From Aquinas to Zwelethemba

A Brief History of Hope

'… unless the past and the future are made part of the present by memory and intention, there is, in human terms, no road, nowhere to go'
Ursula K. Le Guin

'What a hope!' This casually ironic cliché represents the drained dregs of a once-powerful, even noble idea. This slackening of meaning is noticeable in ways that are all around us in everyday speech, particularly when 'hope' is used as a verb: 'I hope it isn't going to rain tomorrow'. 'Can war in Iraq be avoided?' 'Let's hope so', and so on. The noun, on the other hand, tends to retain some lingering resonance of a deeper and more serious principle: 'There is some hope (*or* There is no hope) that there will be survivors of the avalanche'[1].

If these contemporary usages are mere echoes, what is the source? What are the stuctures of faith and/or reason that have at different times and in different places put Hope in a prominent position as a guiding concept? Furthermore, what possibilities are there of extracting this concept from the current fogs of wishful thinking, ironic dismissal and political obfuscation that surround it, and giving it some degree of refreshed and stimulating life?

'Hope springs eternal in the human breast'[2], and it may be helpful to regard hope as a constantly re-emerging force in the human psyche, which has from time to time been explicitly recognised and articulated within an intellectual or theological framework or system, while at other times – such as the present – it has drifted to the margins of serious consideration and analysis.

What kind of frameworks might these be, and how may they illuminate the potential of hope as a constructive force in our time? At its broadest, hope is essentially future-oriented, focused towards some desired goal. In what terms, then, has hope been understood as an operative principle in cultures in which there has been broad, explicit and confident consensus on what constitutes an appropriate and admirable object of hope? Furthermore, as we look towards our own collective future, what might be the shared object of our hope?

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[1] This distinction may arise from the fact that the verb is always connected to a person – 'I/They hope …' - suggesting wishful thinking rather than serious expectation, while the noun implies a broader, generalisable and possibly more stable vision.
[2] Alexander Pope (1688-1744), *Essay on Man* (1732) I 95.

No ‘period’, however defined, is seamless, monolithic or internally uniform, especially not the ‘Middle Ages’ (still referred to as the ‘Middle Age’ in French and German). This vast stretch of time, places and cultures – c. 450-1450 – was given its dismissive name in the 18th Century, suggesting that little of lasting importance or interest took place in the thousand years between the lamented end of the Roman Empire and the much worthier ‘Renaissance’ and (even more so) ‘Enlightenment’[3]. Twentieth-century scholarship and interpretation has, however, brought about a less self-important and more sober perspective on medieval culture and its continuing presence in our present[4]. Despite the many differences and changes subsumed under the label ‘medieval’, therefore, it may be worth - for the purposes of this discussion of hope - extracting and identifying the leading ideas in this context from this rich period of our shared heritage, and briefly tracing their history and some of their speculative expressions.

Medieval Christianity and after

One of the characteristic cultural products of the Middle Ages was the compendium or encyclopedia[5], summations of all that was considered known or knowable by means of the intellect or reason[6]. Within conceptual parameters which to them seemed ‘natural’ at the time, generations of writers and thinkers pursued, observed or constructed patterns, correspondences and hierarchies in a spirit of almost obsessive rationality, based on the assumption that, beneath or beyond the muddle of human life[7], this was essentially a world of order.

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[3] The transitional or ‘inbetween’ periods may be called ‘postclassical’ and ‘postmedieval’ respectively, just as we today are in the ‘postmodern’ and wondering what new kind of consensus, if any, is going to emerge. For further discussion of the concept and term ‘postmedieval’, see John Cartwright, ‘The ‘Morality Play’: Dead End or Main Street?’, *Medieval English Theatre*, Vol. XVIII 3-14 (1996).

[4] For an excellent and accessible summary of this process, see Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, New York 1991.

[5] Literally, a ‘circle of that which can be learned and taught’.

[6] Ways of ‘knowing’ the divine, on the other hand, were celebrated through analogy and metaphor by such writer-mystics as Richard Rolle and Dame Julian of Norwich in England, Jacob van Maerlant in the Netherlands and Meister Eckhart in Germany.

For example, Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) produced his *Etymologiae*, which takes as its structuring principle the supposed direct and naturally inherent relationship between words and their objects or referents. This compendium ranges from God and the angels through the liberal arts to clothing, modes of transport, agricultural methods, and food and drink. Written at a time when new social and economic forms were beginning to emerge after the collapse or withering away of the Roman Empire, the *Etymologiae* became – for all of what we may regard as its oddities – a vital pattern and source of information and argument in the succeeding centuries.

Another example of an influential encyclopedic work, some six centuries later in the 'high' Middle Ages, was the *Speculum Maius* ('Great Mirror') of Vincent of Beauvais (c.1195-1264), consisting of three voluminous sections: the *Speculum naturale*, which, in Vincent's words, concerns 'all things' – that is, the material world; the *Speculum historiale*, about 'all times'; and the *Speculum doctrinale*, 'all arts', all forms of art and learning: poetics, music, logic, politics, medicine, natural philosophy (what we would call 'science'), culminating in theology, and all of it crammed with detailed examples.

Works of this kind, in addition to being sources of information and enlightenment for the contemporary reader, are in effect expressions of praise and admiration for the marvellous *plenitas* (fullness, abundance) and order of the created world, in which all things are considered to be hierarchically connected: this chain or ladder begins with inanimate objects, such as stones, and ascends via the vegetable kingdom, the animal kingdom, human beings and angels, with God at the top (or, in other visionings of the universe, in the centre of a mandala or set of concentric circles).

Each of these levels or classes is considered to have its own special qualities or attributes: stones, for example, are outstanding for their endurance, plants for their power of growth, animals for their movement. What gives humans a special – and particularly challenging – position in this scheme of things is that they not only partake of the corporeality and senses of the animal kingdom but are endowed with both the power of reason and a soul (angels don't need reason – not being encumbered by 'this muddy vesture of decay'[8], they apprehend truth directly).

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[7] In medieval Christianity seen as the realm of mutability, presided over by the fickle 'goddess' Fortune; in the East, the realm of *Maya* or illusion.

What are the implications of this positioning of human beings on the cosmic map, and how does this relate to any thoughts about hope?

In this context, reason, that special human talent, is to be used to understand the nature of the world, and to use and cultivate the resources of the world in ways that reflect, to a lesser degree, the kingdom of Heaven on earth. Just as the macrocosm is, as we have seen, formed of a hierarchy of overlapping and interlocking degrees, so both the microcosms of the 'body politic' and the individual human being are formed on hierarchical principles, and each is frequently used as a metaphor for the other: for example, reason, understanding and memory, seated in the head, should control the lesser organs of, say, digestion and sexuality; if they do not, the result may be likened to a rebellion. Conversely, if the labouring classes (whose special role is to provide food for everyone) turn against the monarch (the 'head' of state), this is as 'unnatural' as an individual's desire for money or for sex becoming immoderate and overruling his/her reason.

Another frequently used analogy for the 'unnatural' overthrow of reason is of a horse controlling its rider, rather than the other way round.

Everything in the world, therefore – including every faculty of each human being – has its niche, its special place, its unique contribution within the plenitude of creation. Humans, however, not only have reason and understanding beyond that of other creatures, they also have a certain degree of free will (the extent of this freedom was a constant subject of debate throughout the medieval period - as it still is, but using the language of Marx, Freud, Jung, the Buddha and others, rather than of formal theology). And that's where the trouble (and the challenge) starts, and where the nature and function of hope can be - and needs to be - more clearly defined.

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[8] I.e., our body and physical senses (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* [c. 1595], V I 64)

Human beings, then, have the power of choice, and their exercise of that power will be much influenced by their having – or not having – hope for a better future. For the medieval Christian, the primary object of hope is God and, through God's grace, personal salvation and eternal beatitude. God's grace, however, is to some extent attracted by the use to which the individual Christian puts his or her gift of reason and free will, and the choices that flow from that.

An Arab trader, who regularly travelled throught the desert with goods loaded on his camel, came to his sheikh or spiritual adviser with a problem concerning faith: 'When I'm travelling and I stop for the night, should I tie up my camel (thus showing my lack of faith), or should I simply trust in God?' The sheikh answered, 'First tie your camel, then trust in God'.

For a medieval person to be regarded as 'unreasonable' is therefore not a trivial matter – it suggests that they are choosing to throw away their specifically human 'talent' and are willing to behave like animals[9].

Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is a comprehensive attempt to explicate the divine plan of creation, in so far as it is considered to be graspable by human reason. A modern editor describes the structure of this work as 'the architectonic order of scientific theology'[10]. Human beings, their nature and their potential, are central to this plan, and Aquinas lays out an extraordinarily full and severely logical analysis of the workings of mind, body and soul.

In his extensive section on Hope, he states succinctly, 'Hope is directed to a future good which is hard but not impossible to attain'[11]. If, in other words, the goal were easy to attain, hope would not be necessary; if, on the other hand, it were impossible to attain, hope would be pointless and self-deluding. Hope as an operative capacity is therefore at its most effective if it is associated with clear thinking and the realistic assessment of options and possibilities. The consistent linking of hope to human rationality and the power of judgment is therefore clear.

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[9] Cf. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524 AD), Book V, Prose 2): 'Human souls … are more free while they are engaged in contemplation of the divine mind, and less free when they are joined to bodies, and still less free when they are bound by earthly fetters. They are in utter slavery when they lose possession of their reason and give themselves wholly to vice' (English translation by Richard Green, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962, p. 104). See also above, note 6 and text.

[10] W.J. Hill, *Summa Theologiae* Volume 33, London and New York, n.d. (?1964), p. xix.

[11] '..objectum spei est bonum futurum arduum possibile haberi' (2a2ae. 17, 1).

The mullah Nasr ud-Din was living close to the border of a country. He was regarded in the neighbourhood as a bit odd, and so when he approached the border one day leading a long train of heavily loaded donkeys, the customs officer was suspicious, and asked what was in the bags.
'Firewood', said Nasr ud-Din.
'Uh-huh', thought the customs officer, and searched each one. He found nothing but firewood, and reluctantly waved Nasr ud-Din through.

A few days later, here he came again with another train of heavily loaded donkeys.
'Potatoes'.
'Oh yeah?'
But it was all potatoes, sure enough.

A couple of weeks later, the customs officer was sitting enjoying some quiet in a coffee-house, when Nasr ud-Din came in. He called him over, bought him a coffee, and said, 'Look, just between ourselves and entirely off the record, you've got to tell me – you really were smuggling stuff across, weren't you?'

'Sure', said Nasr ud-Din, 'It was donkeys'.

Consequently also, hope only has active meaning when at least some degree of free will, practical thinking and individual or collective choice is assumed.

Naturally, therefore, hope may be abused: 'it is quite possible to hope in a malicious way'[12]. Aquinas does not deal directly with the way in which the human capacity for hope may be deliberately and cynically exploited by others for their personal or collective gain (see the fully argued and illustrated chapter by Peter Drahos), but warns that one should not put one's hope in other people, except as 'secondary or instrumental sources of help in attaining the means to beatitude'[13], which once again requires careful judgment and the exercise of responsibility.

In this scheme of things, hope also has other powerful associations – it is one of the 'theological virtues', faith, hope and love, and is only fully effective when complemented by its 'sisters'. In medieval (and later) Christian terms, all three of these concepts are – as we have seen in the case of hope – intimately tied to theologically defined notions of salvation and transcendence. It may be useful at this point, however, to attempt to redefine them outside that particular framework while maintaining, if possible, at least some of their potency, both individually and in relation to one another, as follows:

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[12] 'spe aliqia male utitur' (loc.cit.).
[13] 2a2ae. 17,5.

- *Love* is a heartfelt wish for the wellbeing of another (or others), not dependent on a desire for personal gain.
- *Faith* is an intuitive sense of the possibility of certain desired outcomes.
- *Hope* is a force that ‘is directed to a future aim that is hard but not impossible to attain’.

- Love without faith is fragile and vulnerable; love without hope is a dead end.

- Faith without hope is insufficiently grounded in the experience of daily life; faith without love is a dangerous abstraction that may lose its way in scorn or hatred of whatever is ‘other’.

- Hope without faith has little staying power; hope without love is short-sighted and ignorant of its true long-term interests.

Aquinas notes that, just as angels do not require reason (note 3 above, and text), they have no need of hope, as they are already in the presence of God. Also, ‘there is no hope to be found in either the blessed or the damned; it exists only in those who are still en route (*viatoribus*)’[14].

The individual Christian was often referred to as a *viator* (‘traveller’) or *peregrinus* (‘pilgrim’) on a life-long journey, constantly confronted by crossroads, bad weather, smooth-tongued fellow-travellers and conmen, and other discouragements, seductions and choices. On this path, there may also be secondary objects of hope, provided that these are directed in turn towards the ultimate divine objective. To use the language of pilgrimage, if you make the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah the objects of your journey, rather than the Heavenly Jerusalem, you may indeed get what you hope for, but at a price.

Let us consider further this image of the journey, and its implications for understanding the nature and workings of hope[15].

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[14] *Summa* 2a2ae. 18, 3.

[15] The great folksinger, composer and community activist Ewan MacColl used to sing (with tongue in cheek)

> This life is a journey we all hae to gang,
> And mony’s the burden we carry alang –
> Though sorrow be your burden, and poverty your lot,
> We’ll be happy all thegither wi’ a wee drappie o’t.

The concept of life as a journey, pilgrimage or quest was deeply ingrained in medieval thought, and was particularly powerfully expressed in the growing body of tales of Arthur and his knights. Briefly, these tales first circulated in Latin in the 9th Century, then in Anglo-Norman, were greatly enlarged and given a strong ‘courtly’ flavour in the French of Chretien de Troyes in the 13th Century, and were re-arranged, re-imagined and re-told in English prose by Sir Thomas Malory in about 1470 – it is this English version that has been drawn on for most versions of the Arthurian cycle since then (by, for example Alfred Tennyson and John Steinbeck in written form, and as musical or film (or both) in *Camelot*, *Excalibur* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*).

This trail is worth pursuing further, I believe, because it is in late medieval representations of the quest (especially by Malory) that we may observe hope not merely as a theological construct but as a force in human action and choices.

The Monty Python version is of particular interest to us in this context, partly because of its great popularity in our time, and partly because it focuses specifically not only on the quest but on the most famous of them all (at least among moderns), the Quest for the Holy Grail. What is it about the quest (or about this particular quest) that laid it open to the very amusing burlesquing to which it was subjected by the Monty Python team? And does their success suggest that we should pay no further attention to the quest (and its relations with hope) as a relevant metaphor and a source of serious understanding of our life and choices today?

I think not, for two reasons. First, the Grail Quest is in my view the least interesting, the least rich in human insight and the most stereotyped of all the stories that Malory included in his collection, and for that reason the most easily parodied. The *History* and the *Quest* of the Holy Grail are thought to have been composed by Cistercian monks at some time in the 13th Century, using the highly popular model of the quest in order to subvert the very values of chivalric behaviour upon which that genre was based. In Lancelot and Gawain, for example, Malory presents characters whose slips

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However, his songs and his actions showed that enjoying a ‘wee drappie o’t’ was merely a refreshment stop on a journey requiring thought, planning and determination.

and indiscretions only serve to highlight their strengths and achievements, striving as they do to combine ‘private virtue and public service[16], as deliberately exemplified by Malory in terms of the ideals of knighthood.

The Grail episodes on the other hand, while composed with great skill, are essentially polemics promoting an explicitly heaven-directed and almost infallible otherworldliness, represented by Galahad, and to a lesser extent by Perceval and Bors, which makes it difficult for ordinarily imperfect readers to see them as realistic role-models. Lancelot’s human ‘weakness’ and impurity, on the other hand, disqualifies him from success in this quest.

The second (mis-)step leading from Malory to Monty Python is via the vigorous but romanticising neo-medievalism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which produced, for example, Pugin’s Houses of Parliament, the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the ideal of the English gentleman[17], and Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott* and *Idylls of the King*, his version of the Arthurian cycle. While the *Idylls* contain some of Tennyson’s most eloquent and moving writing, his representation of the Grail episodes has something of the shiny moral surface of Victorian high culture - Sir Galahad, the only knight who actually achieves the Grail, famously points out that

My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure [18].

It is these levels of high-minded over-simplification that lend themselves to burlesque, not the knightly quest as such, which, as I propose to show, functions at its best as a mythic[19] or fabulising means of coming to terms with our life as a journey, with hope as one of its most important but easily deformed elements.

The Tale of King Arthur is the first of eight inter-connected ‘books’ in Malory’s Arthurian cycle. It recounts, among other matters, the conception and birth of Arthur, the drawing of the sword from the stone, the gift of the sword Excalibur, Arthur’s proving of himself as an exemplary knight, his defeat of competing kings in the region, and the appearance of key figures such as Lancelot, Gawain and Tristram. Merlin, whose special foresight gives him the uncomfortable knowledge that his own time is limited, is a constant presence in this book, arranging by devious means for Arthur's conception, advising and admonishing him, generally acting as a catalyst in attempting to build a culture in which knighthood is not merely a matter of individual physical heroics, but comes to stand for a combination of individual fulfilment and prowess and a commitment to (in idealised feudal terms) social service and social justice[20].

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[16] D.S. Brewer (ed.), *Malory: the Morte Arthure*, London, 1968, p.1.
[17] See Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*: *Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, Yale UP, 1981
[18] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Sir Galahad.*
[19] By ‘myth’ I understand a narrative that is not literally true but which exemplifies or embodies some important truth or truths about human existence. Our dominant anti-imaginative and anti-intellectual culture tends at present, however, to equate ‘myth’ with ‘untruth’.

He is, in other words, acting in hope (or out of hope), in a manner which integrates a distant vision with the easily under-valued details of immediate choices.

The second section of this book, 'Torre and Pellinor', begins with Arthur's betrothal (against Merlin's advice) to Guinevere and the presentation of the Round Table as part of her dowry. At the feast celebrating their wedding and coronation, there occurs what Merlin (who knows something unusual is about to happen) describes as 'a strange and marvellous adventure'[21]. First, a white hart and a white 'brachet' (a female hound) run into the hall, pursued by thirty black hounds 'with a great cry'. The brachet bites a piece out of the haunch of the hart, which leaps aside and knocks a knight off his bench. The knight seizes the brachet, goes to his horse and rides off.

Then there enters a lady on a white horse, crying to the king for help to retrieve her brachet. Just as he is telling her that he cannot help her, a knight 'all armed on a great horse' rides in, seizes the lady and rides out again with her, despite her loud outcries. 'So when she was gone the king was glad, for she made such a noise', but Merlin insists that it would dishonour both Arthur and this great feast if he took no action. At Merlin's urging, Arthur calls on three knights to respond: Sir Torre, a newly knighted young man, is to bring back the brachet and the knight, 'or else slay him'; Sir Gawain, to bring back the white hart; King Pellinore (not the bumbling but charming knight of

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[20] For another contemporary example of a traditional heroic figure being used for a comprehensive statement on the relationship between the privileged individual or ruler and the needs of the broader society, see Sir Gilbert Hay, *The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour* (c. 1460?), ed. John Cartwright, Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, Vol. II (1983), Vol. III (1987), Vol. I forthcoming, especially lines 2055-2084.

[21] Malory, *Works* (ed. E. Vinaver), 2nd edn. (1971), p. 63. Spelling modernised by the present writer.

T.H. White’s delightful 20th-century version) to bring back the lady and the second knight, ‘or else slay him’.

Very briefly, Gawain pursues the hart into a castle and lets loose his two hounds; the knight of this castle emerges and protects the hart by killing the hounds. Gawain, infuriated at the loss of his hounds, fights with the knight, refuses his pleas for mercy and is about to cut off his head when the knight’s lady throws herself in between and Gawain accidentally cuts off her head instead. Four armed knights enter and accuse Gawain: ‘Thou new made knight, thou hast shamed thy knighthood, for a knight without mercy is dishonoured’. Gawain and his squire (who has also criticised him for his action) are thrown into prison; in the morning an informal court (in the quasi-legal sense) of ‘four fair ladies’ spares their lives and then, on hearing that they come from the court of King Arthur, decides along with the knights that Gawain should return to the court with the head of the hart, ‘because it was in his quest’. In addition, however, he is obliged to ‘bear the dead lady with him, on this manner: the head of her was hanged about his neck, and the whole body of her before him on his horse mane’.

When he reaches the court, Merlin sees to it (as in all three cases) that Gawain gives to the assembly a full account of his quest, and shows them the evidence – clearly, he has both succeeded (in the most narrow sense of bringing back the hart) and failed in a deeper sense. The assembled court ‘judged him for ever while he lived to be with all ladies and to fight for their quarrels; and ever that he should be courteous (a key and at times profound chivalric concept), and never to refuse mercy to him that asketh mercy’.

These quests are, it seems, being orchestrated by Merlin in order to provide hard – even shocking – examples, for the edification of the newly created order of knights of the Round Table, of what it means in practice to be a knight engaged on a quest - or, on another level, a human being faced with the varied and unexpected tests of principle of an ordinary life. For example, how consistent with the objects of one’s hope (e.g., bringing back the white hart, or promoting a system of fair trade) are one’s particular choices from time to time along that road?

Torre, riding an ‘old courser’ and bearing hand-me-down armour and weapons, negotiates a number of difficult situations with both courage and insight, and on his return is – at Merlin’s suggestion – rewarded by Arthur with an earldom.

The quest of King Pellinore is for our purposes probably the most revealing of the three. He rides speedily after the lady abducted by the knight, and shortly comes to a valley where a young woman is sitting by a well with a wounded knight in her arms. She appeals to Pellinore for help, but Pellinore is ‘so eager in his quest’ that however much she cries out after him, he speeds on his way. The narrator at this point informs us that the young woman wishes that Pellinore might be in such need before he dies; the knight dies in her arms and she kills herself for sorrow.

Pellinore in the mean time has continued to speed on his way, and with the help of a poor man by the roadside he is guided to where there are two tented pavilions – one of the knights had challenged the second as he came by with the lady, saying she was his cousin, and they are there fighting over her while she is guarded by their squires. Pellinore behaves with knightly propriety, parting the two knights and assessing the rights and wrongs of the situation. Both knights attack him, but despite the treacherous behaviour of the abductor, who stabs Pellinore’s horse under him, he kills the recreant knight and receives the submission of the lady’s cousin. He stays overnight in the latter’s castle, and they exchange knightly courtesies.

In the morning, after more mutual compliments, he sets off with the lady. Her horse throws and severely bruises her, dislocating her arm, and they decide to rest under a tree for the night. In the darkness they overhear a conversation between two knights – one is coming from Camelot, where he has been greatly impressed by this new fellowship of knights; the other is heading for Camelot with the intention of poisoning King Arthur – an almost throwaway hint of the challenges facing the collective hope of a more just and thoughtful social compact[22].

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[22] In the end, the tragic collapse of the Arthurian dream is not so much due to the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, although that is clearly the proximate cause, as to the selfish bickerings, petty vengefulness and short-sighted ambitions of some of the other knights in the court. The institutional practices and code of behaviour developed under the guidance of Merlin were in the end not enough to contain, defuse and re-direct the selfish passions of the individuals involved. The vision remains, however – a balance of pragmatism and idealism in which faith, hope and love operate for the common

They ride on in the morning, and come to the well where the knight and lady had been. They find that all but the lady’s head has been eaten by ‘lions or other wild beasts’, and Pellinore is horrified: ‘Alas! Her life might I have saved, but I was so fierce in my quest that I would not abide’. He is not able to explain to his companion why he is so distressed. He takes the knight’s corpse to a nearby hermitage for burial, and comes back to the lady’s remains, ‘with fair yellow hair’.’[M]uch his heart cast (that is, ’was drawn to’) her face’. He returns to Camelot with one live and successfully retrieved lady and one bodiless blonde head, and tells his story.

Guinevere reproves him for not saving the life of the young fair-headed woman, and he agrees, repeating that ‘I was so furious in my quest that I would not abide’. Merlin then intervenes, revealing that the young woman was Pellinore’s own daughter; she was to marry the young knight, but on their way to Arthur’s court he was treacherously speared from behind by a cowardly knight. Pellinore, comments Merlin, will ultimately be abandoned to his death by the person he trusts most. It could perhaps be said that he had faith and hope, but was lacking in love.

The reports being concluded, the assembled knights agree on a set of principles that will guide them and all other knights of the Round Table in their actions: to flee treason; to give mercy when asked; to honour and support women; to undertake no battle in a wrongful cause, either out of love or for material gain – individual actions are seen as inseparable from the collective hope for a prosperous and peaceful future.

Merlin has therefore successfully stage-managed this special occasion in order to demonstrate the convergence of the individual quests into a shared set of values, standards and objectives. The vision of the Order of the Round Table is taking shape by means of an open process of action and reflection, in which taking responsibility (by implication, looking to the future) is very clearly distinguished from blaming (getting stuck in the past, however dreadful).

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good. We get a bit embarrassed talking about ‘love’ in the public or civic context – perhaps we can begin with ‘respect’, which is a prerequisite for love.

What are we to make of these succinct and powerful tales, and others like them? In relation to our present concern, I suggest, the quest may be seen as a representation of hope in action, a narrative embodiment of the theological and moral abstractions of the churchmen, encyclopedists and other commentators. The ostensible aim of the quest (that is, the object of hope) may be agreed, but – as each of the quests has demonstrated - every step of that journey is as important as any other step. Means and ends cannot usefully be separated.

Also, the individual wayfarer may, like King Pellinore, be singlemindedly confident as to the appropriateness of his choices along the road, but in truth his autonomy is an illusion, and his welfare and the full success of his enterprise is intimately bound up with the interests of others. This re-articulation of the ideals of knighthood that is undertaken in the late fifteenth century by Sir Thomas Malory and – even more explicitly – by Sir Gilbert Hay in Scotland, strongly emphasises the interdependence of the individual and the collective in terms of rights, responsibilities and appropriate objects of hope[23]. The terms of the discussion may at times seem strange to us, but the search for understanding and coherence is familiar.

'What if ….': thinking in hope

In Malory's Arthurian cycle, this 'discussion' is only occasionally explicit, and is generally 'embodied' in the action of the narrative. In this postmedieval period of exceptional change and anxiety there was also, however, a great deal of more explicit commentary and speculation on the relations between the individual and the collective and their implications for the 'common profit'. Among the most widely read and influential of these works was Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in Latin in 1516, very quickly translated into English and other vernacular languages and still a powerful influence in imagining alternative futures, or objects of shared hope.

Utopia is a prose narrative in two sections. The title is a coinage from Greek, meaning 'No Place', with an underlying pun on *Eutopia* ('Good Place'), suggesting the great difficulty of moving from the unsatisfactory present to a better future. However, the very fact of writing and circulating this provocative document may be seen as an act of hope, a living out of Aquinas's definition ('Hope is directed to a future good which is hard but not impossible to attain'). More was a devoted churchman, a scholar and a diplomat, who later became Henry VIII's trusted Chancellor (and who was even later executed for refusing to, in effect, transfer his religious allegiance from the Pope to Henry after the king's English 'Reformation'). He was a close friend of Erasmus, the great humanist scholar, and was an active participant in an informal international network of thinkers and doers in public life.

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[23] As the Xhosa/Zulu saying puts it, 'Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (A person is a person through other people).

The first book of *Utopia* begins in Antwerp, where More pictures himself (as was frequently the case in reality) on a diplomatic mission, and where he is introduced to one Raphael Hythloday, who had supposedly been on the transatlantic expedition of Amerigo Vespucci in 1504. He and a few companions had decided to go on exploring further west, and had come upon several kingdoms and other states, including Utopia. He describes some of the key features of this place, and he and More begin a friendly and informal debate on their merits and demerits.

They agree to continue the discussion on another occasion, and the scene shifts to the dinner-table of Cardinal Morton in London, where More and Hythloday are among the guests, including also a lawyer and a friar. The conversation deals with the contemporary state of England: especially the movement of rural people to the city, as the remnants of feudal interdependence decay and as struggling landed families dismiss their servants, all leading to an increase in unemployment and crime. The lawyer takes a hard line on punishment as both desirable retribution and as deterrent, while the friar and More attempt to define the underlying causes of the increase in crime and public disorder, and thus arrive at possible remedies. After some diplomatic interventions from Hythloday, they invite him to tell the whole story of his journey to Utopia. That account forms the main part of the second section.

The dinner-table conversation imagined by More has therefore established that the social and economic situation in England at the time called for serious and innovative thought about alternatives that would be both just and effective. This then leads naturally on to the question posed in all serious speculative fiction: 'What if…?' In this case, More, through the imaginary voyage of Hythloday, puts the radical question, ‘What if there were no such thing as private property?’, and explores some of what the implications of this difference might be in practice.

To stimulate debate (and probably to cover himself against any charges of sedition in a highly sensitive political environment) More invents an extreme case, in which no distinctions are permitted in housing, clothing or any material objects, however personal, in which all towns are designed according to the same ground-plan, and in which gold is regarded with such contempt that it is used for chaining and thereby humiliating stubborn prisoners[24] (of whom there are few). The details that More provides on Utopian family life, economic relations, justice, etc, all flow from the original ‘What if …?’ premise, presenting a comprehensive picture of a starkly different society that demanded a response from the reader.

More’s *Utopia* quickly became very popular. It circulated widely in both its original Latin form and in English and other translations, to the extent that it gave its name to a whole genre of speculative thinking and experimentation[25]. More was not the first to use narrative fiction to explore the forms and implications of different visions of human coexistence[26], but his example has inspired many successors to put into the public domain, through the medium of speculative fiction, more or less fully articulated expressions of the object of their individual and/or collective hope, sometimes combined with suggestions – more or less convincing – on how to get ‘there’ from ‘here’.

So, for example, there there have been versions that express the values of either proto-socialism and communitarianism (William Morris, Edward Bellamy) or elitist vanguardism (Ayn Rand, Robert Heinlein). Some others have used this speculative space to promote warnings, rather than encouragement, on the possible effects of grand utopian visions: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), on the dead-end of upbeat scientism, and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), on the slide into tyranny when revolutionary socialism loses touch with its foundational values.

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[24] This is probably also an example of More’s quietly satirical undertone, referring here to the excessive show and hierarchical rituals of life in the royal court, the centre of power.

[25] Although misunderstanding or ignorance of the book itself has led to the common interpretation of ‘utopian’ as ‘admirably idealistic but obviously impractical’. More’s purpose, however, was clearly to stimulate innovative and constructive thought and debate, not to provide a blueprint for a particular desired model.

[26] See, for example, Plato’s ****

In taking forward this discussion of the nature, possibilities and difficulties of hope, I propose however to look briefly at one work of speculative fiction by each of two contemporary and still productive fabulists, Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-) and Kim Stanley Robinson (1952-). In relation to our investigations in this volume of essays, what is especially striking about their speculative narratives (their ‘thought experiments’, to use Le Guin’s term) is the degree to which they combine a broad and identifiable values-based vision with highly inventive imaginative detail and a sober sense of practicability and human fallibility – surely crucial elements in the effective practice of hope. These thought-provoking narratives are not the road itself, but – in the ways in which they construct and then problematise the possibilities of utopian change - they are helpful signposts.

Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1975) is a meticulously imagined and constructed fable of contrasting personal and collective possibilities and the obstacles on the route to their realisation. Le Guin has, it seems (and she – like Robinson - is thoroughly acquainted with the history of her chosen genre) deliberately taken on Sir Thomas More’s basic premise – that is, the abolition of private property – and re-situated it in circumstances that test its viability far more convincingly than in the original *Utopia*. More, for the purposes of his fable, assumed that the inhabitants of Utopia were almost unfailingly rational beings who were happy to accept the necessary constraints on individual expression and choices for the sake of the collective good. Le Guin, on the other hand, deliberately situates her narrative at a point of crisis in the life of an ‘anarcho-syndicalist’, ‘anti-propertarian’ social experiment that had been running for several generations and is showing signs of strain and reaction.

Where More doesn’t explicitly problematise the utopian vision at all, and where Malory sadly shows us, with minimal commentary, the collapse of a great and still inspiring dream, Le Guin in this novel sets herself the challenge of understanding more fully what makes a hope-based project powerful and attractive and what makes it at the same time vulnerable and potentially fragile.

The action is set in the constellation of Tau Ceti in the distant future. Urras is a planet very much like our earth, with a familiar range of competing ideologies; Anarres is its 'moon', but with a thin but viable atmosphere and a limited but adequate range of indigenous plants and supply of water. The 'Odonian' revolutionaries (named after Odo, the woman who had most clearly exemplified and articulated a set of radically democratic values) had been exiled to Anarres 170 years before the beginning of the action, and the narrative – in two intertwined streams – centres on episodes in the life and growing awareness of Shevek, an Anarresti physicist and committed Odonian. In the development of his theoretical model ('the unification of Sequency and Simultaneity in a general field theory of time' – p.77), he finds himself coming up against 'walls' of jealousy, fear of change, and intellectual 'propertarianism', and he comes reluctantly to recognise that 'the will to dominance is as central to human beings as the impulse to mutual aid is, and has to be trained in each individual, in each new generation' (144), and 'it's always easiest to let yourself be governed' (*ibid*).

In order to escape from this self-imposed stagnation, he breaks the 170-year-old taboo on personal contact with Urras, the original home planet, and travels there alone, regarded by many on Anarres as a traitor. On Urras he discovers a (to him) bewildering combination of wealth and poverty, creativity and cruelty - 'They knew no relationship but possession. They were possessed' (66). When he realises that what the authorities on Urras want from him is the exclusive possession of his theory (with its implications for the instantaneous transmission of information across space and time), he goes underground and then, with the assistance of Keng, the Ambassador of 'Terra' (that is, our earth), he returns to Anarres to carry on the unending revolution.

In their last conversation, the Ambassador notes that, 'My world, my Earth, is a ruin. A planet despoiled by the human species' (287), and says sadly that 'We forfeited our chance of Anarres centuries ago, before it ever came into being' (288). Shevek has by this time, however, moved (or been moved) from naïve idealism through shock and disappointment to a calm acceptance of his ongoing responsibility, and when Keng says with melancholy admiration, 'I thought I knew what 'realism' was', Shevek replies, 'How can you, if you don't know what hope is?'.

The Dispossessed is therefore both a statement *of* hope (in writing and publishing it at all) and a statement *about* hope - in exploring the vicissitudes of a serious and intelligently articulated utopian vision in the face of conflicting human desires, economic hardship and ideological hostility. Vision and practice are two hands washing each other, and there is no finality.

Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge* (1990) takes this challenge even closer to home, both in time and place. The novel is set in Orange County, California, in 2065, and the action takes place in and around El Modena, a ‘conscious community’ in which population growth is limited to what the natural resources (including particularly water) can support, various forms of communal living are commonplace, the dominant form of transport is the bicycle, and the present suburbanisation of Orange County has been deliberately rolled back.[27]

As in *The Dispossessed*, the core of this novel is the political and emotional growing-up of an active and idealistic young man – in this case Kevin, a builder and adapter of ecologically and aesthetically satisying houses. He has just been elected to the town council, and his favourite withdrawing place, the one remaining un-‘developed’ hill-top on the edge of the town, is the object of a rezoning proposal, at first somewhat disguised in an application for a variation in water supply. Robinson has an exceptional gift for integrating key ideas and concepts, down-to-earth dialogue, a convincing interplay of characters and a striking sense of place into one satisfying narrative.

The central train of events is ‘shadowed’ by occasional flashbacks to the notebooks of Kevin’s grandfather, Tom Barnard, who in 2012 was struggling to write an utopian novel, but who had by the time of the main action of this novel withdrawn into disappointed solitude. Writing in Switzerland, he notes that ‘there is no such thing as a pocket utopia’ (51), which is what Kevin (and the reader) come to recognise in the case of El Modena. His frustration with fictional utopias is that ‘they don’t have to deal with our history’ (81), but can artificially make a fresh start on, for example, another planet, and he recognises that they need to 'invent the history leading out of this world (please) into the world of this book'(126). Utopia, he writes, 'is when our lives matter' (155); he resolves (within Robinson's own fiction, of course!), that he will 'not just write a utopia, but fight for it in the real world' (251), and he comes out of his solitude to add his experience and insight to 'the process of making a better world … Struggle forever' (82) in the messy arena of daily life.

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[27] Oscar Baldarrama, the newly appointed town attorney who has just moved to El Modena from Chicago, writes ironically to a friend: ‘It really exists! Arcadia! Bucolica! Marx’s “idiocy of rural life”!’. However, his experience and scepticism is important to his new fellow-citizens in understanding the political intricacies of the situation.

Both these novels take as vital the relationship between the individual and the community or collectivity, and both attempt to demonstrate the desirability and the possibility of a convergence of interests between the two: while there are constantly tensions in this relationship, both works are exploring and testing, through a fictional experiment, how this convergence might be expressed in practice through sufficient agreement on an appropriate object of hope.[28]

Novels must come to an end, but in neither *The Dispossessed* nor *Pacific Edge* is there truly a closure. A novel, however powerful the ideas that it embodies, is not a tract or treatise but an imaginative projection, and the reader is left with the suggestion made in another of Le Guin's thought-experiments[29]: 'Let the heart complete the pattern'.

- In this essay on the nature and functioning of hope, we have seen, in a brief glimpse of some leading medieval ideas, hope as an element in a structure of intellectual or theological understanding and in the perennially current metaphor of the quest. In considering a small number of speculative novels, we have seen hope as a necessary dimension of fictional projections that represent utopian visions and the challenges to their implementation.

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[28] The modern editor of Aquinas's volume on Hope (*op. cit.*, 137) sees in this kind of convergence the 'full realisation of my humanity, the most perfect deployment of my liberty under the direction of intelligence, the fulfilment of myself in the construction of the human community'.

[29] *Always Coming Home* (1988)

Hope in Action

The next and logical step is hope embodied in more than fictional form, hope in practice[30], and we shall conclude by briefly considering one contemporary example of this stage of the living-out of hope. The point of including it is not so much in the details of the model that has been built, but in the process of building it, which may be suggestive beyond its local circumstances.

Contemporary South Africa, despite the inevitable deflation from the euphoria of the early 1990's, still presents fertile ground for innovative experiments in social, political and economic relations: there is – at least in theory – an ideological and political commitment by the government to the refreshment of democratic practices; there is a severe need for just such a refreshment, especially in the communities most marginalised and deprived by generations of apartheid, a need which no government agency has the capacity to deliver on its own; and there is in these communities an eagerness to participate actively in the new dispensation.

In late 1997 the Community Peace Programme (CPP)[31] initiated a pilot project in a poor black community, Zwelethemba[32], some 90 kilometres from Cape Town. This experiment was to test a hypothesis: that people living in a community of this kind (many of them unemployed and poorly educated in formal terms) have the knowledge and the capacity for the building and self-direction of their community, with minimal intervention by professionals or outside experts. Matters of security being so fundamental to the peaceful functioning of a community, these were the issues around which this knowledge and capacity was to be drawn out, mobilised and made visible and effective. The aim was also to build a model that was not merely a 'once-off', but that would be robust and well-grounded enough to be widely replicated without substantial modification.

By early 1988 some thirty Zwelethemba residents had come forward to take part in this model-building project. Having agreed on the broad vision of building peace in a self-directed community, the next step was to identify the values that would form the foundation of whatever processes or structures were to come. ‘Respect’, in many possible manifestations, was the top priority; leadership, for example, was re-visioned as the capacity to facilitate, to be a catalyst in the growth of others, by example and, where appropriate, by ‘coaching’.

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[30] Although, as we have already suggested, the writing of fictions such as those of Le Guin and Robinson may in itself be regarded as an example of hope in practice. The pen can be as mighty as the spade.

[31] A unit of the School of Government in the University of the Western Cape.

[32] This Xhosa name happens to mean 'place of hope'.

By trial and error, with frequent reviews of practice, there crystallised out a ‘Code of Good Practice’ (a simply expressed touchstone of values and priorities), and step-by-step procedures for conflict management (‘peacemaking’). Other dimensions have been added and tested as the needs became apparent: a system of outcomes-based payments, supported increasingly by funding from local governments; internal and external reporting procedures; instruments for surveys and monitoring; procedures for the day-to-day and month-to-month coordination (through a deliberately small and proportionately shrinking core of professional staff) of a growing network of ‘Peace Committees’, as these structures have come to be called.

Each step in the building of this integrated model is tested against the question: ‘Does it or does it not support and promote constructive self-direction?’ For example, at an early stage in the pilot project, the group agreed on a conventional constitution with a Chair, Deputy Chair, Secretary, etc, and then discovered that the office-bearers never attended actual peace-gatherings, but preferred to hobnob with town councillors and chat importantly about what everyone else was doing. On reflection, therefore, the group simply abandoned that particular form of stucturing and concentrated on inventing and testing forms and procedures that expressed and reinforced, rather than unintentionally undermining, the guiding values and objectives of the project.

What has emerged in practice is a practicable and sustainable way of balancing altruism (service to the community, through facilitating a process of conflict management) and self-interest (financial reward, based on active engagement in the processes).

It seems therefore possible to move towards the realisation of a shared vision by mobilising people’s energies, knowledge and commitment around common problems (that is, ‘common’ in the senses of being both ‘shared’ and ‘frequent’) – the process of engagement itself makes these commonalities visible and initiates a regular series of action/reflection feedback loops.

While the various partners engaged in this project certainly believe in the more-than-local validity of the details or content of this model, they are not the point here. Rather, they would suggest that the very idea of imagining, building, testing and monitoring a coherent model of governance – in whatever area of social, political, cultural or economic life one chooses to be engaged in – is of fundamental importance in considering possible forms and processes for the realisation of hope.

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Hope is ‘not merely a flight from this valley of tears and its tasks’[33]. Indeed, Herbert Marcuse noted that ‘one of the worst signs of our danger is we can’t imagine the route from here to utopia’[34], while the fictional Tom Barnard concludes, as he prepares to engage in social action, ‘the way is the life’[35].

Hope is about thought in action, but it cannot function alone. This essay has attempted to demonstrate that, in addition to its traditional sisters of faith and love[36] , hope’s companions are reason, imagination, action, reflection and perseverance. The journey – or, even more specifically, the quest - may stand as an image of unfolding possibility, of the constantly evolving practices that derive from the application of these human talents. There is nothing more realistic than hope, provided that it has these companions on the road.

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[33] *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed, Karl Rahner, London 1975, p. ***

[34] Cited in *Pacific Edge*, p. 127

[35] *Pacific Edge*

[36] Redefined above in non-theological terms.