why, as the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1947/2010) insists,

> at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative. For, since the one who writes recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men . . . the work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world insofar as it demands human freedom. The result of which is that there is no "gloomy literature," since, however dark may be the colors in which one paints the world, one paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it.
>
> (p. 1211)

Perhaps this future-facing quality in literature, its "confidence in freedom," is one reason it is often figured as the lifeblood of culture. Indeed, wherever literature or the capacity to produce it is under threat, so, by extension, is life itself, since what is at stake are the very values by which we organize and make sense of life. But literary production, precisely since it is so vital, retains its own form of cultural power. Writing of Scheherazade, the storyteller in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, E. M. Forster argues that she "wields the weapon of suspense" through her literary activity: "She only survived because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next" (Forster, 1927/1979, p. 41). In the same vein, the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958/2007) argues that "acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all" (p. 177–178). It is through art and literature, Arendt insists, that the world becomes "what [it] is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth" (p. 178).

Literature as Both Imitative and Inventive

In examining how hope expresses and activates itself in particular literary forms and texts, I will make a general association between literature and narrative forms. While many literary genres, such as certain kinds of poetry, ignore or outstrip the narrative impulse, the mimetic and storytelling dimension of literature is one of its most ancient and basic elements, and through analyzing it we can begin to see how

texts might reflect and engender hope. Insofar as it involves narrative, literature's relationship to hope inevitably has to do with its creation of a fictional world that is both like and unlike our own. The novel, for example, offers a picture of our universe, but never a perfect replica; as Frank Kermode (1967) notes, "any novel, however 'realistic,' involves some degree of alienation from 'reality'" (p. 50). It is not only the events described in a novel, the fictions the writer invents, that depart from reality. The very shape of the novel, the fact that it contains a beginning, middle, and end, implies a totality and closure we do not always or necessarily encounter in life. In this respect we can even say, following Kermode, that literature's role is to lie, its form working against the mimetic or imitative capacity it harnesses (pp. 134–135).

Literature's restriction to particular forms limits its mimetic ability but simultaneously gives it a different function: besides representing reality, art has an endless capacity to reimagine it. The representation possible in literary forms is allied to and balanced by imagination. If it were wholly representative, literature would be sterile, merely a photo negative of empirical reality; if it were wholly imaginative, it would be irrelevant, having no purchase on the world in which we live. Caught in the dynamic interplay between these poles, literature engages the mind and thereby becomes a subtle shaping force within history.

Literature tends, then, to operate somewhere in the midpoint between two extremes: the will to represent reality and the will to reimagine it. These literary ambitions are both present in some way in all forms of narrative and, since they name partially competing impulses, can be thought of as ends of a spectrum. We can refer to one end as literature's *imitative* capacity and to the other as its *inventive* capacity. In what follows I will assess some examples of texts in which one or the other tendency predominates, paying attention in each case to the ways in which they connect to hope.

Literature's Imitative Capacity: Attention to the Real

I will focus on mimetic forms of literature in two ways: the *object* of the writer's attention, that is, their social reality, and the chronological *mode* of their attention, which is typically (though not always) to recount past events. To begin with the former, texts that rely on imitation of life can exhibit hope and resilience through the simple act of close attention. Particularly where it offers a record of places and times of hopelessness, literature takes on a moral force by portraying the survival of the human spirit in spite of atrocity and, in unflinchingly witnessing such atrocities, affirming a dignity and future beyond them. Poetry has a special role here because it need not color its documenting of history with invention, as fiction does. In this sense poetry provides a link between history and literature, turning the former into the latter not merely to exhibit the writer's ability to do so but to urge action and to hope for justice.

Few contemporary writers are as associated with this type of poetry—what has been called the poetry of witness—as Carolyn Forché (1981), who uses it to powerful effect in her poem "The Colonel." The speaker begins by explicitly declaring the historicity of what the poem describes, linking the poem's words to the real world: "What you have heard is true." The poem ends with a shocking and memorable scene, as the titular colonel pours a bag of human ears out onto the dinner table and sweeps them to the floor:

> Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.
>
> (p. 16)

The poem leaves open-ended the question of who will do the work of atoning for the injustices it recounts; the dismembered ears are pressed to the ground as if listening for the strains of a redemption undiscovered as yet in the world of the reader. "The Colonel" is therefore a poem of witness that addresses the limits of witness, challenging the reader to do more than to read, its muted outrage a reminder that hopes can only be realized through action.

A similar injunction can be gleaned from African American poet Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), a long political poem Tolson was commissioned to write in honor of Liberia's centennial anniversary. Buoyed by economic growth, post–World War II Liberia finally seemed in a position to be hopeful about the future, but the nation's past was rife with colonialist and racist violence. As Liberia's poet laureate, Tolson refuses to shy away from these realities in the poem, despite its purportedly celebratory function. A lengthy section of *Libretto* testifies to the atrocities of Liberian history. The gallery of images and ideas in Tolson's litany of troubles includes "gold fished from cesspools," "epitaphs in blood," "the pelican's breast rent red to feed the young," "maggot democracy," and (in a line he lifts from Baudelaire) "the *oasis d'horreur dans un déserte d'ennui*" (oasis of horror in a desert of tedium) (lines 405, 409, 417, 426, 429). In the poem's final section Tolson amplifies this exhibition of horrors, conjuring a savaged landscape in which "barbaric yawps shatter the shoulder-knots of white peace"; in which colonialist "britannia rules the waves"; in which, since "pin-pricks precede blitzkriegs," we are forever on the verge of war; and in which no survivors are left in ruined cities to witness "blind men gibbering *mboagan* [death] in greek / against sodom's pillars of salt" (lines 514, 516, 531, 552–553). The poem's eventual movement away from this record of evils and toward a confidence in the Liberian future is earned partly by Tolson's refusal to minimize historical tragedies in favor of political optimism. One tenet of a literature of hope, then, is that in order to know where we might go we must first recognize where we are and have been.

Their fictional aspects notwithstanding, novels too can document social realities with unflinching candor. Charles Dickens's description of the London fog at the outset of *Bleak House* is at once an evocation of its appearance and, reading

the fog metaphorically, an indictment of the moral turpitude enveloping the city. Less overt methods of literary realism can be equally effective. In his close reading of a passage of Emile Zola's 1888 novel *Germinal*, Erich Auerbach (1953/2003) comments on the "matter-of-factness" of Zola's style, arguing that Zola's direct simplicity helps show "that all this was meant in the highest degree seriously and morally; that the sum total of it was not a pastime or an artistic parlor game but the true portrait of contemporary society as he—Zola—saw it and as the public was being urged in his works to see it too" (p. 510). For Auerbach, the fact that Zola's portrait of his social reality is an ugly one is a point in his favor. It announces to the reader his honesty, his anger, and, alongside both of those, his hope for change: "The art of style has wholly renounced producing pleasing effects in the conventional sense of the term. Instead it serves unpleasant, depressing, desolate truth. But this truth is at the same time a summons to action in terms of a social reform" (p. 512). Zola is a realist writer, but even where he allows himself the departures from historical reality granted the novelist, these serve the same higher aim: "If Zola exaggerated, he did so in the direction which mattered; and if he had a predilection for the ugly, he used it most fruitfully" (p. 512).

That the novelist both attends to reality and, for thematic effect, embellishes it where necessary is also seen in the work of a writer like Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who uses character as a screen through which to project the most elemental questions facing humanity. Dostoyevsky's works display paradigmatic examples of what the Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin (1981) calls "heteroglossia . . . *another's speech in another's language*," which results in the expressions of multiple worldviews rather than a single and unified point of view (p. 324, emphasis in original). For Dostoyevsky's readers, the point is less than to agree with any one character's point of view than to be caught up in the dramas their words and actions create, recognizing them as heightened versions of universal dilemmas. Hope emerges here not in the rightness or wrongness in the claim a given character makes but in the fact that they stake their distinct and individual humanness by making it. To wrestle with life's great questions amid the uncertainty of existence is itself a kind of hopeful expression—a determination to learn what it is we are doing here, to uncover or solidify a foundation, or even the lack of one, on which to premise our actions.

Literature's Imitative Capacity: The Recovery of the Past

In the main, narratives recount the past, real or imagined, and generally rely on the past tense. The backward glance of the storyteller might seem to render narratives out of step with hope, a disposition that has everything to do with facing the future. But taking into account literature's justification for its engagements with the past, we see that this is not so. Works of literature show us how we rely on the past in order to understand ourselves and situate ourselves within time;

indeed, we plumb our pasts, personal and communal, to give the future a shape whose outlines we can discern and trust. Likely the most famous of novels founded on an extended recollection of personal history is Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which the narrator's circuitous reflection on his life is precipitated by a madeleine, a small cake the taste of which transports him back to his childhood. The narrator, whom we can call Marcel, uses his memories not only for self-assessment and self-fashioning but also for provocative and beautiful discussions of concepts, including love, memory, desire, and art. It is through these numerous narrative digressions that Marcel strives, as he writes, to "seek my way again, I will turn a corner . . . but . . . the goal is in my heart . . ." (Proust, 1913/1934, p. 51). At this juncture early in the novel, looking back to a time when he looked ahead, Marcel indicates his consciousness of our proclivity as humans to narrate our own lives temporally. The hesitancy and figurativeness of the language—the ellipses are Proust's own—equally suggests the constant challenge of charting a path forward for the self, an activity Marcel performs in *Remembrance of Things Past* partly through the philosophical asides he generates through his memories of past events. These reminiscences are colored by Marcel's search for happiness and his belief in its possibility, one that, through its evincing a faith in the essential goodness of reality, both exhibits hope and encourages the reader to share in it.

If we narrate our lives within time, Marcel locates a source of hope in being briefly freed from this project of self-creation, that is, freed from time by time. Late in *Time Regained*, the novel's final volume, Marcel elaborates on the power of certain memories in his life:

> If, owing to the work of oblivion, the returning memory can throw no bridge, form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, for this very reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which the poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sensation of renewal only if it had been breathed before, since the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost.
>
> (Proust, 1927/1983, p. 903)

The tone here is bittersweet, since the past cannot be regained; but the irretrievability of the memory, Marcel observes, is in fact a condition of the happiness it bestows. Moreover, the curious mixing of past into present animates some part of us existent outside time. When memory is tangible, experiential, and not merely intellectual,

> the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self . . . is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to us. A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us,

> to feel it, the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy, even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem logically to contain within it the reasons for this joy, one can understand that the word "death" should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future?
>
> (p. 906)

For most of us it is only natural to understand hope—and its counterparts, fear or despair—in chronological terms, as an act of looking forward and reacting to what we believe we can or cannot see there. One thinks of Clarissa, the elegant heroine of Virginia Woolf's great novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, preparing for a dinner party and pondering meanwhile, with a similar mixture of elation to be in the world and sadness to have to leave it, "how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all" (Woolf, 1925/2000, p. 134). Proust's genius is to identify, as a solution to this problem, and in however paradoxical a fashion, an animating locus of hope outside time itself, as crossed moments of time release us from time's spell.

Another means through which the novel can embody hope in its representation of the past is in its ability to credibly and richly recreate otherwise inaccessible lives, revealing the hopes and dreams of those long dead. This animating, recovering work of literature demonstrates its restorative power, its countering of the slow pull toward anonymity death entails. I can think of no more exemplary recent instance of this effect than Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy, a series of novels that imagines the life and world of Thomas Cromwell, 16th-century earl of Essex and minister to King Henry VIII. Mantel's pen vividly reveals Cromwell's life—not only his world but also his passions, his loves, his mannerisms—in intricate detail, so that we feel, through a fictional portrait of a historical figure, that we truly know a man otherwise in many respects lost to history. Writing in the present tense, Mantel makes the past feel immediate and new, and does so partly through the humanity of Cromwell, the complexity and utter believability of his inner life. Cromwell is not a man given to the display of weakness or emotion, so that when he privately mourns the loss of his wife and daughter to the plague, the reader is struck by the keenness of his grief. It feels, though this may be unsurprising, much like deep grief might feel to anyone—tidal, consuming, leaving him entirely bereft:

> All Hallows Day: grief comes in waves. Now it threatens to capsize him. He doesn't believe that the dead come back; but that doesn't stop him from feeling the brush of their fingertips, wing tips, against his shoulder. Since last night they have been less individual forms and faces than a solid aggregated mass, their flesh slapping and jostling together, their texture dense like sea creatures, their faces sick with an undersea sheen.
>
> (Mantel, 2009, p. 142)

Metaphors drawn from nature—waves, wings, water—underlie this description of Cromwell's sadness, suggesting both its enormity and its elemental quality. We are subtly attuned, too, to Cromwell's plausibly early modern conception of death as a passage to some other world from which there is no return. In the correction of "fingertips" to "wing tips" we might intuit a shade of hope, the ancient notion that Cromwell's loved ones have taken, like angels, to the air of a higher realm; but, countered by his despair, this image of his loved ones is juxtaposed against a darker one in which they struggle in a watery Hades. Experiencing, alongside Cromwell, the grief he may well have felt, we are privy both to the coping strategies that must have attended daily life in a world in which death and suffering were intractably, numbingly routine and, more significantly, to what is more poignant: the untapped reservoirs of human feeling that constantly threatened to overcome them.

One could be forgiven for thinking that conventional hope is far removed from this tender, invented glimpse of the grief of a man long dead. But hope subsists in this nuanced portrait of sadness through the fact that it invites us into the specificity and reality of the life of another, even one long vanished, suggesting by implication that such lives are in some ways like our own even as they are unlike them. In being asked by literature to make such connections across time we intuit how all lives, even supposedly extraordinary ones, are finally ordinary and mundane, but equally that the ordinary life merits the attention it receives and can be newly seen, pulled from the obscuring dreck of history, through first the author's and then the reader's acts of attention.

The same idea—the intrinsic value of the ordinary—is a central theme in the 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, written by the American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson. In an early scene the narrator imagines her recently widowed grandmother busy with daily chores:

> One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow's black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith. Say there were two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground, with earth here and there oozing through the broken places, and that there was warmth in the sunlight, when the wind did not blow it all away, and say she stooped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems, and say that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands, to flutter and tremble, and to glare with the light, and that the throes of the thing were as gleeful and strong as if a spirit were dancing in its cerements. (Robinson, 1980, p. 16)

The dominant note in this remarkable passage is the studied contrast between what might be called heavenward and earthward realities, both of which suffuse the scene: the spring sunlight contrasting the garment of mourning, the green earth reappearing from beneath the old snow, the sodden sheet become suddenly spirit-like. (The passage puts me in mind of Richard Wilbur's poem "Love Calls Us to

the Things of This World," which describes a similar event.) An ordinary thing suddenly revealed as extraordinary, the sheet is a symbol for the grandmother's whole life; in "performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith," she lives in quiet trust that her office in the world, however overlooked, matters—an idea that can spur us to hope, too, amid the many seemingly insignificant tasks we must accomplish.

Moreover, *Housekeeping* offers a critical space to think about the border between what I've termed imitative and inventive tendencies in narrative. Robinson's repeated phrase "say that," which appears in the passage above and several other places in the novel, puts the narration in the subjunctive mood, making it hypothetical; the narrator herself editorializes, guessing at what may have happened. In so doing, the novel calls attention to its own fictiveness. No mere rhetorical flourish, "say that" helps us notice us that we are entering a space between pure history and pure invention, the mysterious space of the fictional, in which fidelity to the real is expected but in which more is possible than in our everyday lives. Which is to say that "say that" narrates fiction as history while subtly reminding the reader of fiction's freedom from history.

Literature's Inventive Capacity

Guided by Robinson's phrase, which directs our attention to the writer's freedom to conjecture, we move from the imitative to the inventive mode of narration. One function of literature in its inventive capacity is to articulate the difference, in either a positive or negative direction, between what is actual and what is possible. In his *Poetics* Aristotle (335 B.C.E./1997) calls poetry "a more philosophical and a higher thing than history" for exactly this reason—because literature is not limited to what is or what has been but is able to imagine what might be (pp. 17–18). Literature is therefore a source of hope in that it can operate outside the constraints of the given, which is so often saturated by loss and pain. In this respect literature's consolatory power derives from the dimension of possibility or otherness it adds to human life. Northrop Frye (1976) puts the matter starkly: "The feeling that death is inevitable comes to us from ordinary experience; the feeling that new life is inevitable comes to us from myth and fable. The latter is therefore both more true and more important" (p. 132).

Frye's remark points to the connection between literary and religious texts; in its oldest forms, such as myth, literature orients social reality in a manner similar to the sacred writings with which it overlaps. But there is a more immediate, if less high-flown, way in which we can conceive of literature's capacity to reshape experience. In departing from the actual, writers face their potential—and their responsibility—to use language to incite tangible change. In her landmark feminist essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" the poet Adrienne Rich (1972) argues that

> to write poetry or fiction, or even to think well, is not to fantasize, or to put fantasies on paper. For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive . . . If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming.
>
> (p. 23)

"'Hope' is the thing with feathers— / That perches in the soul—" (Dickinson 1891/1960, p. 116). So begins the Emily Dickinson poem, and is there a more stirring example of writing as renaming? Here, as in many of her poems, Dickinson tells us what we somehow already knew to be true but what seemed, until her telling of it, to be beyond language's capacity to express. In this way, by small degrees, experience can in fact be transformed through literature, as Rich puts it.

Here we can return briefly to Melvin Tolson. As we have seen, Tolson's *Libretto* is dark edged and imitative of reality in the honesty of its depictions of inhumanity; but it also reflects literature's inventive tendencies in its exuberant final section. The poem ends with an unabashedly celebratory vision of a future unified world culture in which "free and / joyful again, all mankind unites" (Tolson, 1953/2000, lines 700–701). In this envisioned future, submission, domination, structures of power, and forms of slavery both literal and figurative have been permanently consigned to history. The poem's closing conjures an environment in which artist and audience are separated not by ideology, skin pigmentation, gender, or ethnicity but merely by the distance between one mind and another—a distance the artwork is able to bridge in mysterious and multitudinous ways.

If past and present realities would seem to render such hopes implausible, it may be for just this reason that Tolson insists upon them. One purview of literature is to coax the indistinct outlines of heretofore unimagined possibilities into stark relief. Such swerves away from mimesis are predicated on the fact that literature's power to plainly convey the unlikely and alien can speak into and transform the world we know. The literature of invention encompasses what we call genre fiction—fantasy, science fiction, and the like—but where such novels resist pure escapism, they can offer trenchant critiques rooted in the appeal to what remains possible but undone in our own world. As Ursula K. Le Guin (2014), herself an acclaimed writer of science fiction, insists, "Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words." The world of Kafka's *The Trial* fits into this category in that it exhibits a universe hyperbolically estranged from our own in order to expose realities proper to our own. The same can be said of Samuel Beckett's novels and plays, all expressions of what in a 1961 interview he calls "the task of the artist": "to find a form that accommodates the mess" (Driver, 1961/1979, p. 219).

The Portuguese writer Jose Saramago's 1995 novel *Blindness* is an illuminating contemporary example of an attempt to meet Beckett's challenge. *Blindness* tells the story of a mass epidemic of sightlessness that spreads through an unnamed city. The consequences of this general blindness are increasingly horrific. Confusion and shock begin to give way to despair. Abuse, crime, and trauma become rampant. The middle part of the novel is given over to an unstinting depiction of the cruelties apt to occur in such a period of lawlessness. In the aftermath of these injustices, the doctor's wife—the one character in the novel who has been mysteriously spared the onset of blindness—considers aloud what they should do next:

> The only miracle we can perform is to go on living, said the woman, to preserve the fragility of life from day to day, as if it were blind and did not know where to go, and perhaps it is like that, perhaps it really does not know, it placed itself in our hands, after giving us intelligence, and this is what we have made of it.
>
> (Saramago, 1995/1997, p. 266)

Spoken by the only character in the novel who can see, these words adumbrate the ways we are all figuratively blind: blind to the future and what it will bring, and blind too to how we will react to it. The moral choice, argues the doctor's wife, is to "preserve the fragility of life," a phrase that emphasizes both the necessity of our efforts and the difficulty of the task.

The task is difficult—and life is fragile—given our propensity, as human beings, toward inhumanity, a predilection the novel has already evinced in some detail. But *Blindness* is equally interested in how we are capable of rising above reprehensible behavior. Near the novel's close, both of them still unable to see, a man known only as "the old man with the eye patch" converses with "the girl with the dark glasses," a woman he has encountered during the plague, and expresses a surprising wish:

> The monstrous wish of never regaining our sight, Why, So that we can go on living as we are, Do you mean altogether, or just you and me . . . With you, And why do you want to live with me, Do you want me to tell in front of everybody, We have done the dirtiest, ugliest, most repulsive things together, what you can tell me cannot possibly be worse, All right, if you insist, let it be, because the man I still am loves the woman you are.
>
> (p. 274)

This incongruous declaration of love is premised on a foundation of and longing for intimacy with another person, suggesting a human thirst for togetherness that persists amid general ruin. In a sighted world, these two characters, far apart in years, would make unlikely partners; but in a time of blindness they are able to reach a different and perhaps truer understanding of each other and of the value each has for the other; as the girl remarks, "two blind people must be able to see more than one" (p. 274). Not long after this romantic interlude, the general blindness lifts, and everyone can see again. But the novel's perspective on hope

predates this moment. It is found not in the miraculous recovery of sight but in the determination to love amid potentially perpetual sightlessness. Our ability to recognize and to want to share in another's humanity survives the terrible crimes we suffer or perpetrate. That both these instincts coexist in us is the conundrum *Blindness* pursues and may be the source of its unlikely hope. As one of the novel's characters memorably opines, "Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are" (p. 248).

Insofar as *Blindness* is a parable of the human condition, then, it counterpoises our hunger for love against our great penchant for hatred and fear. And there is a sense in which all literature documents a persistent belief in the human, and even, since there is a moral urgency in all great writing, a demand for the final righting of wrongs. In an essay, the critic and poet Jay Parini (1997) captures this quality of literature:

> It is possible, possible, possible. The writer has to keep saying this. The word is a seed planted invisibly in the mud; the imagination of a fully grown and blossoming tree, three or four or five decades into the future, makes the act of planting possible. Writers must imagine a reality that is always down the road, must work (where possible) without allegiances to power: their job is to afflict the comfortable, to unmask authority, to confound and conflict the status quo, to imagine a politics of redemption.
>
> (p. 230)

George Steiner (1975/1992) calls language "the main instrument of man's refusal to accept the world as it is" (p. 228). We refuse to accept the world as it is because of the many ways, going awry, history has injured our hard-won hopes. Literature sets out a mirror and window in which to see things as they are and, if first in imagination only, set them right. The poet Claire Schwartz (2022) clarifies the stakes at the outset of her collection *Civil Service*: "History is the compass. / Difference is the poem" (p. 4). The fact that reality differs from our expectations spurs literature's insistent difference from reality. This difference-making is a hopeful act because to document experience is a precondition to reimagination, which itself must precede reinvention. In this way even works such as Kafka's *The Trial* are hopeful in that they speak, by the mere fact they exist, to the assailed yet irrepressible notion that our creative tendencies outweigh our destructive ones, that loss need not wholly preclude recovery. Writing, as Adrienne Rich asserts, is renaming; and renaming begins with the power to name, to call a thing what it is. Hence whether its primary impetus is challenge or conjecture, literature is finally nothing else than the act of seeing clearly what is there. That moral clarity, transcribed to paper, is always imbued with hope. It is the fruition of imagination, the human voice caught between witness and guess, archiving a compendium of creation and description that both defines the limits of our vision and reaches toward what must finally exceed it.

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