
Sic Est in Republica: *Utopian Ideology and the Misreading of Thomas More*

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In a book that ought to be better known, *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy*, Thomas Molnar comments on the community of all goods among the inhabitants of the imaginary island in St. Thomas More's *Utopia*:

Each family brings to this central market the products of its work, and each household head takes home whatever his family needs for sustenance. He neither pays nor barterers, yet he is refused nothing, since nobody in Utopia asks for more than he needs. And, More adds with a disarming, but significantly dangerous naïveté, "Why, indeed, would a person, who knows that he will never lack anything, seek to possess more than what is necessary?"¹

Molnar's otherwise acute observation is flawed in one crucial detail: it is not Thomas More who speaks with "significantly dangerous naïveté," but rather Raphael Hythlodæus, who is a character in More's *libellus uere aureus*—his "truly golden little book"—entitled *Utopia*. Molnar has made a familiar error in mistaking a work of literature for a treatise or a tract. Although such a mistake may seem relatively harmless—a concern only of literature professors—utopian ideology, with its associated "terror" and "human cost," may be seen from one perspective as a result of bad literary criti-

Bad literary criticism can have dangerous consequences.

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¹ *Utopia: The Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 141.

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cism. In fact, the book *Utopia* provides the earliest antidote to utopian ideology, which it disparages as an analogue to generic confusion and a fault of decorum, and which it subtly ridicules by the ironic deployment of stylistic variation. St. Thomas More's *Utopia* is perhaps the first *dystopia* in the Western literary tradition.²

To be sure, the most common interpretations of the work over the past four centuries would seem to belie this assertion. In *An Apology for Poetry* Sir Philip Sidney remarks that Sir Thomas More's "way of patterning a Commonwealth was most absolute, though hee perchance hath not so absolutely performed it,"³ with the clear implication that More had set out to describe a perfect commonwealth in the proper manner but had failed in the execution. The Utopian custom of permitting a prospective bride and groom to view one another naked before making a final decision to marry has, not surprisingly, attracted a certain amount of attention. The grave denizens of Sir Francis Bacon's earnestly conceived *New Atlantis* are said to dislike this custom, "for they think it a scorn to give refusal after so familiar knowledge." They solemnly provide, however, what they regard as a superior alternative: "*Adam and Eve's pools*, where it is permitted to one of the friends of the man, and another of the friends of the woman, to see them severally bathe naked."⁴ Application

² This article is based on a paper that was first presented at two ISI Honors Conferences a number of years ago in Washington, D.C., and Oxford, more recently at the Thomas More Academy in Raleigh, North Carolina. Since then, I have learned that some of its broader ideas were anticipated by Jesús Fueyo Alvarez, "Tomás Moro y el utopismo político," *La Mentalidad Moderna* (Madrid: Instituto de estudios políticos, 1967), 260-324. After a lengthy survey of a number of European (mostly German) commentators, Jesús Fueyo concludes (309), "More's *Utopia*, far from being the 'ideal state' of the 'saint of humanism', is that very utopia realized or the counter-proof of the unreality of humanism as a political idea. . . . *Utopia* is the critique according to 'political reason' of all utopias, a book absolutely and thematically *anti-utopian*" ("*La utopía de Moro, lejos de ser el 'Estado ideal' del 'santo del humanismo', es esa misma utopía realizada o la contraprueba de la irrealidad del humanismo como idea política. . . . La Utopía es la crítica según la 'razón política' de todas la utopías, libro absoluta y temáticamente anti-utópica*").

³ *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), I, 166.

⁴ *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, ed. Hugh G. Dick (New York: Modern Library, 1955), 571-72.

of this prenuptial practice of New Atlantis might well reveal more about one's friends than about a prospective spouse. In *Brief Lives* John Aubrey not only takes the Utopian custom literally; he gives it a biographical basis:

Sir William Roper . . . came one morning, pretty early, to my lord, with a proposal to marry one of his daughters. My lord's daughters were then both together a bed in a truckle bed in their father's chamber asleep. He carries Sir William into the chamber and takes the sheet by the corner and suddenly whips it off. They lay on their backs, and their smocks up as high as their armpits. This awakened them, and immediately they turned on their bellies. Quoth Roper, 'I have seen both sides', and so gave a pat on the buttock (to the one) he made choice of, saying, 'Thou art mine'. Here was all the trouble of the wooing.

This story turns out to be, literally, an old wives' tale, since Aubrey "had [it] from my honoured friend old Mrs. Tyndale."⁵

During the past two centuries, attempts to treat the *Utopia* as a blueprint for an ideal communist society have generally been less amusing, but hardly less absurd. In the late nineteenth century, Karl Kautsky, sometime secretary to Friedrich Engels and editor of the last, posthumous volume of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, expounded *Utopia* as a precursor of modern socialism in *Thomas More and His Utopia* (1888; trans. 1927) in a fashion that takes one's breath away with its insouciant expropriation of More as a witness for a perspective that he would have loathed. More "takes his stand," Kautsky maintains, "on the material conditions" and is thus "a whole epoch in advance of his time":

. . . at a time when the capitalist mode of production was in its infancy, he mastered its essential features so thoroughly that the alternative mode of production which he elaborated and contrasted with it as a remedy for its evils, contained several of the most important ingredients of Modern Socialism. The drift of his speculations, of course, escaped his contemporaries, and can only be properly appreciated by us to-day.⁶

Attempts to treat the Utopia as blueprint for ideal communist society have been absurd.

⁵ *Brief Lives*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1982), 214.

⁶ In Sir Thomas More, *Utopia: A New Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 141. Cf. Jesús Fueyo, *La mentalidad moderna*, 275: "Kautsky, like the greater part of the commentators, has taken as settled or at least has not posed the question

Kautsky's breezy assumption of the superior wisdom of the present can only seem risible now that his "present" has retreated more than a century into the past, and the glowing promises of communism have collapsed so utterly. Nevertheless, More's *Utopia* is still not infrequently read as a dramatized plea for the establishment of just such a commonwealth as its second book describes. The jacket blurb on a recent reprint by Transaction Press assures the reader that "Thomas More's book *Utopia* is his vision of a perfect society,"⁷ and Part II of the introduction to the standard Yale University Press edition, written by Edward Surtz, S.J., gives a more complex version of the same view. "The *Utopia* as a whole," Fr. Surtz says, "is centered upon 'the best order of society'"; and he leaves no doubt about what that order is: "The distorted conception of private property which is the root of injustice, greed, and pride in Europe must yield to the communism which flowers in a universal justice, prosperity, and brotherhood in Utopia." The two-book form of the work mirrors the simplicity of the conception: "The intricate problem and all the possible solutions are set forth in Book I. The most important and actually the only genuine solution is detailed and proved in Book II."⁸ This section of the introduction to the Yale edition is entitled "*Utopia* as a Work of Literary Art," but it is precisely a sense of literature and art that is missing: Fr. Surtz insists "that More's theme almost cries aloud for the least complicated of structural forms: a problem and its solution."⁹ This is the structure of dialectic, however, not of dramatic fiction.

whether the political order that the fantastic traveler of *Utopia*, Hythlodæus, describes is real and effectively the political ideal of More, the author of the work" ("Kautsky, como la mayor parte de los comentaristas, han dado por resuelta o no se han planteado siquiera la cuestión de si el orden político que describe el fantástico viajero de *Utopía*, Hythlodeo, es real y efectivamente el ideal político de Moro, el autor de la obra").

⁷ Thomas More, *Utopia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1997), back cover.

⁸ *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 4, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J., and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), cxxv, cxxvi. The argument in Fr. Surtz's portion of the introduction is essentially a summary of the argument he presents in *The Praise of Pleasure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁹ *Ibid.*, cxxvi.

Further, Thomas Molnar is not the only conservative who excoriates More on the same basis for which Surtz and Kautsky praise him. An especially formidable challenge is presented by Eric Voegelin, surely one of the most influential philosophers among conservative thinkers over the past half century. His attitude toward More is ambivalent, and, unlike Molnar and most other commentators who assume that *Utopia* is an apology for socialism, Voegelin is not unaware that More is a writer of literature. In *The History of Political Ideas*, the philosopher observes that interpretation of *Utopia* is complicated “because More gave free reign to his sense of humor and taste for satire,” but for Voegelin this penchant seems a matter for opprobrium.¹⁰ His disapproval of More looks suspiciously like Plato’s philosophical rejection of poetry as such because it tells lies about the gods, stimulates the passions, and obscures the facts of reality with its fictional world.

Voegelin maintains, “At the center of [*Utopia*’s] meaning lies the autobiographical part of the dialogue.” He is aware that More the man was considering permanent service in the court of Henry VIII, doubtless with no little anxiety, when he wrote his famous work. “The argument that must have been going on in the soul of More at the time is distributed in the dialogue between More and Raphael” (113). What Voegelin fails to see, however, is that an autobiographical *origin* of a work of literature does not make the work as such autobiography: the “More” who speaks within the dialogue *Utopia* is as much a fiction as the “Raphael” with whom he debates.

Voegelin is less interested in the work of literature than in its reduction “to the importance it actually has in the history of political ideas” (111). When these ideas are extracted from their fictional context, they amount to nothing save a false political “ideal” antithetical to the author’s religion: “In spite of the far-reaching decomposition of his Christianity, More is still too much of a Christian to be an intramundane eschatologist like the later Progressivists, Positivists, and Marxists. He indulges in an ‘ideal’; but at least he knows that the ideal

Autobiographical origin of a literary work does not make the work an autobiography.

¹⁰ *The History of Political Ideas*, vol. 4: *Renaissance and Reformation*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 22, ed. David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 130. Subsequent references to this volume will be given parenthetically in the text.

is nowhere. . . .” Nevertheless, “With More’s *Utopia* we are in the transition from Christian to revolutionary intramundane eschatology” (118). Apparently, Voegelin assumes that merely to have represented utopian ideas in a fiction is a source of negative social consequences: “More has the dubious historical merit of having expressed for the first time the full *pleonexia* of secular reason, justice, and morality. His expression of the ideal is not the cause of what followed afterward, but it is the first spiritual symptom of the great spiritual disease that was to grip Western civilization in the following centuries” (129).

Voegelin’s treatment of More in “Ersatz Religion,” where he is classified with Hobbes and Hegel as modern Gnostics, is still more disparaging. “In his *Utopia*,” Voegelin maintains, “More traces the image of man and of society that he considers perfect.” Although he knows that this “perfect state” cannot be attained because of man’s eradicable pride, Voegelin continues, “This raises the question of the peculiar psychopathological condition in which a man like More must have found himself when he drew up the model of the perfect society in history, in full consciousness that it could never be realized because of original sin.”¹¹

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The assumption that the fictitious state described in the second book of *Utopia* represents “the model of the perfect society” for Thomas More is an egregious negative exemplum of inadequate literary interpretation. Although Voegelin acknowledges More’s literary intentions at one point, he nonetheless treats the work as a political treatise. As Gerard Wegemer points out, “More considered the study of good literature to be an important part of the statesman’s education in prudence—i.e., in that ability to see and make judgments in light of what actually exists without the distortions that often arise from one’s own desires or expectations.”¹²

¹¹ *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968), 101. See also Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 121.

¹² *Thomas More on Statesmanship* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 77. Wegemer’s discussion of *Utopia* in this book is among the best that I have seen. Once again, however, Jesús Fueyo, *La Mentalidad Moderna*, 321, has already observed that the book’s “response” to Raphael’s “dialectical dislocation” “proceeds slyly in the exposition itself” and points out

As Wegemer goes on to argue, it is the deployment of irony, dialectic, and dramatic dialogue that provide literary works the capacity to grasp the reality of human experience in all its complexity and subtlety that appeals to More. No one who recognizes and responds to the ironic layering of *Utopia* would make the error of seeing Thomas More as any kind of “Gnostic.” Wegemer provides a compelling argument that, while Raphael Hythlodæus and the fictional commonwealth certainly do display Gnostic characteristics, this outlook is severely rebuked by both the character “More” and the author, Sir Thomas More.¹³

Read as a work of literature, the text of *Utopia* furnishes the keys to its own interpretation in features of its substance and style. Perhaps the most revealing passage comes a bit over halfway through the first book. After Raphael has dismissed with disdain Peter Giles’s suggestion that a man of Raphael’s talents should attach himself to some king in order to acquire wealth and influence both for himself and for his friends and relatives, he confronts the more formidable challenge that he make his talent and effort available for the benefit of the public. His answer takes the form of a lengthy anecdote about a visit to the court of Cardinal Morton, the mentor of Thomas More’s own boyhood. Readers, distracted by the humor of the incidents and the satire on social conditions in Tudor England, often fail to notice that Raphael’s answer is not very persuasive. He has maintained that he has no skill in public affairs, and that great men are too engrossed by greed and ambition to pay attention to wise counsel anyway; but, in fact, Raphael’s observations are shrewd and, more significant, the Cardinal is quite receptive. It is no wonder that More persists in urging a life of public service upon this world traveler. At this point Raphael invents a speculative scene at the court of the King of France (in contrast to the “true” event in England) and launches into what Clarence Miller describes as a 464-word periodic sentence, followed almost immediately by a sentence of 926 words. These sentences, Miller observes, are hardly nor-

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how More’s irony undermines his character’s argument: “Lo que ocurre es que la respuesta crítica va como solapada en la misma exposición.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

mal Latin style.¹⁴ They are, to the contrary, a tortuous reflection of Hythlodæus's own passionate exasperation not only with the corruption, but also with the complexity of European politics and society.

Now I have not counted all the words in either sentence, and anyone who examines the Latin text will notice a dozen or so periods, in the sense of punctuation marks, scattered through what Miller is calling sentences. His point stands, however, because both of these agglomerations of words comprise a collection of syntactically connected clauses and phrases in which the main clause is completed only at the end. Such is a "period" in the terms of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Almost all translators have simplified Raphael's syntax and, indeed, made the entire text of *Utopia* and both of its principal speakers sound very much the same. This procedure obscures the dramatic force of the dialogue as well as a vital facet of Raphael Hythlodæus as a character—that he is both "Raphael," the healing or medicine of God, and "Hythlodæus," trifler, babler, speaker of nonsense or drivel (Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of speaking ὑθλοζ toward the end of the first book of the *Republic* [336D]). The trick is to discern which rôle he is playing at any given moment in the dialogue. The long sentences amount to emotional expostulations. *Age finge me apud regem esse Gallorum, atque in eius considerare consilio. . .*¹⁵ "Come on, imagine me at the court of the French king, sitting in his council, while in a top secret session with the king himself presiding, encircled by the most prudent men, it is very assiduously being considered by what arts and devices he may retain Milan and recover Naples, which has slipped out of his grasp. . ." What follows is a long series of clauses beginning *dum* ("While") and *atque* ("and besides" or "and also") until Hythlodæus begins his imaginary intervention—*Hic, inquam, in tanto rerum molimine* (88: "Here,

¹⁴ Clarence H. Miller, ed. and trans., Thomas More, *Utopia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), xi-xix. See also Miller, "Style and Meaning in *Utopia*: Hythlodæus's Sentences and Diction," *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Hafniensis*, Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, ed. Rhoda Schnur et al., Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 120 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 675-83.

¹⁵ *Utopia*, ed. Surtz and Hexter, 86. The text of *Utopia* is quoted throughout from this edition. I have provided the translations except where otherwise indicated.

I say, in such a busy enterprise”)—and advises the French to follow the example of the Achorians, who decided that peace was more profitable and less stressful than conquest. This part of the lengthy periodic sentence consists of a series of clauses beginning *tum* (“then”), *cum* (“since”), and *ita* (“and so”). All of this concludes with Raphael’s rhetorical question, which amounts to a QED: *hanc orationem quibus auribus mi More, putas excipiendam?* (90: “This speech, my dear More, with what ears do you suppose it would be received?”). More’s answer requires just four words: *Profecto non ualde pronis* (90: “assuredly not very eager [ears]”).

This laconic response, which Raphael greets with his second long, complex sentence, is itself a stylistic comment on Raphael’s discourse; and the character, “Thomas More,” spells out the implicit critique in his rejoinder to Raphael’s hypothetical example of the Macarians as a model of state financing. “If I were to pour out these ideas and others like them upon men fiercely committed to the other side,” Raphael asks, “how deaf would they be to my story?” (96: *Haec ergo atque huiusmodi si ingererem apud homines in contrariam partem vehementer inclinatos, quam surdis essem narraturus fabulam?*). “Very deaf, undoubtedly,” More replies, “and no wonder.” This time he does not give Raphael the opportunity to run off with the conversation and reproves the introduction of a “peculiar” or “extravagant” (*insolens*) argument among men on whom he knows already it will have no influence. “Among intimate friends,” More says, “in familiar conversation, this scholastic philosophy is not disagreeable. Otherwise, in the councils of rulers, where great affairs are being handled with great authority, there is no place for these things”¹⁶ When Raphael triumphantly seizes upon this remark as a concession—“this is just what I was telling you, that there is no place among rulers for philosophy” (98: *Hoc est, inquit ille, quod dicebam non esse apud principes locum philosophiae*)—More brings in the analogy of a theatrical presentation.

Now it is important to bear in mind that the “Thomas More” who argues with Raphael Hythlodæus is as much a

¹⁶ *Complete Works* IV, 98: “Apud amiculos in familiari colloquio no insuauis est haec philosophia scholastica. Caeterum in consiliis principum, ubi res magnae magna autoritate aguntur, non est his rebus locus.”

fictional character in *Utopia* as Raphael himself, even though “More” shares a good deal of the biography as well as the name of the author of *Utopia*. In this respect, “Thomas More” serves the same narrative and dramatic function as “Geoffrey Chaucer” in the *Canterbury Tales*, and the two characters are similar in personality, since each is a natural straight man who is too inclined to take things at face value. The author, Thomas More, would naturally expect his humanist readers to recognize the comic possibilities of his own name, as Erasmus had done in dedicating his *Praise of Folly* (*Encomium Moriae*) to his English friend. The Latinized form of “More,” *Morus*, derives from the Greek, μωρός (“dull,” “heavy,” “foolish”). For the character “More,” the author of *Utopia* accepts a likeness between the name and the man that his friend Erasmus denies: “What first put me in mind of this [comic account of Folly] was your family name, “More,” which is as close to the word *Moriae* as you are yourself distant from the thing; or rather you are furthest from it in the judgment of everyone.”¹⁷

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From this perspective More’s theatrical analogy reveals its riches; there is, he maintains, an alternative to the scholastic or academic philosophy that supposes anything to be convenient in any place:

There is another more civil philosophy, which knows its own rôle, and adopting itself to it, keeps up its own part fitly and with decorum in the play that is in hand. This is the one you ought to put in practice. Otherwise, while some comedy of Plautus is being staged, with banter among the household slaves, if you appear on the stage in the garb of a philosopher and you run through the place in the *Octavia* where Seneca takes issue with Nero, would it not have been better to have played a silent part rather than turning the play into a tragedy by declaiming something so out of place? For you would have corrupted and distorted the actual play, while you mix in these different bits, even if those things you offer had been better. Whatever play is in hand, do it the best you can, and don’t upset everything, because something else comes to mind that may be finer.¹⁸

¹⁷ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Lof der Zotheid / Laus Stultitiae*, ed. & trans. J. M. Vermeer-Pardoën (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1992), 16: “Primum admonuit me Mori cognomen tibi gentile, quod tam ad *Moriae* accredit, quam es ipse a re alienus; es autem vel omnium suffragiis alienissimus.”

¹⁸ *Complete Works* IV, 98: “non huic scholasticae, quae quiduis putet ubiuis

More is accusing Hythlodæus of the literary fault of in-decorum. Remember that Shakespeare is still nearly a century away, and “tragicomedy” means not a successful blend of tragedy and comedy as in *The Tempest* or *The Winter’s Tale*, but an awkward *mélange* of tragic and comic features. The first English translation of *Utopia* by Ralph Robinson (1551) renders *tragicomoediam* as “an impertinent tragic-comedy,” while Fr. Surtz makes it “a hodgepodge of tragedy and comedy” and Miller has More admonish Hythlodæus not to “jumble together tragedy and comedy.”¹⁹ More is using what was regarded as a literary fault to censure a political impropriety. Humanist literary theory required the integrity of the various genres because each was thought to correspond to a different aspect of reality. The significance of the analogy is thus that Hythlodæus has neglected to take into account the constraints of reality in assuming a political stance; his understandable disgust with the corruption and injustice of sixteenth-century political institutions leads him to ignore the rôle of human nature and history in the emergence of both the institutions and their myriad imperfections. The history of the world is in some respects like a play in progress when each of us appears on the scene: we can act the part we have been assigned well or ill, but we cannot change the plot, the other characters, or the genre. Hythlodæus begins to resemble Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who wants to play all the parts and alter the design of the play to suit his own fancies. It is for this reason that More tells him that it is better to perform effectively the actual drama than to attempt a rewrite or turn to

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conuenire, sed est alia philosophia ciuilior, quae suam nouit scenam, eique sese accommodans, in ea fibula quae in manibus est, suas partes concinne & cum decore tutatur. Hac utendum est tibi. Alioquin dum agitur quaeipiam Plauti comedia, nugantibus inter se uernulis, si tu in proscenium prodeas habitu philosophico, & recenseas ex Octauia locum in quo Seneca disputat cum Nerone, none praesterit egisse mutam personam, quam aliena recitando talem fecisse tragicocomoediam? Corrueris enim, peruerterisque praesentem fabulam, dum diuersa permisces, etiam si ea quae tu affers meliora fuerint. Quaecunq; fabula in manu est, eam age quam potes optime, neque ideo totam perturbes, quod tibi in mentem uenit alterius, quae sit lepidior.”

¹⁹ *Ideal Commonwealths*, ed. Henry Morley (rpt., New York: Hippocrene Books, 1988), 28; *Complete Works* IV, 99; *Utopia*, 43. In *An Apology for Poetry*, 199, Sidney condemns “mungrell Tragy-comedie.”

an altogether different text—even a better one—while the actors are on stage.

The analogy becomes explicit in what follows: *Sic est in Republica sic in consultationibus principum*, More continues:

Thus it is in the commonwealth, thus in the counsels of rulers. If twisted opinions cannot be pulled up by the roots, and you are unable to cure commonly accepted vices according to your heartfelt judgment, yet for all that you ought not to abandon the commonwealth and jump ship in a storm because you cannot rein in the winds. You should not, however, insist on peculiar and extravagant talk, which you know will have no weight among those who hold different views; but you ought to strive by an indirect approach and exert yourself so that you may, to the utmost of your power, manage everything aptly; and so what you cannot turn to good, you at least may make as little bad as possible. For it cannot be that all things will become well, unless all men were good, which I don't anticipate for quite a few years.²⁰

The comedy in which we have all been asked to participate, More suggests, has few noble characters. Until tragic dignity is more widespread, it will be necessary for reformers to make do with the Plautine counselors whom Hythlodæus deprecates. In fact, it is the man who gives the speech from Seneca among the tricky slaves cracking jokes who is most ridiculous of all. The paradox of Raphael Hythlodæus' name is highlighted in this exchange: in attempting to play the healing angel—a divine messenger who transcends the ordinary human limitations—the archangel Raphael becomes a speaker of nonsense, of ὑθλοζ.

The necessary irony is only possible in a work of literature—a dramatic representation. My colleague M. Thomas Hester tells how one of his students observed that the old Yale Press paperback edition of the Surtz translation of *Uto-*

²⁰ *Complete Works*, IV, 98-100: "Sic est in Republica sic in consultationibus principum. Si radicitus euelli non possint opiniones prauae, nec receptis usu uitij mederi queas, ex animi tui sententia, non ideo tamen deserenda Republica est, & in tempestate nauis destituenda est, quoniam uentos inhibere non possis. at neque insuetus & insolens sermo inculcandus, quem scias apud diuersa persuasos pondus non habiturum, sed obliquo ductu conandum est, atque adnitendum tibi, uti pro tua uirili omnia tractes commode, & quod in bonum nequis uertere, efficias saltem, ut sit quam minime malum. Nam ut omnia bene sint, fieri non potest, nisi omnes boni sint, quod ad aliquot abhinc annos adhuc non expecto."

pia designates it “HISTORY/PHILOSOPHY” on the back cover. (A study of book jacket blurbs could be a compelling bit of social history.) This designation seemed incompatible with the professor’s exposition of the book’s literary conventions. Undaunted, my colleague wittily explained that the Press was merely following Sir Philip Sidney’s distinction between history and philosophy, on the one hand, and “poetry” on the other. “The generic locus of *Utopia* [Hester explained] is that seam (or seem/sem) between Philosophy and History, that space (or no-place) traced by the bold virgule on the book cover.”²¹ In other words, a work of literature—a work like *Utopia*—cannot be pinned down as an account of facts or an exposition of ideas. Its “facts” are fictions, and its ideas are uttered by fictional speakers. It is, therefore, a perilous business to identify the moral or message of a literary work with the disquisition of any individual character. “Thomas More” urges Raphael to work by means of an “indirect approach” (*obliquo ductu*), but it is that other Thomas More, the author of *Utopia*, who is most assiduous in the deployment of obliquity. When Raphael immediately rejects the character More’s recommendation of an “indirect approach” (102: *obliquus ille ductus tuus*) he becomes a literary character objecting to the character—that is, the genre—of the work in which he exists. *Utopia* is a dialogue, but Hythlodæus insists, above all, on direct statement, on spelling out every social arrangement in minute detail according to a rationalistic master plan, with no compromise or accommodation. Everything he says must, therefore, be interpreted in the light of its incompatibility with the very text in which he says it.

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From this perspective, Raphael’s lengthy description of the island of Utopia and his exposition of its communist institutions in Book II is qualified by pervasive irony. Book I concludes, you will remember, with a dispute between “More” and Hythlodæus over the abolition of private property. “As long as it remains,” Hythlodæus argues, “the worry and even

²¹ “Re-Signing the Text of the Self: Donne’s ‘As Due by Many Titles,’” in *Bright Shootes of Everlastingness: The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 59.

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the inevitable burden of poverty and misfortune will remain among by far the greatest—and by far the best—portion of mankind” (104: *Sed manente illa, mansuram semper apud multo maximam, multoque optimam hominum partem, egestatis & erumnarum anxiam atque ineuitabilem sarcinam*). More counters with the commonsense argument that men require the fear of need and the incentive of prosperity as motivation to work and produce wealth: “In what manner can there be an abundance of goods,” he asks, “with each man stealing away from labor? As is only natural when the reason of profit does not prod him, and reliance on the industry of others renders him slothful?” (106: *Nam quo pacto suppetat copia rerum, unoquoque ab labore subducente se? utpote quem neque sui quaestus urget ratio, & alienae industriae fiducia reddit segnem*). To some extent, the history of the twentieth century may be regarded as a vindication of this skepticism about human nature. Nevertheless, at this moment in the dialogue Raphael Hythlodæus plays his trump card; he appeals to the facts—nowadays he would undoubtedly be armed with statistical reports in addition to his eye-witness account. I have actually seen a society with efficiently functioning communist political and economic institutions. The perfect commonwealth is Utopia.

That is to say, the perfect commonwealth is *no place, nowhere*. Lurking in the title of the work is the paradox that undermines the entire discourse of Book II. Yes, there is the possibility of a perfectly ordered society that will eliminate poverty, vice, and strife; and, yes, it does take a communist form. It can only exist, however, in a nonexistent place—in other words, in a place not encumbered with living, breathing human beings. Clarence Miller points out that the style of Hythlodæus’ speech changes drastically in the second book, which is dominated by short sentences of transparently simple syntax and contrasts starkly with the passages that we have been considering. What is more, this simple style matches and, surprisingly, masks the simplistic account that he provides of Utopian polity. What if someone dyes his plain wool clothing? What if a judge fails to protect a defendant through malice or ineptitude? How are these judges chosen anyway? How can it be determined whether someone really believes in God or is only shamming? Or if someone is really lusting for office but

pretends modesty?

Hythloday does not answer these questions. He considers them simply irrelevant because the difficulties they embody spring from pride, which has no place in Utopia. The institutions of the Utopian society clearly cannot work unless pride is eliminated. And how is pride eliminated? By the institutions, especially the abolition of private property. The institutions cannot be introduced unless they have already been introduced. But the ease and lucidity of Hythloday's sentences tend to mask such difficulties. The thing is simply there. No need to ask how it got there or can manage to stay there.²²

Considered in this light, all the perfectly rational practices of "the best state of a commonwealth" appear less persuasive. Since the Utopians attempt to enforce strict monogamy and punish adultery with great severity, it seems sensible to permit both parties to see their prospective spouses naked in advance of the marriage in order to preempt any potential disappointment on the wedding night or discontent in the future. Now if the practice that Francis Bacon includes in the *New Atlantis* of permitting a friend to view a spousal candidate naked in "Adam and Eve's pools" is hardly a better solution, still, the objection Bacon raises to the Utopian procedure is not without force: "they think it scorn to give a refusal after so familiar knowledge." Indeed, the Utopians' own rationale for their custom is, upon reflection, rather chilling:

While we scornfully rejected this custom as absurd, they, on the contrary, were amazed at the striking foolishness of all other nations, who in shopping for a colt, where it is a matter of a little cash, are so cautious that, although it is nearly bare, they refuse to clench the deal unless the saddle is removed and all the trappings pulled off, lest under these coverings an abscess be lurking. But in choosing a wife, an action that will result either in pleasure or in disgust for a lifetime, they proceed so negligently, as to evaluate the whole woman—with the rest of her body covered with clothing—by hardly more than a single handbreadth (for nothing beyond the face is visible) and join themselves to her not without great danger of getting along badly if something later proves offensive.²³

²² *Utopia*, xv.

²³ *Complete Works*, IV, 188: "Hunc morem quum uelut ineptum ridentes improbaremus, illi contra caeterarum omnium gentium insignem demirari stultitiam, qui quum in equuleo comparando, ubi de paucis agitur nummis, tam cauti sint, ut quamuis fere nudum nisi detracta sella tamen, omnibusque reuulsis ephippijs recusent emere, ne sub illis operculis hulus aliquod

More's literary imagination refrains from reducing human relationships to abstract categories.

Is choosing a wife like buying a colt (or a car)? Although the Utopians (and Hythlodæus) may think of it as an abstract analogy, for a literary imagination the comparison carries unsavory metaphoric overtones. Perhaps this is the principal difference between Raphael's scholastic or academic philosophy and the dramatic model proposed by "Thomas More": the latter will refrain from reducing human relationships to logical categories. The Utopians stress that no one buys a horse without examining it very carefully, demanding that even the saddle and all the rest of the equipment be removed; but there is also the adage, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Marriage involves a mutual gift of spouses to one another. This is the teaching of Pope John Paul II,²⁴ but it is not altogether a twentieth-century novelty, and More certainly would have understood it in principle. "The form of marriage," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, "consists in a certain indivisible intimacy of spirit by which one spouse is bound to keep faith indivisibly with the other," and involved in this is "mutual deference of one to the other."²⁵ The Utopian practice would in reality result in scenes hardly more edifying than Aurbrey's apocryphal story of how William Roper picked Margaret More to be his bride. It amounts to a refusal to acknowledge the mysterious dignity of human nature and reduces men and women to objective commodities.

And this is the defect in virtually all the Utopian institutions: in attempting to eliminate all contingency, all risk, from human affairs, they introduce the more perilous risk of eliminating what is essentially human: our openness to chance, success, and failure. The monochromatic clothing of the Utopians, the restrictions on travel, the honey-comb symmetry in which their cities are disposed, the mandatory exchange of houses

delitesceret, in deligenda coniuge, qua ex re aut uoluptas, aut nausea sit totam per uitam comitatura, tam negligenter agant, ut reliquo corpore uestibus obuoluto, totam mulierem uix ab unius palmae spatio (nihil enim praeter uultum uisitur) aestiment adiungantque sibi non absque magno (si quid offendet postea) male cohaerendi periculo."

²⁴ "Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other," *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 128-34.

²⁵ *Summa Theologiae* 3.29.2: "Forma autem matrimonii consistit in quadam indivisibili coniunctione animorum, per quam unus coniugum indivisibiliter alteri fidem servare tenetur. . . . per alia opera viri et uxoris, quibus sibi invicem obsequuntur ad prole nutriendam."

every ten years—such customs have the common goal of preventing any form of personal corruption or want, but they also preclude the development of anything extraordinary. What is more, the pragmatic ruthlessness of the Utopian military and colonial policies demonstrates that there are severe limits on the compass of their justice. The maintenance of the “perfect society” in Utopia seems to require the exploitation, however moderate, of their neighbors, however undeserving of regard the latter may be. Finally, there is the almost Taliban style isolation of Utopia, which is an emblem of its estrangement not only from human nature, but also from human history. The first project of the mythical founder, King Utopus, after defeating the “coarse and rural throng” (112: “rudem atque agrestem turbam”), who had been the original inhabitants of “Abraxa,” was to force them to dig up the isthmus connecting them to the mainland. What this represents is a separation not only from the rest of the world, but also from history.

*Utopia
separated not
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Now More knew all this, and that is why he wrote a work of satirical fiction rather than an *Institutio Principis Christiani*—*The Education of a Christian Ruler*—such as his friend Erasmus published in 1516 (the same year as *Utopia*), which is a very prudent, even cautious work indeed. C. S. Lewis’s comments that *Utopia* “is not a seriously consistent philosophical treatise,” and that it is “a holiday work, a spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy, and (above all) of invention,” seem to me very acute.²⁶ I differ with him only insofar as I find the *Utopia* more serious than he seems to allow. While it is not a serious treatise, it is a serious work of literature; that is, its debate, paradox, comedy, and invention are all deployed to make a serious point about politics: namely, that the lives of concrete, unique individuals in historical communities cannot be arranged according to abstract logical schemes. The point is established in part simply by More’s decision to write a work of literature, rather than that treatise, for which so many critics seem to yearn. Consider Raphael Hythlodæus: he is intensely passionate, although mostly about repressing passion; he is mesmerizing and exasperating at the same time. He is in every way, especially when

²⁶ *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 168, 169.

he inveighs against corruption and injustice in Tudor England, a more interesting and engaging character than the pallid citizens of Utopia whom he praises so. The vividness and immediacy of More's dramatic dialogue is, finally, a surer refutation of Utopian political philosophy than the arguments put in the mouth of the character "Thomas More." Literature presents us an image of life, and in the commonwealth of Utopia, sensible persons will perceive an image of what can be lived only in the mind of a fanatic like Raphael Hythlodæus.

It is of course the Raphaeli Hythlodæi among us who fail to enjoy this perception, because their sights are fixed upon a hypothetical future in which their own schemes may be infallibly imposed upon society at large. You may see the mentality at work in the special pleading of the appendix to Paul Turner's translation of *Utopia*, which tortures More's prose to show that it means virtually the opposite of what it plainly says. Some years ago, Raphael Hythlodæus was Governor of New York, although he went by the name Mario Cuomo then. In 1985 Governor Cuomo was invited to address a symposium of scholars at Fordham University celebrating the 450th anniversary of More's martyrdom. The Governor's "Personal Appreciation," subsequently published in the conference proceedings, provides a stunning example of truly inept literary criticism. It is as if Hythlodæus, like the matinee idol in *Purple Rose of Cairo*, has stepped out of *Utopia* and proceeded to comment on his own author:

Is there anyone whose name has been more closely linked to the task of bringing earth to perfection than the author of *Utopia*? That is exactly the enterprise that Thomas More threw his whole life into. For myself, I feel, in a very real way, twice blessed that I can look to this man not only when I am wondering over what I am supposed to be, but also when I am worrying over what the role of government is supposed to be.²⁷

Who but a liberal politician could turn St. Thomas More into a policy wonk? Let us recall that the real St. Thomas More went to the headsman's block as a martyr—that is, as a *witness*—to, among other things, the integrity of Christian marriage. Raphael Hythlodæus would not even provide counsel, let alone witness, to any regime that was less than perfect. The

²⁷ *Interpreting Thomas More's Utopia*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 4.

Utopians would see no point in it; after all, they are willing to grant divorce to a couple who “have found that their dispositions are not sufficiently compatible” (190: “non satis inter se coniugum conueniant mores repertis”). As for the Governor, I fear that martyrdom would smack too much of *imposing your morality on society* for his taste.