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Read More, Read Better: Review of *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times* by Phillip E. Wegner

Gerry Canavan

English Department, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Phillip E. Wegner's *Invoking Hope* announces itself from its first pages as a book for the Trump years; all but one of the chapters, he notes, were first presented or published in 2016, and the book as a whole functions in multiple ways as a reply to the "terrible news." But the book is also a response to larger trends and practices in US literary and cultural study, both inside and outside the academy, that long predate Trump and continue on in new forms after him. The book begins not with denunciation of Trumpism per se but rather with a stirring appeal for literary theory in the face of its proclaimed obsolescence, and the case for what Wegner calls "creative reading" against the flattening of all matters of interpretation to a moralizing ethical criticism that reduces all works, all artists, and all ideas to being either *good* or *bad*.

This sort of kneejerk moralism, Wegner says, "should be understood as a symptom of the emerging post-Truth Trump era ... a place wherein self-identified authorities of all kinds, proclaiming themselves the defenders of noble past traditions, can assert, without any real demonstration or argument, their

judgments of who and what are good and evil and where grand global ambitions give way to narrowly parochial, disciplinary, professional, and even nationalist agendas.” It is a symptom of the impoverishment of our minds and our imaginations.

In this way *Invoking Hope* is, self-consciously, slightly out of step with the prevailing winds of the contemporary literary academy, which has, to large extent, accepted the attitude of retreat and withdrawal that Wegner associates with moralizing ethical criticism (in no small part, as Wegner among many others has noted, due to the injunction to contract and shrink being imposed by austerity-crazed, anti-humanities university administrations). Carolyn Lesjak summarizes the field of play well when she writes that “the overarching message seems to be: scale back, pare down, small aims met are better than grand ones unrealized”—a mood of inevitable defeat that quite naturally leads critics to swap the “hermeneutics of suspicion” for “a suspicion of hermeneutics.”

During the so-called “theory wars” of the 1980s-1990s, theory itself was often presented as if it were reducing all art and all criticism to vulgarized politics, in the name of indoctrination—but Wegner argues instead that theory has always actually been a call to “read more widely and expansively ... expose our students to as many and diverse cultural practices as possible” in the name of activating our deepest felt emotions and our grandest creative ambitions. Like any good utopian, Wegner puts himself strongly on the side of inflation rather than deflation; indeed, in his reading, theory and utopia become revealed as versions of one another, as “both aim to reeducate collective desire for other ways of being and doing in the world.”

This becomes only more important as Wegner begins to explore the reading practice he calls, following Pierre Bayard, *non-reading*. This is not the books one has never read (those Wegner calls the *not-read*) but rather the books one has heard of but not yet encountered, or skimmed, or read but since forgotten. Centering non-reading alongside or even above reading returns us to the generative work of creative reading in a new way: “If all one ever does is non-read ... then any communication we offer of a book, verbal, written, or otherwise, is a local and deeply contingent act of creatively writing that book; this is the case even if such a writing takes place in our head and only for the audience of our future selves.” Here again we see the partial, promiscuous, and highly personalized practice of literary study as Wegner constitutes it, as performed in the classroom, on one’s own, in *Invoking Hope*, on Twitter or Tumblr, or even in this review—the point is to unsettle both the fantasy of expertise and the fantasy of final answers that has deformed contemporary criticism in order to reactivate the uncertainty that makes reading and non-reading such an intoxicating and potentially transformative experience both for the individual and for the various collectivities in which they are in dialogue.

Utopia, Wegner suggests, is to be found not in Utopia but in *Utopia*—in “More’s book itself, and most particularly in the figure of a dialogue it offers us.” This dialogue is, at its core, a matter of the pedagogical process Wegner calls the “education of desire,” the ultimate goal of the utopian form in all its modalities, from the utopian travelogue to literary theory to the highest art to the basest science fiction. Such works educate our desire by teaching us that the object we desire that we feel we have lost is in fact something we have never possessed but might devote ourselves to bringing about (even as they also teach us that “there will be no final realization of utopia, no end of history, no perfection to be realized, but rather a continuous reformulation of the object cause of desire pulling us forward.”)

What I worry may be lost in my summary of Wegner's genuinely bracing celebration of the work of the mind—his refusal, in some sense, to give up on the dream of the high-water period of theory in the 1980s and 1990s in favor of the diminished, slighter, and shallower ambitions of much contemporary criticism—is just how wide-ranging and, yes, promiscuous it actually is. Following his former teacher Fredric Jameson's twinned injunctions to “always historicize” and “always totalize,” the tendrils of Wegner's revitalization of theory can take root in any seemingly any text. This is where the fun comes in: the book doesn't just want to polemicize, it wants to play. *Invoking Hope* thus brings Bloch, Brecht, and Jameson together with *Fight Club*, *Groundhog Day*, and *The Revenge of the Sith*; far from being an elitist call for a return to arcane obscurantism or dusty monasteries, it instead calls on theorists and critics to craft a sense of their work that can be both intellectualist and populist all at once. (Yes, there are still Greimas squares, but they are clearly and succinctly explained.)

Especially in its second part, “Reading Utopia,” Wegner's project becomes universalist and ecumenical in the best sense, seeking out attempts to realize utopia (however provisionally) by way of the education of desire, as seen in the life of W.E.B. Du Bois, the “comedy of remarriage” of *Fifty First Dates*, the science fiction of Kim Stanley Robinson, and both the novel and film versions of *Cloud Atlas*, among other sites of investigation. I suspect many readers of the *Ancillary Review of Books* may be drawn to these chapters over the headier, high-philosophical, and in-the-weeds “Reading Theory” sections—but both parts taken together build a lovely critical system that calls on us to rethink the ease with which we've allowed ourselves to move on from both theory and utopia. That theory “failed”—that utopia has *always* failed—is not all that surprising; as Wegner writes, the lesson of utopia is that “utopia is never no-where, an imagined perfected future, but in fact always already potentially exists in the concrete now-here, in our collective fidelity to the project of making a world we so desire rather than a world we fear.”

That project of excavation and recovery, of seeing beneath and beyond the despair of the present, remains just as urgent as we turn the page on one particular moment of “dark times” (the Trump era) into another (COVID) and another (ecological omnicrisis) and another (don't get me started). “Ours is a time of proliferating pessimism,” writes Wegner. “There has been a surge of major intellectual schools ... whose point of departure is a deep and rigorous questioning of the possibility of positive change.” Wegner doesn't doubt the pessimists have a point—but, following Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, calls on us anyway to be faithful to a vision of the future that doesn't come pre-ruined. “Hope is ineradicable and, as long as there are subjects committed to truth, the future remains open.” Of course I'd prefer a bit of a stronger promise of our eventual victory than that—but, in these dark times, I suppose we should be glad to find hope wherever we can get.

Gerry Canavan (he/him) is an associate professor of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature in the Department of English at Marquette University, and the author of *Octavia E. Butler* (University of Illinois Press, 2016). He is the co-editor of *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, and *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, and also serves as an editor at two academic journals focused on science fiction studies: *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Film and Television*.

Transparency Statement

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