

## Hope against Hope

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### 1. Hope, fear and risk

Hope is not a concept that psychoanalysts regularly focus on. Unlike guilt, say, or omnipotence, it is not the topic of innumerable papers. Yet the issue of hope is ever-present. There is no life without hope. It is hope or hopefulness that keeps us going. And hope functions at all levels and often in different directions simultaneously. Every action and many thoughts and emotions include intentionality, and thus involve some hope, something aimed at. We all contain part-selves, with different agendas of hope, more or less cut off from each other and from our 'central selves'. This theme will be exemplified, I hope, in what I say about *Spoor*.

In *Honeyland*, both Hatidze and the chaotic Turkish family have their hopes, but hopes of very different kinds. Hers are in tune with reality, with nature, with a slow tempo of life. They are the hopes of a person of maturity, wisdom and kindness. By contrast, the hopes of the invasive family, subject to exploitation, to perpetual squabbles, caught up in fractious insecurity, are harried, ambitious and yet passive, easily put off their stride and rarely go beyond the aspiration of survival. Their experience of time is radically unlike Hatidze's. everything is rushed, fluctuating.

The film enlarges in us observers the sense of the former type of hope, based on respect for nature and a steady purposiveness, a willingness to expend ongoing effort to achieve our ends.

In *Spoor* too, not only do the various characters have different kinds of hope, so does the main character within herself.

'Spoor' means scent or track. We witness a character who is on the track of corruption, but she ends up being tracked herself. Duszejko – is it significant that everyone gets her name wrong, no one quite knows who she is? - becomes a serial killer, identified with the underdog, the under-animal.

At the start of the film, she's shown as passionately fond of her dogs. She has ordinary hopes for their well-being. She loves them, and they her. She is mildly crazy with her horoscopes and the idea that star signs explain everything, but she is a well-educated, kindly, principled, ageing professional, who has life in her (the sexual relationship, her friendships, her affections for the children she teaches, her earlier career as an engineer), as well as loving the dogs. She protests against injustice, cruelty and corruption. She makes friends with other outsiders, who have also been mistreated.

Later, when doubly traumatised by the killing of her dogs and the indifference and corruption of the powerful institutions - police, church, politics, childcare organisations – then, another her emerges, the killer identified with the animals. This part-self deals with pain and the nastiness of others by annihilating it and them. There is a paradox in the use of violence to annihilate violence. She also exhibits the other side of primitive violence, namely, an unrealistically idealised perfectionism, in which all conflict and struggle is eliminated.

The end of the film shows us this fantasy, that by getting rid of the evil ones, she can establish in heaven, or on earth, or even in the Czech Republic, an idyllic family with tame deer waiting to be stroked. She is like a baby, swinging between extremes of raging hopes of destroying the bad breast, the bad mother, and the other extreme of a sort of a false, idealised paradise. She is no longer a wronged victim, but a deluded killer.

The paradisaical ending, with its echoes of Hollywood, is so out of kilter with the earlier part of the film that I think we are meant to take it that it is a fantasy. My own suggestion is that the Duszejko of the later stage of the film, the killer/ fantasist, is psychotic, that she eliminates her own part in the deaths, ascribing the killings to the animal self she now believes is actually embodied in the animals themselves. (I am reminded of a murderer (described by Neville Symington) who 'blanked out his crime; just the odd flashes came back to him but not what he had done himself' Person, p118.) Like this man, Duszejko may at the conscious level believe she herself has not killed anyone. She annihilates not only the hateful men, and the pain of loss and of injustice, but also the actions that she, her vengeful self, had planned and carried out.

So, one unconscious hope is to avoid guilt and responsibility. But more basically, she shifts from hopes for justice (to achieve which she has acted earlier with purpose and articulacy) to

hope for instant removal of the exploiters. These part-selves have different agendas, i.e. aims and hopes, different emotions, and different defensive organisations (that result in the varied agendas). The anxieties related to these hopes vary too. Hopes range from realistic efforts to get corruption investigated and pursued, to omnipotent wishes to eliminate all obstacles whilst (in my view) also eliminating from awareness her own murderousness. She ends with a wishful hallucination of perfect amiability, a psychotic state that buys freedom from anxiety and from conscious guilt at a price.

Whether or not this hypothesis of her psychosis is right, she certainly functions at two or more levels, with different levels of hope.

What about the audience's hopes in watching the film? For a long time, I think, we hope for her to win, we (or I) feel like killing the priest and the boyfriend of the girl. But by the end we don't know what to hope for.

## **2. 'It's the hope I can't stand. Coming fully alive is dangerous.**

Professions of hope imply a degree of uncertainty, and anxiety that what we hope for will not happen, and/or that, if it does, it won't live up to our expectations. Hope entails risking disappointment. People say, 'It is the hope that I can't stand', that is, hope raises the stakes, opening up this possibility of intense disappointment. Hoping, like love and having children, is a hostage to fortune.

As a result we may be driven, consciously or unconsciously, to cut our losses in advance, numbing ourselves. If disappointment and loneliness are too extreme for us to bear, we are liable to give up on hope and with it, love. Love and the hopes that enter into it are cut short or diluted. They may be disrupted in many ways, including by disillusionment, betrayal, exclusion or accident.

Maupassant's story, 'After', describes the less extreme reaction to trauma – a dilution of hope rather than an eradication of it.

The story: An old priest speaks to his friend the countess of his decision to go into the church. He is fond of her grandchildren, whom she, following the deaths of their parents, is bringing up. The priest had been unhappy as a child; his parents loved him, if they did, 'more with

their heads than their hearts' - they were disappointed in him for lacking the ambition to become a successful business person like themselves. When he was a teenager, he and an abandoned spaniel became close friends. One day the spaniel was run over by a coach and killed. The tragedy led the boy to decide **to** dilute his losses by going into the church: were he to have a child who died, he could not, he says, have gone on living. (As in Spoor, a dog is killed)

The confession is heartfelt. As readers, we are left uncertain – was this a life-denying decision? Or was it the sanest, most realistic one available to this youth and later, adult? Despite his inevitable regrets, was it in accordance with his best interests in life? Would the alternative choice - of marriage and becoming a father - have been for him an arrogant, fantastic hope or assumption that he could bear anything, including the potential loss of a child?

Some men traumatised and humiliated by the break-up of their marriages, kill their ex-partners, their children, and then themselves. I have a parallel worry in relation to Vladimir Putin. Rather than the humiliation of defeat and disgrace, might Putin prefer the orgasmic hope and power to be derived from setting off mutual, assured, nuclear destruction?

### **3. Hope against hope. Beyond despair, too frightened to feel fear. The flicker of hope.**

In her fine book, *Hope against Hope*, published in 1970 more than thirty years after the death of her husband (the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam), Nadezhda Mandelstam presents not only a profile of this courageous man, but more substantially a multi-dimensional understanding of the psychological state of society during Stalin's time and beyond. She shows how it's through facing hopelessness and near-despair that she has been able to keep alive a small flame of reality-based hope against the hypocritical, mindless and empty versions propounded and enforced by double-talk and double-think of those living (and writing) under Stalinism.

She gives a deep account of the 'plague that infected all our minds'. This disease annihilates the capacity to think and to have any trust in human values. In the 'New Era' mentality, all change was supposed to cease; history was deemed to have come to an end. Hopefulness had been replaced by what she calls a 'hypnoid' state, 'stupefaction', an 'indifference so overwhelming as to be almost physical'.

She had her own experience of this state-beyond-despair in 1934, while travelling under guard with her husband from Moscow to Cherdyn, the venue in the Urals for his first sentence of exile. Nadezhda (the name in Russian means ‘hope’) recalls a dreadful sense of doom that came over her on the train. She describes entering a ‘new world’ in which all values, meaning and hope had been demolished. She writes: ‘Until a short time before, I had been full of concern for all my friends and relatives, for my work, for everything. Now this concern was gone – and fear too. Instead, there was an acute sense of being doomed... Resistance was useless. Having entered a realm of non-being, I had lost the sense of death. The collapse of all familiar notions is, after all, the end of the world’.

In this deathly doom, even fear disappears. ‘If nothing else is left’, she protests, ‘one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity. Fear is a gleam of hope, the will to live, self-assertion’.

I am reminded of the ‘pictorial image’ used by psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion in a seminar in 1977. Five survivors of a shipwreck, whose other companions have already died of starvation or drowning, ‘experienced no fear - but became terrified when they thought a ship was coming near. The possibility of rescue (hope) and the even greater possibility that their presence would not be noticed on the surface of the ocean, led them to be terrified. Previously the terror had been sunk, so to speak, in the overwhelming depths of depression and despair.’

We can be too terrified to feel terror. The fear is not experienced, but numbed into stupefaction and depression. It is one might say suicidal, turning central elements of the self like desire and even hope into a deadly apathy. I think this state of mind echoes what Bion also says about the state of mind in the infant prior to thinking, when there is no containing function that gives it shape and, over time, words.

So, hope and fear are linked.

#### **4. There are many kinds of hope.**

Over time, we may be able to enlarge, broaden and deepen our hopes. We may move, grow from hopes that are passive, or omnipotent; unattainable and/or futile; from wish-fulfilling hopes and beliefs that are used to deny pain. We may partly grow out of such primitive or

pathological hopes, transforming them into hopes that allow both our self-reliance and its limits. We may replace, or perhaps override, futile and merely self-serving hopes with more realistic ones. We may be able to bear the pain of disappointment.

Hope may be omnipotent. Some, especially people besotted with another person, hope and even expect that they will by force of will change the other's mind from hatred or indifference to adoration of them. Some people cannot take no for an answer.

On the other hand, a common feature of hope is passivity, over-dependency; it functions as a defence against reality. For example, hope for eternal life may be a defence against fear of death.

Some patients hope that the analyst will do the work of changing them, magically, that it's not up to themselves.

We may be able to move to be less passive. I like the story of the man who pesters God to let him win the lottery. Eventually God gets fed up, looks down and says: 'Do me a favour. At least buy a ticket'. We need to buy tickets for what we look for. We need to put ourselves out towards realising our hopes.

In Homer's *Iliad*, the ace fighter Achilles withdraws his men from the war against Troy in protest at Agamemnon's stealing his concubine, Briseis. Part of the attempt to persuade Achilles to accept Agamemnon's reparation and apology consists in the argument that he should accept the apology, that 'Sin goes racing around the world causing havoc, but prayer comes along behind, lame and half-blind, making amends'. There is a switch here from prayer as hope for gifts from the gods in exchange for libations and sacrifices, to a recognition of the need to pray, hope for, work towards a different attitude of recognising our own spoiling and trying to make amends.

When approaching death, we may be sustained by hope for others who will outlive us, whom we've loved, for friends, grandchildren, for projects, for professions and institutes. This attitude may help us become more reconciled to death without denying our fear and our loss.

We can shift hope towards the attainable – e.g. if we're losing 10-0 in a football match, we had better be reconciled to not winning; but we can aim at keeping on fighting and showing a proper pride. We transform hope for revenge by trying to understand as well as condemn. We modify hope for recovery from dire illness into hope for a death that is dignified, hope that we will die bravely. I think we will die more peacefully if we hope or believe our life has been worthwhile, that we leave the world better for our presence in it.

Winnicott makes the point that an anti-social tendency may imply a deeper hope, that the delinquency will be recognised as a testing of the parent figures to see if they will see through this façade of trouble-making and be really concerned for them and their need to be noticed, and loved.

Hope is often a defence and defiance against reality. It can, as it does with the main character of *Spoor*, degenerate into omnipotence and murder, or into murder-suicide. But it may also be generous and in touch with internal and external reality, mourning and accepting what we can't influence or change, whilst developing more mature, more realistic aims.

November 2022