

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Fourteen, Number One

Tarrying with Hopeless Angels: A Theo-poetic, Lacanian Exposition on Hope

Mark Gerard Murphy, St Mary's University, UK & Barney Carroll

Abstract

This paper is a theo-poetic exposition on hope via the series Neon Genesis Evangelion. The authors work to counter the dilemma of the modern human-cyborg: a subject saturated with digital technology who wants to fight the horror of their continual experience of a commodified hope. What emerges in this paper's analysis is the articulation of three kinds of hope. The first kind is a prosaic general hope of the imaginary; the second is a rational hope of the symbolic, while the third is an occult, excessive hope in the real. The ethical injunction of this paper's conclusion is that to refuse the horror of the digital, we must preserve this third-order hope through an ethics of antagonistic uselessness.

Keywords

Lacan; Theo-Poetics;Psychoanalysis;Mystical Theology

'The thread of human hope is spun with the flax of sorrow.' – Kaworu Nagisa

Neon Genesis Evangelion is set in the fortified city of Tokyo-3 fifteen years after a worldwide cataclysm. The protagonist is Shinji, a teenage boy who is recruited by his estranged father to the shadowy organisation NERV to pilot a giant bio-machine called "Evangelion" into combat with alien beings called "Angels". The series explores the emotional landscape of various humans as they continuously struggle to prevent cataclysm while trying to make sense of their roles and the power structures around them. The series is steeped in imagery derived from Kabbalah, Christianity, and Judaism.

The young pilots - all motherless teenagers - come to learn that their role in the struggle against humanity's Lovecraftian, angelic antagonists is through something called 'the human instrumentality project'. Eventually, the project transpires to culminate in a merging of humanity's consciousness to become a single divine being without internal contradiction.

The defining moment comes when the human instrumentality project is initiated, and most of humanity is wiped out as it becomes a horrific monolithic super-being. However, at a critical moment, Shinji, the essential catalyst of this monstrous moment of human evolution, rejects this "wholeness": he bursts out of the aggregate of human consciousness into the desolate ruins of the world, populated with the bodies of dead angels. It is here that *Neon Genesis Evangelion* ends. It ends with us looking at a world inhabited by dead hopes but with a sense of optimism.

The End of *Evangelion* is usually interpreted as cynical and full of despair. The protagonist is continuously depressed, coerced into his role against his will, frequently catatonic or paralysed by hysterical internal conflict in the face of crisis, and only able to fulfil his duties in moments of manic rage; eventually selfishly sabotaging humanity's great project for survival only to be left gazing at a world without life. He is continually told by his peers that if he can nurture the correct attitude, the correct discipline, the correct outlook, he can succeed with this new monstrous technology. The *Evangelion* 'self-help' and its promise of an experience of the 'good' are always held just out of reach, and he is expected to strive toward

this goal at his Father's behest. Something important is struggling to be said throughout, something blurred through the demonology of Judaic-Christian imagery: the difference between outright cynicism and this strange other state of existence that continues living even in the face of total dissolution.

Cynicism perceives cynicism; as Ursula le Guin wrote in her reflective introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "many people who do not read science fiction describe it as 'escapist', but when questioned further, admit they do not read it because 'it is so depressing' (Guin, 2017). Escapism likewise perceives escapism. The salience is in the contradiction: what hope struggles to speak itself in the gulf between? If a picture is to have a meaning, then it must have something in common with what it depicts. If Evangelion is a story that culminates in an ocean of dashed hopes, then the getting there must be seen as a critique of hopes, and of a hope that transcends the end of the world despite its manifestation.

Our world lacks the horrific colour of Evangelion with its concept of the end and its ensuing human response. However, the grammar of the dream work is the same. Indeed, if a sense of boredom typified in the last decade, today, we are faced with a perpetual state of managed anxiety, which is mediated by digitally distributed technologies of well-being. A sense of dread saturates everything, as if cataclysmic horror lies just behind every surface, forever about to puncture our precarious sense of a reality which is not worthy of preserving. As neoliberalism staggers onwards in the constant deafening hum of boardroom disaster management, we struggle to manage our human hope in the same digital register.

The word *hope* comes from the late Old English *hopa*, which means 'confidence in the future.' This inherently theological term came framed in medieval Christological and eschatological terms. To have hope was to have confidence in a gifted future given to us by a specific narrative; a myth of salvation. It was to believe in the restorative powers of a new dawn, which was to subsume us into the Godhead via participation. In the medieval mind, the future and past resonated with each other: the prelapsarian fullness of being was to find itself once more through sacramental anamnesis and participation. Here, the lost seeds of the past were to bloom into the tree of life, which was once barred to us.

However, if in the past, desire and hope were the same things as we see in Augustine, then Aquinas changed its coordinates. For the latter, hope was now located in the irascible category of the passions as opposed to the concupiscible aspect. Hope was thereby separated from the excesses of immediate desire and moved into an austere distant category. This was much later affirmed by the philosopher Kant, who placed hope at the centre of his enquiry. Kant dissects hope into three carefully considered objects:

- (1) One's own happiness (as part of the highest good),
- (2) one's own moral progress (in the *Religion*) and
- (3) the moral improvement of the human race as a whole. (Bloeser and Stahl, 2017)

More and more, we begin to see the outlines of a liberal conception of hope. One which seems to be less concerned with hoping *for* an impossible future, of which we somehow already participate in, and instead, hoping becomes located *within* a predetermined future; one which is already hoped for us, with its limits set out and its possibilities exhausted. The responses to this dissected, anaemic ideal of hope have given us a glimmer of something more radical. The German Marxist philosopher Ernest Bloch broke with liberal conceptions of hope in a way that brought back its excesses. His understanding of Marxism was split into two categories: One he calls the cold stream and the other a warm stream (Boer, 2016). The former can be understood as a positivist conception of historical developments, while the latter acknowledges the processual, excessive constitution of reality, which is captured by the concept of hope and expectation (Boer, 2016). Hope was to be conceived as something we participate in, can only come to grasp through the reflexive use of the affects, and only ever cognise partially. It thereby positions itself against mere fantasy or a determinate mechanism of prediction. However, this bifurcation of a "middle way" still resonates with anaemic theological traditions. His perspective on a radical conception of hope still has much in common with the German Reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who argues that the old theological sins against hope are despair and presumption; severe limitations that cordon off the arena of hoping. He repudiates those who veer off the carefully laid tracks:

Presumption is a premature, selfwilled anticipation of the fulfilment of what we hope for from God. Despair is the premature, arbitrary anticipation of the non-fulfilment of what we hope for from God. (Neal, 2009, pp.7–8)

This is a theology of hope based on lack— a cynical emancipation that cannot fathom an eschatology founded on despair and excessive presumption. As George Bataille would say, should hope be so servile?

We may call sovereign the enjoyment of possibilities that utility doesn't justify (utility being that whose end is productive activity). Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty [...] What is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having to anything else in view but this present time. (Bataille, 1992, p.192)

His concept of sovereignty hinges on understanding objects in the economy of our desire as being entirely free from concepts of utility and use. This understanding of sovereignty is the antithesis of the concept of servility, which approaches objects as things to be valued for their use. Is it possible to speak of the uselessness of Hope in its absolute apophatic excess? Is it still logically coherent to say, “I hope precisely because my hope is useless?”

When we hope for something grand, we draw from the beauty of the goal the courage to brave all obstacles. If the chance of reaching it diminishes, the desire grows proportionally. The farther from reality lies the goal, the more desirable it is, and since desire is the supreme force it has the greatest amount of force at its service. The vulgar goods of life are so small a thing that in comparison the ideal conceived must appear immense: all of our petty joys are shattered before that of realising an elevated idea. (Guyau, 1895)

In the end, hope may arise from lack, but that lack is not defined by distance, it is defined by something hidden in plain sight that ever alludes our gaze. Hope always misses the mark, not because it is so distant, but because the target is so close, so close we cannot experience it. Nor can any commodified, experientialist discipline harness it for us. In its hiddenness, it spurs us to action so that we can become this antagonistic hope:

The truth is found in movement, in hope, and it is with reason that we have proposed as a complement to positive morality a “philosophy of hope.” A child saw a butterfly poised on a blade of grass; the butterfly had been made numb by the north wind. The child plucked the blade of grass, and the living flower that was at its tip, still numb, remained attached. He returned home, holding his find in his hand. A ray of sunlight broke through, striking the butterfly’s wing, and suddenly, revived and light, the living flower flew away into the glare. All of us, scholars and workers, we are like the butterfly: our strength is made of a ray of light. Not even: of the hope of a ray. One must thus know how to hope; hope is what carries us higher and farther. “But it’s an illusion!” What do you know of this? Should we not take a step for fear that one day the earth will slide away from under our feet? Looking far into the past or the future is not the only thing; one must look into oneself. One must see there the living forces that demand to be expended, and we must act. (Guyau, 1895)

Moreover, this is why the message of Evangelion is so powerful. What we have is a story where a young boy rejects the prevalence of a common language of a prosaic hope. He denies the pleasure principle’s ‘hope for wholeness’ that his Father imposes upon him with these lumbering technologic, digital monsters that he is surrounded by. His spirituality of hope is one which is predicated on a fundamental rejection of the coordinates of a digitally mediated, paternalist well-being. He chooses something excessive and absurd. He refuses to let his state of “becoming” be defined externally. It is a spirituality which is awkward as it says, “There is no such thing as the One; there is no state of the became; no such thing as teleological bliss; there is only becoming.” Hope is darkness. The dark fate of Evangelion is a zero point where all goals and structures are obliterated, and a blank canvas appears as a Dark Night of the Soul.

To trace and act upon and within the horrid surfaces of the world, as such, we must acknowledge our hopes and distinguish them. The most obvious hope, the one most readily rejected, is the hope from on high: the hope whose substance is everywhere and nowhere and whose end is in personal glory. Will I win the lottery? Will I be the father of a beautiful child? Will I become a better person by eliminating my failings and developing my successes? This imaginary hope is escapist and

individualistic. It is the hope for happiness under given imaginary coordinates. It falls apart under any analysis without desperation: individual success is predicated upon material conditions.

Another kind of symbolic hope manifests itself in a rationalist framework. Where are we, what do we fear, and what do we desire? We can and must struggle against our class enemies. Thereby we find successes and failures. In each moment we reconfigure our hope, adding to its textuality. This hope maintains itself in the symbolic. The valence of material struggle displays in tangible consequence. Whereas hope-from-on-high is inscrutable inasmuch as its substance and its rewards are an individual fantasy, a collective hope demands strategy; it demands critical analysis; it does not live without reflection.

A third hope exists, which feeds our lower order hopes: the touch of a non-experiential darkness in the real. Its occult like nature brings us into momentary glory. The event of some strange thing, whose substance we dismiss or glorify, brings us into a wide-eyed pure hope. Depending on the circumstance, we are always in danger of sublimating that hope into one of the lower order hopes. Certainly, the propinquity of digital technologies co-opt our third order hope into commodified experientialist fetish objects, but we must guard against these machinations.

Hope from beyond has no shape. It does not fit our concerns: it merely illuminates them. That illumination should be sought and cherished and guarded against. Any left activist experience will see the corruption of glory into tactics. Any right-winger will see glory collapse into self-validation against the other. We must seek and cherish hope from beyond while refusing to let it dissolve into formalised hope. Without a fresh desire for beyond, without tactics ripped of all but drive, we are left on dry land.

An 'absurdity of substance' nourishes this third-order hope, an excess of the soul, a deep commitment that has no foundation apart from an infinite movement with no goal: It continues, it moves. All we can do is recognise this movement as from a beyond in us which moves to the beyond; both of each are unexperienced. We must recognise it insofar as it teaches us to embrace that part of my neighbour,

which I cannot ever hope to know, but still am enjoined to embrace. In this sense, the third order is nourished by faith and love.

Conclusion: Toward a non-spirituality of antagonistic uselessness.

It is too easy for leftists to fall into a militant war on hope. A quiet solipsistic war is the most obvious way to avoid the contradictions of inspiration and strategy. On the one hand, the hyperrational mindset rejects all hope that does not manifest in the guise of a technocratic, constructivist project: endless lists, plans, plans and more plans! On the other, the nihilist collapses the darkness of the beyond with the opaque immediacy of death. However, a ruined world remains a crucial object for us precisely because of the opportunities it can offer. As Donnie Darko says, 'I just hope, that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief... because there will be so much to look forward to.' So, let us look beyond. Let us take visions of ruin and glory seriously. After all, the horror of folding heaven into the world is the task at hand, so let us ensure dead hopes are not folded into our pragmatics.

All of our desires, our essence, what we are, have been shaped and honed by a system so sophisticated that it saturates every part of our lives. It is impossible to step outside of this machine; it is impossible to have any kind of purity in approaching it critically. Thus, hating capitalism and choosing to fight against it, always entails, in the last instance, some semblance of self-hate and self-erasure. Much of our pop-spirituality and digitised wellness-culture usually posits self-hate as a negative: a sin. This is something to be tackled head-on. The more we love ourselves, the more we find the coordinates of a prosaic hope. Indeed, the more we search for experiences of wholeness and happiness, the more we vanish into the valences of the Angel's algorithms. They feed us pre-packaged sentimentalism: short term justifications that cloud the horror of alienation—all they can offer are truncated, two-dimensional hopes, emptied of social transformation in forcibly mappings the limit of our individualised lifeworld. Being a radical means questioning and throwing to the wind all of the coordinates by which we measure and experience happiness, well-being and hope since these are mediated by the very system we set ourselves against. How can we trust our experience of hope and happiness? How can we expect our hopes and desire to lead us anywhere but to further integration into a world that stops other worlds emerging? How can a radical hope look like

anything other than an apophatic, non-experiential void? A revolutionary solidarity reveals itself only in the kenotic stripping away of expectations in the Other and ourselves, and then we realise there is nothing outside of the relation, nothing outside an entangled, planetary desire. This is a truth of solidarity that goes beyond violent conceptions of hope founded on scarcity (Keller, 2014).

References

Bataille, G., 1992. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. Zone Books.

Bloeser, C. and Stahl, T., 2017. Hope. In: E.N. Zalta, ed. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2017. [online] Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Available at: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/hope/>> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2019].

Boer, R., 2016. Concerning the “Warm Stream” within Marxism. *International Critical Thought*, 6(1), pp.13–28.

Guin, U.K.L., 2017. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Hachette UK.

Guyau, J.-M., 1895. *The Philosophy of Hope*. [online] Marxist.org. Available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/guyau/1895/hope.htm>> [Accessed 9 Nov. 2019].

Keller, C., 2014. *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. Columbia University Press.

Neal, R.A., 2009. *Theology as Hope: On the Ground and Implications of Jürgen Moltmann’s Doctrine of Hope*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.