

FROM THE EDITORS

“TO GET ALL THE MUSIC POSSIBLE” The Fragility and the Strength of Hope

“Hope sitting on a globe, with bandaged eyes playing on a lyre which has all the strings broken but one out of which poor little tinkle she is trying to get all the music possible, listening with all her might to the little sound...”¹ The description of his vision of ‘hope’ which George Frederic Watts included in his letter to Madeline Wyndham written in December 1888 seems to grasp the essence of a common-sense understanding of ‘hope’: the belief in the potential of little means, once they are coupled with what we call an eager and trusting heart.

Watts’s painting of Hope, embodying the vision the artist described in such detail, manifests an additional quality, namely that of beauty, which he accomplished through his thorough application of color and light, as well as through the subtle brushstrokes he used. On the ideational level, though, the beauty of Hope lies in the fact that despite her blindness, despite her incapability of an insight other than the one her faint music might prompt or provide, she unceasingly strives to achieve her own vision, and seems decided, but also serene in her eternal perseverance. It is Hope’s fragility contrasted with her willpower that we admire. What the painter grasped in his depiction of Hope—whether deliberately or not—is precisely the determined effort a human being continually makes in order to obtain an insight, one as deep as possible, or a proper cognitive judgment, in whatever situation might occur. This inherently human need to find the proper direction and orientation of thought, followed with the right decision whether to act or not to act, and, if so, what action to take, is accompanied by the unspoken conviction that one is bound to assume such an attitude by the power of one’s nature. It is precisely the inner belief that an insight is possible and that the effort to obtain it is both a deeply cherished need and an existential duty that might be considered in terms of ‘hope.’ Hope appears then to bridge the gap between the opacity and the clar-

¹ Letter from George Frederic Watts to Madeline Wyndham, 8 December 1885, now in the Tate Archives. Quoted after Nicholas Tromans, *Hope: The Life and Times of a Victorian Icon* (Compton, Surrey: Watts Gallery, 2011), 70.

ity of vision. Perhaps, applying Humean categories, one might venture to say that—in some sense—hope constitutes the bridge between ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ or rather one between ‘ought’ and ‘is.’ Therefore—in binding one’s longing for a vision with an actual vision and with its consequences—hope demonstrates, in itself, the potential of light. Like light, it is a catalyst for vision. In this sense hope is light.

John Paul II—a philosopher pope—begins his poem *The Roman Triptych* with an expression of wonderment at the unique status of the human being in the world:

(Allow me to pause here;
 allow me to stop at a threshold,
 the threshold of simple wonder).
 The running stream cannot marvel,
 and silently the woods slope down,
 following the rhythm of the stream—
 but man can marvel!
 The threshold which the world crosses in him
 is the threshold of wonderment.
 (Once, this very wonder was called “Adam”).

He was alone in his wonder,
 among creatures incapable of wonder—
 for them it is enough to exist and go their way.
 Man went his way with them,
 filled with wonder!
 But being amazed, he always emerged
 from the tide that carried him,
 as if saying to everything around him:
 “Stop—in me is your harbor,”
 “in me is the place of meeting
 with the Primordial Word.”
 “Stop, this passing has meaning...
 has meaning... has meaning.”²

In the natural world, the uniqueness of the human being springs from the specifically human capability of wonderment, which in turn engenders—also specifically human—hope to find the meaning of things (the hope to understand the ‘deep structure’ of the ‘wonder’). Indeed, the two concluding lines of the quoted extract (“Stop, this passing has meaning... / has meaning... has meaning”) are not simply a matter-of-fact statement: they do not express a certainty or a mere acknowledgement of the ‘state of things.’ Rather, the

² J o h n P a u l I I, *The Roman Triptych*, trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz, “L’Osservatore Romano” (Weekly Edition in English), March 26, 2003: 4.

words “has meaning,” followed by suspension points (which recur twice in these lines), suggest that man is intrigued by his own cognitive grasp of the surrounding world. The wonderment at the world he experiences engenders in him a hope of grasping the meaning of things: the meaning he has not been fully revealed and one he is incapable of conceptualizing by himself.

By introducing, in the part of his poem entitled “Conversation between father and son in the land of Moria,” the figure of Abraham, John Paul II seems to point to the fact that the ‘hope of understanding’ is so deeply inscribed in human existence (or, in other words, in human experience) that it actually permeates its entirety, revealing itself most radically in situations with which one would tend to associate despair.

So they walked and talked together on the third day.
Here is the hill, where I shall offer a sacrifice to God—

said the father, and the son was silent, dared not ask:
Where is the lamb? We have fire, wood, a sacrificial knife,
but where is the sacrifice?
God alone will choose it—
This he said, and dared not say aloud
the words: the lamb, my son, will be you—
so he was silent.

With this silence he was falling again into a soundless hollow.
He had heard the voice which led him.
Now the voice was silent.
He was left with nothing but his own name
Abraham: He who believed against hope.
In a moment he will build a sacrificial pile,
make fire, bind Isaacs hands—
and then—what? the pile will burst into flames....
Already he sees himself as the father of a dead son,
the son the Voice gave him and is now taking away?³

The question mark that concludes the above-quoted extract seems as meaningful as the recurring suspension points in the opening part of the poem: the reader gets the impression that the incredulity of the act apparently demanded of Abraham makes him hope against belief rather than—as we read in the poem—believe against hope. While he might have believed against hope when he was childless, and while he may believe against hope now: believe in his God and know that in a moment God will take away from him what he once gave him in a free gift, there is also another interpretation surfacing, the one

³ Ibidem.

the question mark suggests: while Abraham believes in the power of God, his hope in the goodness of God is so strong that the entire existence of Abraham at this point becomes one of hope.⁴

Abraham's hope against belief, one can sense from John Paul II's rendition of the biblical story, may be contrasted with Abraham's belief deprived of hope that Søren Kierkegaard scrutinizes in the "Prelude" to his *Fear and Trembling*.⁵ Already in its opening part the Danish philosopher describes Abraham as a man who was tempted by God and who "endured temptation, kept the faith, and a second time received again a son contrary to expectation."⁶ Indeed, in none of Kierkegaard's readings of the story does Abraham hope: he is either focused on fulfilling God's will without understanding it ("It is better for him to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee"⁷), or he is resigned ("They rode on in silence along the way, and Abraham's glance was fixed upon the ground.... From that time on Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had required this of him.... Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he knew joy no more"⁸), or he is haunted by guilt ("He prayed to God to forgive him his sin ... that the father had forgotten his duty toward the son.... He found no rest"⁹), or he must face the consequences of his blind obedience to God ("Isaac had lost his faith"¹⁰). Neither in the comments Kierkegaard offers his readers on Abraham's attitude do we find any reference to hope, as if hope turned out redundant in the face of absolute faith and belief in the promise once made; as if absolute faith and belief in the promise supplanted the sentiment of hope, or expectation, the need for the 'light' and, together with them, the

⁴ Commenting on the significance of this scene in *The Roman Triptych*, Joseph Ratzinger wrote: "The immense arch, the true vision of the *Roman Triptych*, is clearly revealed in the third panel, the ascent by Abraham and Isaac of Mount Moria, the mountain of the sacrifice, of the self-gift without reservation. This ascent is the last and decisive stage in Abraham's journey, which began with his departure from his own land, Ur of the Chaldeans; it is the basic stage of the ascent toward the summit, against the current, to the source that is also the goal. In the inexhaustible dialogue between father and son, consisting of few words and of bearing together, in silence, the mystery of the words, all the questions of history, the suffering, fears and hopes are reflected. In the end it becomes clear that this dialogue between father and son, between Abraham and Isaac, is the dialogue in God himself, the dialogue between the eternal Father and his Son, the Word, and that this eternal dialogue represents at the same time the response to our unfinished human dialogue." Card. Joseph Ratzinger, "Presentation of the Holy Father's Poetry," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), March 26, 2003: 4.

⁵ See Søren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric," in Søren Kierkegaard, *"Fear and Trembling" and "The Sickness Unto Death,"* trans. Walter Lawrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁶ *Ibidem*, 37.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 40.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 40–1.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 41–2.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 43.

urgent need to find out, to know. Kierkegaard's Abraham seems the reverse of Watts's Hope: there is neither need nor will in him to strive for a truthful vision. He does not aspire to understand. Rather, he replaces cognitive effort with the contents of the command of the authority he obeys.

By faith Abraham went out from the land of his fathers and became a sojourner in the land of promise. He left one thing behind, took one thing with him: he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him...¹¹

Deprived of hope for knowing the truth in the sense of recognizing it, Kierkegaard's Abraham shows a radically different face from the one John Paul II describes in his *Roman Triptych*. We might say that John Paul II's Abraham—due to the room he leaves for the light of hope—seems, so to speak, more 'human.'

A philosophical question which inevitably comes up in relation to the above reflections is whether hope, conceived of as light and a catalyst for vision, can—startlingly—become a yoke to the cognitive subject. Inherent in every cognitive act, hope for attaining a truthful vision may be confronted with one that apart from being truthful is also difficult to embrace. Tadeusz Styczeń analyzes the case of the 'Kowalski' of the 1980s in Poland. 'Kowalski' is a symbol of an average Polish person who lived a big part of his or her life under communism, and then joined the Solidarity movement because it brought hope for a change, for a change in political and social senses: a change Kowalski identified with the good. Yet soon the oppression of the regime became relentless and 'Kowalski' was arrested and given an alternative: 'Either you sign a declaration of loyalty in which you will state that the hopes and ideals of Solidarity are merely rowdy lawless anti-State excesses, and you will leave this place as a free person, or you will spend the years to come in prison and your family will be persecuted.' In the Poland of the 1980s, many of those blackmailed in such a way would finally sign a declaration of loyalty—doing so with a trembling hand—and later could never forget the price of the 'freedom' they gained by killing hope in themselves. Occasionally, though, 'Kowalski' would refuse to accept the freedom thus offered to him. Styczeń calls such a decision a "startling lesson in anthropology and ethics,"¹² a "tremendum et fascinosum mysterium hominis."¹³

¹¹ Ibidem, 48.

¹² Tadeusz Styczeń, "Wolność w prawdzie," in Tadeusz Styczeń, *Dzieła zebrane*, ed. Alfred M. Wierzbicki, vol. 4, *Wolność w prawdzie*, ed. Kazimierz Krajewski (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL and Instytut Jana Pawła II KUL, 2013), 25. All translations from Styczeń are my own.

¹³ Ibidem.

Kowalski breaks the atom of his own 'self.' He breaks into the depth of the mystery that he is, he breaks into the depth of his personal subjectivity. In a sudden illuminating vision, Kowalski sees that he must not ignore the truth he once recognized and found true, or he will ignore himself, more than that: he will question himself as a person. To save oneself is to save the freedom that is incomparably deeper and more important than the one offered to Kowalski by the authorities, provided he signs the declaration, thus backsliding from what he had found true [the substance of his hopes]. To save one's freedom, to save faithfulness to the truth once recognized, and to save oneself—they are one and the same thing! Kowalski grasps this inseparable *unctim*. And the discovery he makes leaves no room for doubt: in the situation violence and oppression forced him to confront, he can remain truly free only when he stays in prison.¹⁴

Unlike Kierkegaard's Abraham, Kowalski does not remain passive towards hope. He is open to a new vision, involved in bringing it about, and he remains faithful to it because abandoning his hopes, acknowledging that they were merely "rowdy lawless anti-State excesses" would be tantamount to questioning his own dignity, to questioning himself as the subject he clearly is. No wonder Styczeń would frequently call the 'Kowalskis' of the 1980s in Poland—those faithfully striving to overcome the 'darkness' with the light of hope—the Socrateses of our times. Styczeń's 'Kowalski,' who freely chooses to stay in prison and remains faithful to what he has found true reminds one of Watts's Hope, serene in her perseverance despite her frail means.

*

The authors of the present volume discuss both the fragility and the strength of hope. Its various renditions and descriptions of the pathways on which it advances reflect the diversity of human experience. The papers we have collected address the essence and structure of hope, its rootedness in human nature, its relationship with religious faith, as well as its functioning in the most difficult areas of human life, such as those marked by suffering, death, or other liminal situations. Hope manifests itself also as a driving force of history. As a literary topos, it conveys beauty. Abuse of hope, in particular of social hope, results in totalitarian systems, which then destroy hope.

In this volume, we have also included an extensive section devoted to a discussion of the present condition of universities. In the wake of the recent reform of academic institutions in Poland, many universities (but also scholarly journals), in particular those dedicated to the humanities, are facing the prospect of non-existence. Considered as unnecessary and unprofitable, not

¹⁴ Ibidem.

infrequently disdained as spurious, and made to remodel themselves so as to abandon their unique ethos and become bureaucratic cosmopolitan schools advancing a standard blueprint for education and research, they are perhaps most in need of hope.

The editors of *Ethos* would like to thank Adam Potkay, who inspired us to prepare the present volume.

Dorota Chabrajska