Introduction

The Value of Cultivating Longing in a Secularized World

—Daniel Boscaljon

With the blessings of technology, we have infused the twenty-first-century world with matters of the moment: we have acquired a taste for what occurs *now* and no longer have the patience to suffer our dreams to come to fruition. Marketers create a craving for consumption, convenience, and certainty: they frame digital technologies as tools whose use is restricted to temporarily satiating such demands. Eliminating the arduous temporal gap that more ephemeral goods demand, our world provides a series of superficial goods whose certain attainment encourages us to sacrifice the search for that which would provide more authentic fulfillment. Because distractions are available at the swipe of a finger or touch of a button, our scale of time has been reduced, shriveling into the infinitesimal quantities that only our technology could measure: we have learned to become irate when a message that would have taken weeks to deliver requires more than three minutes to process. Our frenzied expectations, gratified for a price that we contentedly pay, keep our attentions fixated on *now*. Problematically, our tendency to sacrifice what is uncertain (the concrete symbols of hope, the specific system of utopia) for that which is easily and often instantly available has diminished our awareness of *longing* as an important human capacity—as well as the attendant virtues of patience, fortitude and perseverance.

This collection of essays explores possible modes of resisting this trend, once again expanding the potential of the future to incorporate those distant goods capable of reminding us that humans once could long wistfully toward what remained uncertain. Building from definitions of hope and utopia and continuing through historical and contemporary appropriations

of these subjects, the collection ends by evoking potential hopes for the continuing work of theology in a secular future. Corporately, the collection demonstrates the continued relevance of religion and theology in a future that even technology cannot entirely disenchant. Spanning a variety of different historical times, cultural mediums and theoretical backgrounds, these essays disclose how we regain access to longing and rekindle our desire for a good future through embracing our frailty and humility with a courage capable of defeating the resigned stance of reductionists.

The prosthetic reach of technology, which instantly offers a set of digitally rendered possibilities, constructs a realm of artificial omnipotence in which we seem anything but frail, humble or finite. Indeed, the convenience and allure of this instantaneous digital world successfully distracts us from understanding the horror induced by a lack of future: we repress our anxieties and mediate them through cultural artifacts that testify to the trauma caused by dwelling in worlds with foreshortened futures. Building on worries sparked with the Cold War threat of immanent annihilation, these post-apocalyptic works feature characters with no hopes for futures. Ranging from *The Terminator* to *The Walking Dead*, such works emphasize a fated and known end of existence that they bleakly insist is inevitable. Perhaps the most resonant example of brute hopelessness is Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*, which introduces readers to a world that is dying, an ashen world of darkness and silence where the remaining humans can do little more than delay their own deaths. This vision of a futureless end shows that hopes in progress were illusion: it induced evisceration, not culmination. Religious beliefs are similarly negated: all attempts to wrestle meaning from the ashes of human pain proved illusory instead of prophetic. Suffering brought nothing more than the delay of death and the need to endure more suffering. McCarthy offers no reason for the appearance of this world, and the protagonist's attempts to make meaning out of the situation falter, stillborn, through a vaguely summoned insistence that he is one of the "good" guys. Offering a secularized wasteland of unrelenting ashen decay, McCarthy forces readers to face the horrors of making choices in a space where the end truly is imminent. The meaninglessness of this end works to deprive readers of understanding any reason for continuation, and even if one sympathizes with the father's desire to provide for his son, why the son would continue to live remains unanswered.

Our unthinking emphasis on *now* and forgetfulness concerning the future causes two serious problems. First, a pernicious cycle develops as we find that trivial goods adequately distract us from deeper sorrows, although successfully inducing our inattention leads us to neglect the work of *repairing* the world in ways that permit healing. This situation comes with

excellent economic advantages: misery makes money, as any one distraction occurs with diminishing returns. Unable to wait, we purchase goods we cannot afford in order to gain the moment of forgetfulness capable of displacing our worry. The distractions become increasingly ill-suited to long-term sustenance, and we remain starved for a world filled with compassion instead of suffering—this, in turn, encourages us to once again indulge in what is certain and capable of quickly attending to our desire for distraction. Corporations calculate the economic advantages of these types of goods, things that all-too-often are purchased on credit, and the cycle continues.

A second problem with losing longing emerges when we lose sight of the viability of goods that would require that work of longing, the willingness to desire temporally distant goods beyond our capacity to grasp with certainty. These goods emerge at individual and communal levels—fulfillment, authenticity, security, companionship—that require, as Freud recognized in *Civilization and its Discontents*, a willingness to defer our drive toward pleasure and the decision to sublimate our passions toward attaining more permanent and lofty ends. We forget the magic of uncertainty, the pleasure of surprise, the charm of the unexpected; we relinquish our grasp on the slow process of change by making the same kinds of demands in the same sorts of ways—or, perhaps more often, we simply resign ourselves to accepting the world as it is. Ignoring how we could work to creatively transform the world, we manage to forget that we are culpable for the world's being as it is.

Worse, perhaps, than losing access to the ends toward which our longing would move us is forgetting our capacity for longing altogether. If we become primarily attuned to what is easy and available, our sensitivity to what is distant or arduous will atrophy: our awareness of goods would become restricted to merchandise available for purchase. Longing requires that we balance a positive desire to attain a distant good with a respect for its distance. To desire to long after something curtails our movements toward it: we desire, but delay seeking gratification. We allow our longing to build, allow it to reveal to us our depths, accept the gifts of patience and fortitude that it bestows. We gain an increased awareness of our temporal trajectories, becoming more familiar with our orientation toward a particular goal. Through longing, we gain access to our ability to relate to that which is not consumed, toward that which remains distant and distinct from us, and thereby we maintain our appetite for the fascinating, the mysterious and the tremendous.

A symptom of dwelling in a world without a future, a world that we increasingly embrace, emerges when hope and longing are anchored to an inaccessible past. Although future hopes remain arduous and uncertain, our

inability to truly inhabit our memories fills those who fixate there with despair. Additionally, nostalgia causes us to neglect both the good available in potential futures and the suffering manifest in our actual presents. McCarthy's world, like that created in *The Walking Dead* series, is a world without meaning, without hope, without society, without good. Persevering through a dying world is underscored as tragic instead of foolish, but the potency of the book reflects back to us the chilling actualization of our current choices.

Acknowledging the dangers that attend the diminution of our capacity for longing, this book offers a series of essays contemplating the value of two conceptual objects that require longing: hope and utopia. The most robust treatments of hope have emerged in the Christian theological tradition, while utopia is a predominantly secular concept developed atheistically. Hope is also a nonreligious capacity to endure suffering for uncertain ends, and the secular ideal of utopia has inspired religious sects to embody the best possibly future. Both conceptions embrace a positive sense of the future that introduces *longing* within the human heart.

Hope is occasionally confused with faith, but they differ relative to their preference of objects: while objects of faith tend to largely be conceptual and anchored in the present (I believe in X (now)), objects of hope tend to be concrete and anchored in the future. The most authentic objects of faith are non-falsifiable, and assist individuals in each moment by integrating the finite and the infinite; contrariwise, objects of hope are either fulfilled or disappointed at some future point. One's hopes either come to fruition in an occurrent future or are revealed as mere illusions. Objects of an illusory hope—a losing lottery ticket, a get-well-soon card for someone who did not, invitations to a cancelled wedding—quickly become objects that represent despair, pointing out the folly of desiring a concrete indication of what is yet to come.

Like hopes, utopias produce a sense of displacement—often these are temporal, inviting us to dwell within their fictional confines. Hopes emerge through symbols that connect, concretely, the imperfect present and a preferred future: they form bridges of specific possibilities that we wish to see come to fruition. Remaining oriented toward hope prevents us from slipping into despair, which encourages us to want to transform a hope into a certainty, to will it to become a concrete and certain future—problematically, of course, this ignores the fragility of hope, its audacious tendency to inspire us to greatness that ends up, nonetheless, falling short of our desired goal. Like all symbols, however, they persist in a quiet anticipation of becoming activated by someone inspired to embrace its specific possibility.

Unlike hope, which is symbolic, utopias tend to be narrative in their structuration: they disclose an arc that bridges to the audience's present,

inviting an integration toward the potential future suggested. An odd form of narrative, however, this arc closes at its end, presenting a perfected world without need for change. This quality of utopia allows it to function as a symbol, albeit one with a narrative foundation, and induces our longing in a similar way—the future is given as something we can grasp as a certainty. Utopias are presented as though they have always already happened—all that is lacking is our participation within them. Moreover, utopias are frequently set up as objectival in their unwavering permanence: having already actualized perfection, inhabitants of a utopic community find change to be threatening. Individuals who are trapped in a world of uncertainty and disappointment are comforted by the allure of a dependable world, one where one's values are permanently rendered and threats to happiness have been abolished. The allure of a utopic narrative arc, in other words, is its beatific conclusion—the unveilation of an absolute system in which all flaws have been fixed. Providing an end to history, utopias undermine the dynamic quality of narrative, driving it into a quiescence that humans find safe and comforting. The best utopic narratives move us to an extent that we are conscripted into concretizing them in our surrounding world: we actively seek to transform a potential future into a reality, forging the narrative into a symbol.

The essays in this volume largely involve interdisciplinary engagements with narrative and theology, which is especially important as utopic visions primarily emerge in terms of narratives, offering stories depicting a place or time distant from contemporary society that attempts to persuade an audience of what must be done to eliminate what the author views as problematic. The tension inherent in the genre is that its very perfection frequently leads to a fear of change, and a conservative drive toward stasis. The unspoken implication underlying many versions of utopia is that, even if perfect, this society's perfection would be limited to its one, ideal, timeless moment. Nonetheless, the dream of seeing one's values enshrined permanently, certainly, pushes us to displace our doubts and embrace this potential future as though it were certain. Teasing apart the theological and philosophical underpinnings of utopian thinking in general, examining particular historical and literary examples of utopia, and gesturing toward the promise of atheistic utopias that discard the fundamentalism of the New Atheists, this collection introduces new possibilities for humans to dwell peacefully and justly with each other. Together, the chapters contribute toward a revitalized sense of the potentiality of utopic thinking, one that grounds its hopes in an embrace of human fragility, failure and imperfection instead of striving for an unrealistic and unrealizable mode of certainty. Put otherwise, these essays direct readers to understand how the value of

both hope and utopia most appropriately rest in creating a sense of longing or expectation capable of encouraging our best efforts for the greatest good.

The diversity of materials analyzed and theorists described in this collection testifies to the universal importance of this discussion, and also offers readers a sense of how questions of hope and utopia permeate popular culture and critical thought. The best utopic visions are ambiguous, if not ironic: they direct our attention to the possibility of an accessible good and simultaneously show the impossibility of its enactment. Often, utopic narratives warn that concretizing the depicted society into human communities requires a disciplinary system that undermines the tenets that had initially induced our longing. Most importantly, the wide variety illuminates how a set of problems transcends particular historical and cultural contexts in ways that suggest why the question of hope and utopia remains universal. Utopia shows us that the good place that we desire is the no-place of sheer potentiality—the unreal, the uncertain, the unknown. Engineering our longing, utopias offer a narrative trajectory that instructs us concerning how to acquire the absolute best possibilities.

Part I offers a set of essays that illuminate ways to connect hope and utopia, introducing many of the major tensions developed throughout the remainder of the book. Each of these essays explores the tension located in the importance of emphasizing *longing*—a desire that remains importantly unmet. Verna Ehret's opening essay provides a backdrop for the volume: she discusses the importance of secularism in the twenty-first century before using "utopia" to diagnose the error of religious and atheist fundamentalisms, and concludes by advocating the use of transcontextural narratives capable of embracing continual transformation and renewal, ultimately concluding that utopia summons us to journeys, not destinations. In the second essay, Diana Fritz Cates argues for the value of utopic longing through a Thomistic moral psychology. She warns, however, that there is a risk inherent in hope: hope can give way to hatred if we take our eyes off the distant good for which we long and focus on the obstacles that stand in our way. The third essay provides a rereading of More's *Utopia*; in it, Marybeth Baggett reminds readers that the founding text of the genre featured far more ambiguities than what is currently remembered as More summons his reader to balance an ethical hermeneutic with a sense of social responsibility. Finally, Holly White's "Desiring Utopian Subjects: Collectivity and its Discontents" describes how utopic visions provide humans with a powerful reminder of a desire for collectivity, an embrace of collective (not individual) potentialities that challenge our resigned embrace of the status quo, which dialectically emerges as an individual hope. Theoretically oriented, these essays provide the helpful task of defining hope and utopia as important topics to think today.

Moving through a wide array of historical and cultural examples, the essays in Part II concretize the tensions connecting hope and utopia. The variety of examples illuminate the commonalities that bind questions of hope and utopia together, as each concrete existence shows how an actualized utopia inevitably disappoints. Ezra Plank shows how this lesson infected the hopes of Calvin's Geneva, especially at the micro-communal level of the family. Melissa Anne-Marie Curley demonstrates this through a reading of Kenji's Japanese literature, showing how Buddhist utopias emerge most hopefully in visions of tension and potentiality—not in a fascist actuality. Benjamin Hunnicutt's discussion of Walter Kerr discloses the way that utopic visions influence everyday life, especially in terms of the split between labor and leisure. Finally, Everett Hamner's discussion of science fiction shows how the fears of an actualized "utopia" emerge in the technologically driven plots of sci-fi cinema that are increasingly postsecular in their appropriation of religion. Ultimately, these essays show the value of utopic longings—and the importance of the "good place" remaining a place toward which we strive but do not attain.

Part III concludes with sustained meditations on the question of the connection of atheism and theology as understood through a lens of hope and utopia. Building on the assessments of how utopic visions have proven fallible in the past, these chapters attempt to integrate a constructive view of how atheism might ground communities in the future—or what guidelines, at the very least, an atheistic community would need to keep in mind. Steven Schroeder opens this section with a lyrical, beautiful discussion of how atheism emerges through Christian theology, gently invoking how hope and community appear in the prison poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. J. Sage Elwell takes an opposed approach, diagnosing the drive toward a technological atheism as missing the truth of human fragility. David Hall's discussion of the importance of Benjamin in Agamben's thinking discloses the theological depths of the most secularized political communities. Finally, Daniel Boscaljon weaves these strands together by discussing ways that *Fight Club* reveals potentialities for postsecular, atheistic gatherings caused by works of determinate negation—small pools of nothingness.

The thinking behind these chapters largely originated in response to a conference on "Futures and Illusions" held at the University of Iowa in August 2012, sponsored primarily by the Department of Religious Studies, and indicate one dimension of the conversation deserving of more widespread attention. Overall, our hope in publishing this collection was to indicate the importance of living malleably, open to changes and transitions, in ways that both respond to the past and attempt to construct authentic and appropriate foundations for the future. Recognizing that utopian spaces are best

preserved as inspirations for our longing instead of spaces that can be actualized in the world allows us to retain a space for hope that does not threaten to marginalize the hopes of those whose values differ from our own.