

The Utopia of Thomas More: A Contemporary Battleground

Gerard Wegemer

"THE STRUGGLE is not merely over an isolated work of genius but over a whole culture"—so says Stephen Greenblatt about Thomas More's *Utopia*.¹ And he is right. Anyone who has been a part of Renaissance literary studies over the last ten years realizes that the Renaissance has become a battleground of intense scholarly interest.

On the one side are the few but well-organized and well-positioned revisionists and New Historicists who wish to give validity to their radical revision of "values," human nature, and political life.² Basic to this revision is the elimination of "nature" in favor of cultural fabrications of power; they would also eliminate allusions to the soul in favor of assumptions concerning the historically conditioned self. These revisionists are having a dramatic effect on the commonplace understanding of the Renaissance, introducing as they have a whole new cast of heroes in an attempt to dethrone the old. Thomas Cromwell, for example, becomes "the most remarkable statesman of the sixteenth century," while Thomas More becomes a self-seeking and deceitful villain. And Shakespeare is not to be studied to understand better the perennial truths of life, but as a vehicle for understanding his historical period and its prejudices.

On the other side seem to be a few

isolated individuals who have not found it possible or necessary to confront vigorously the misconceptions and factual errors of those who blithely dismiss anyone who turns to the great literature of the past for what was recognized as literature's first and greatest function: to artfully and pleasantly teach wisdom to any who labored valiantly enough to acquire it.

In the middle are the many who do not believe truth exists and would define wisdom as a relative balance of moderate opinions.

This seems to be the sorry state of scholarly affairs as one turns to what is perhaps the most debated literary work of the Renaissance. Many today herald *Utopia* as embodying "distinctively modern elements" in calling for radical political and economic reform; others praise *Utopia* for advocating "open-ended dialogue" about fundamental ethical and political issues.³ The Euthanasia Society of America considers the author of *Utopia* as an early friend and patron of their particular cause. And the Soviets, seeing *Utopia* as one of the early communist prototypes, erected a monument honoring More near the center of Moscow. Such is the diverse opinion and confusion surrounding this little book.

Those holding the opinions just cited do not generally try to reconcile their

interpretations with the corpus of More's work or with the author's reputation as prudent statesman, orthodox philosopher, and canonized saint. If they do, the explanation given is psychological. They explain *Utopia* as an attempt by More "to resolve the contradictions of his own divided impulses" or as an example of More's youthful progressive spirit—a spirit that would become pathologically conservative in later life.⁴ But before looking for the basis of this current view of More, let's turn to a brief review of Utopian criticism as it has developed over the last forty years.

During the 1950s and 1960s, J. H. Hexter and Edward Surtz, S.J., were the two most noted interpreters on *Utopia*.⁵ Accordingly, they were asked to edit and translate the Yale edition of *Utopia*, published in 1965. Both, in wholly different ways, developed R. W. Chambers' classic position that *Utopia* satirized the abuses in Europe by presenting a serious political ideal.⁶ Hexter, an historian, took *Utopia* more literally than Chambers. Hexter never distinguished between the characters and the author of *Utopia*, and he considered the Utopians to be true Christians. Surtz, a learned professor of literature, did distinguish between More and his characters, and he agreed with Chambers that Utopia is the best state possible if one would rely on reason alone. In both cases, Hexter and Surtz considered Utopia an ideal, although they gave differing interpretations as to why and how much of *Utopia* was to be taken as ideal.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, research undercut both of these theories by showing the darker side of *Utopia*'s repressive regime and of Raphael's intolerant character, and by showing the lighter side of the Lucianic humor satirizing various features of that regime and its defender. The beginning of this re-evaluation was spurred by such authors as Harry Berger, R.S. Sylvester,

and Ward Allen, who focused attention on the irony at work throughout *Utopia*.⁷ They showed that what at first appears attractive and inviting seems quite different on closer examination. One of the widely quoted articles of this period is Sylvester's "'*Si Hythlodæo credimus*': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's *Utopia*," an article that rightly drew attention to the identity of Raphael Hythlodæus.⁸ Anyone familiar with More's book will acknowledge that Utopia is described and praised by a suspicious character who calls himself Raphael ("healer from God") but belongs to the family of Hythlodæus ("speaker of nonsense").⁹ The reader must decide: is Raphael primarily a healer from God or a speaker of nonsense? In an important way, therefore, the major portion of the comic enterprise of *Utopia* depends upon adequately assessing the character and motivation of this Ulysses-style storyteller. By demanding such judgment and dialectical involvement from his reader, Thomas More imitates the Socratic dialogue, a literary form in which the dramatic action arises from the characters and the opinions they exchange.

Failing to recognize the Socratic character of *Utopia* has caused even the most perceptive critics to impose twentieth-century expectations on a quintessential Renaissance author. Arthur F. Kinney, for example, wrote several important studies of *Utopia* in the 1970s and 1980s, pointing out the ironic play, the classical allusions, and the many internal inconsistencies. He, more clearly than anyone else, shows that "the patterns in the sources and ideas behind *Utopia*" are a deliberate part of More's artistry, "requiring [the reader's] active interpretation and judgment."¹⁰ He even goes so far as to say that More's "classical sources and allusions...point the way to proper understanding of *Utopia*." Ultimately, however, this statement by Kinney is correct but anomalous within his argu-

ment since he denies that a proper understanding is possible; instead, he concludes that More simply presents two opposing views, leaving *Utopia* unresolved and inconclusive. It is precisely for More's "sophisticated art of indirection" that Kinney praises More for transcending the poetics of his time. *Utopia*, therefore, becomes a witty "rhetorical exercise in irony" and "a dialogue of the mind with itself"—not a philosophical investigation of the nature of perennial moral truths.

George Logan's scholarly study of 1983 does approach *Utopia* as a "serious work of political philosophy" and shows how *Utopia* could embody a "best-commonwealth exercise" in the philosophic tradition of Plato and especially Aristotle. The strength of this study is its grappling with *Utopia*'s many philosophic allusions and sources. Its weakness is that Logan, too, uses a twentieth-century epistemology, resulting in his praise of *Utopia* for its "distinctively modern elements" and for its "enigmatic indirection." Logan, an accomplished literature scholar, surprisingly spends no time on determining the literary character of this work. Satisfied with calling *Utopia* a philosophical best-regime exercise, Logan takes Hythlodæus as a "completely attractive" Socratic spokesman and a "completely reliable commentator"—thus ignoring the many studies that have shown the clear unreliability of Raphael on different points.

The modern love for indirection and open-mindedness directs the scholarship of even the most penetrating critics of the day. Brendan Bradshaw, for example, has written the best and clearest critiques of the revisionists' and of Hexter's interpretations of More's writings.¹¹ Nonetheless, when it comes to *Utopia*, he takes it for an ideal to be attained and he considers Raphael to be the perfect embodiment of Plato's position. For Bradshaw the deepest teaching of the

book is simply to "respond critically and yet receptively to new ideas."

Mistaking Raphael as a Platonic figure by such competent scholars as Logan and Bradshaw points to the need for a thorough study of the Platonic allusions and genre that More uses in the *Utopia*. A few partial studies exist, but none even claims to account for the many Platonic parallels and allusions in a comprehensive way.¹² Such a project would be a large and difficult task, for it would mean convincing a generation of intellectuals to take seriously what they have denied and even ridiculed: the existence of a dialectic that reveals nature, essence—and truth.

According to Aristotle, Socrates' greatest contribution to philosophy was the revolutionary discovery of "nature." And what Platonic dialogues dramatize are vignettes of Socrates earnestly yet often light-heartedly engaged in the dialectical search for the true nature of moral entities. At the same time, these dialogues are masterful works of literature designed to draw others into the same activity. In Letter VII, Plato comments on the extreme difficulty in "seeing" the nature of a particular entity (II.23). This requires years of dialectical training and a long, arduous process of weighing and considering the various facets of some being. The Socratic dialogue provides a pleasant and carefully structured way of entry into this dialectical process; it serves to engage, direct, and exercise the intellectual powers of "sharp-eyed" readers, allowing them to ascend from the darkness of received opinion to the brilliance of examined thought, *i.e.*, to the brilliance of ideas that are true.

Because *Utopia* is one of the finest Socratic dialogues of all time, the contemporary denial of the existence of nature constitutes the greatest barrier in recovering the humor, coherence, and profundity of More's masterpiece. And in denying nature, it is no surprise that

many of the latest interpretations of *Utopia* turn to various manifestations of Nietzsche's will to power as their conceptual frame. An influential example is Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. In this work, Greenblatt views dialectics as the sophists did in Socrates' time: as a "manipulative, artful process." Instead of a search for truth, Greenblatt sees More's thought to be a sixteenth-century version of nihilism or absurdist theater. Following the fashionable idea that every human act is ultimately reducible to the fashioning of power, Greenblatt sees *Utopia* as More's own reach for power, as "the perfect expression of [More's] self-conscious role-playing." According to Greenblatt, the fiction More creates of himself arises from More's sense of alienation, his haunting ambivalence, and his perpetual self-estrangement—all of which have their roots in guilt and shame.

This simplistic conception of sublimated power is the basis of many contemporary studies of More. One of the most highly acclaimed and respected is Alistair Fox's *Thomas More: History and Providence*. Here Fox argues that *Utopia* is More's attempt "to resolve the contradictions in his own divided impulses," these impulses being represented by "Raphael Hythlodæus, the embittered idealist reformer, and Morus, a fictional version of himself." In this reading, More's deep-seated psychological conflict leads More to depict deceptive and even unscrupulous behavior in *Utopia*—the same type of conduct More will later imitate: behavior "so subtle and devious as to set not only Machiavelli, but also Richard III and Iago to school."

Needless to say, Fox ignores the studies that show the Lucianic dimensions of *Utopia* whereby More distances himself from his characters the same way Lucian does in his dialogues—and whereby More satirizes the type of behavior Fox accuses More of perpetrating. These con-

siderations of Lucian as prototype constitute one of the most important advances in Utopian studies in recent years.¹³ While such studies shed light on the humor and light-hearted irony of *Utopia*'s satire, Fox's psycho-historical method is darkness, complexity, and ambivalence.

As we saw earlier, to understand *Utopia* one must first understand the characters of the two interlocutors in this Socratic dialogue. A number of studies already mentioned have contributed substantially to our understanding of Raphael's identity, but only in the last few years has significant attention been given to Morus' character as a Ciceronian humanist in manner, word, and deed.¹⁴ What emerges are richly textured characters who dramatize two competing philosophies and two distinct ways of life: Morus embodies the civic traits advocated by Cicero and articulates the philosophy of Christian humanism that was prevalent in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, while Raphael identifies himself with an apolitical philosophy that condemns Ciceronian diplomacy and moderate reform as unjust and wholly ineffective. Raphael, in fact, represents an amalgam of the Stoic and Epicurean elements which Cicero considered the greatest dangers of political life.

Book I of *Utopia* presents Raphael and Morus in debate over the central question raised by Plato, Cicero, Augustine, and indeed by all political philosophers: What is the best way of life? This question, however, is not only debated, but dramatized by Raphael and Morus. Like any Socratic dialogue, the *Utopia* makes sense only to the extent that the perceptive reader discovers the nature of character of each interlocutor.

In assessing Raphael's character, one must recall that Book II, the story of *Utopia*, arises in Raphael's effort to defend his way of life. Morus argues that Raphael has a duty as a just man to serve

his country—or at least some country. Raphael emotionally objects, claiming the futility and even madness of such servitude. In his own defense, he gives three examples, none of which Morus finds persuasive. The first example is historical and actually disproves Raphael's argument; the second and third examples, both imaginary, Morus judges to be imprudent and wrongheaded. Only at this point, when Raphael has failed to convince Morus of his position, does Raphael reveal his "secret knowledge" of Utopia, a knowledge he claims to be the basis of his understanding of human and political life. Significantly, this secret knowledge is gnostic: the god of Utopia is the gnostic god Mythros and the region of Utopia was originally called Abraxa, the highest heaven of the gnostic universe.¹⁵

Raphael not only speaks of gnosticism, he also acts the part of a gnostic master. He insists that his secret knowledge alone can bring peace and prosperity to the known world; yet his totalitarian approach ignores the lessons of prudence, history, and philosophy. Raphael insists that society can only be "perfected" by eliminating all private property; in lieu of anything short of this radical reform, Raphael advises withdrawal from active political life.

A dimension of *Utopia* virtually untouched in recent scholarship—and the most important—is the Christian dimension. After all, since the time of Plato and Cicero the most significant development affecting political life has been the rise of Christianity. And if *Utopia*'s internal claim to superiority over Plato's *Republic* is to be taken seriously, the first and most obvious reason for that superiority would be its Christian character—if it has such a character. I say "if" because it is by no means obvious that there is such a dimension. One strength of Hexter's and Surtz's earlier theories was precisely that they dealt with the preeminence of this

question.

Very little has been done in this area, even regarding Raphael's own position regarding Christianity. Who, for example, has drawn attention to the fact that Raphael clearly misquotes the Bible, selectively teaches its contents, and does not even bring a Bible or any book on any Christian subject with him on his world travels? Nor has there been a study of the Augustinian dimensions of *Utopia*. Critics have called for such a study for many years, and understandably so. More recognized Augustine as his greatest moral authority apart from the Bible, and he gave a well-attended series of lectures on the *City of God* before writing *Utopia*. That More would choose to lecture on this foundational text, "not...from the theological point of view, but from the standpoint of history and philosophy,"¹⁶ is perfectly understandable given the nature of both the *City of God* and the controversies in More's day. As one political theorist has stated, "[T]he *City of God* is an answer to Plato's *Republic*, which it eventually replaced in the West as the most authoritative account of the manner in which man should live in the city." Besides, new worlds were being discovered, and these fueled speculation about the nature of man and of government. These speculations, recognized in *Utopia* itself, could be countered only with an historical and philosophic understanding of the city and of man.

Up to now there have been numerous Utopian studies on the impact upon More's thought of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, and Lucian, but none on Augustine.¹⁷ I would suggest that just as allusions to classical authors provide an internal measure whereby Book II can be judged, so the numerous Augustinian allusions provide an internal Christian measure. As examples, consider these direct contrasts between *Utopia* and the *City of God*: Utopia boasts of a 1760-year history in which no civil wars have taken

place and only two natural catastrophes have affected their civic life; the *City of God* teaches that constant war and continuous catastrophes both natural and moral will always plague human societies. Utopia claims to be "not only the best but the only [political order] which can rightly claim the name of a commonwealth"; the *City of God* denies that a truly just commonwealth is possible anywhere or at any time here on earth. The *City of God* considers "nothing more disgraceful and monstrous" than holding pleasure as the end of life — the very position held by the Utopians. The *City of God* is indifferent to customs if these do not directly violate the law of God; Utopia is absolutely unbending in social custom, even in such matters as arbitrary as dress or choice of home.

These few contrasts—and there are many more—should indicate the playfully antagonistic stance which More constructs within the text of *Utopia* between Raphael's and Augustine's views of the best way of life.

Yet apart from such patterns of allusion, Christianity is present in another way: Morus identifies himself with Christian orthodoxy in his actions and in his entire way of life. He enters the dialogue after worshipping in the cathedral of Notre Dame and he not only warmly greets Raphael, but he also feeds him twice and freely spends the entire afternoon with him, patiently enduring Raphael's strident and often personal attacks.

What we see in *Utopia*, therefore, are two ways of life dramatized and in contest with one another. By leading the careful reader through a thoughtful weighing of the motives and consequences of each way of life, More provides training for the judgment, which alone can bring about true reform.

Of course no one could deny the need for reform in More's time, and Raphael describes well some of the injustices of

the day. Hence what in this article may appear as a devastating critique of Raphael does not nullify the positive function he plays in *Utopia* by drawing readers' attention to the level of injustice in English and European society. Yet such injustice always has existed and always will exist. Hence, Raphael also serves to raise the question, How does one go about rectifying injustice?

Raphael's answer is radical: only by eliminating *all* private property can any social ills be rectified; anything less amounts to morally reprehensible collaboration in evil. Such a position is diametrically opposed to Cicero's, Augustine's, and Morus' advice in facing social ills. By thinking through the limits and possibilities of political life, as presented in *Utopia*, the careful reader imitates Cicero and More by preparing for politics through the careful study of great literature.

1. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), 58. 2. Chief among these schools are revisionist historian G. R. Elton and his many followers as well as such literary critics as Alistair Fox and Stephen Greenblatt. 3. See George Logan's *The Meaning of Utopia*, Princeton, 1983 or Brendan Bradshaw's "More on Utopia" in *The Historical Journal* 24.1 (1981), 1-27 as examples. 4. Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (New Haven, 1983), 51; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. 5. Hexter first set forth his interpretation at length in *More's "Utopia": The Biography of an Idea* (1952; reprinted with an epilogue, Harper Torchbook, 1965). This interpretation is reformulated in part in the introduction to the Yale edition of *Utopia*, vol. IV of the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (1965). His latest study is "Imitation, Words, and Meaning: The Case of More's *Utopia*" in *New Literary History* 6 (1975), 529-41. Edward Surtz's major studies are *The Praise of Pleasure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957) and *The Praise of Wisdom* (Loyola, 1957) as well as his introductory essays to the Yale *Utopia*. 6. This interpretation appears in Chambers' 1935 biography, *Thomas More* (London, Jonathan Cape). See especially 125-144. 7. Harry Berger, "The Renaissance Imagination: Second World and Green Imagination," *Centennial Review* 9 (1965), 496-509; "Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy," *English Literary Renaissance* 12.3 (Fall 1982), 271-90. Ward Allen,

Hythloday and the Root of all Evil," *Moreana* 31-32 (1971), 51-59; "Speculations on St. Thomas More's Use of Hesychius," *Philological Quarterly* 46.2 (April 1967), 156-166; "The tone of More's Farewell to *Utopia*: A Reply to J. H. Hexter," *Moreana* 51 (1976), 108-118. **8.** This article originally appeared in *Soundings* 51 (1968), 272-89. It has been reprinted in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour (Hamden, Conn., 1977). **9.** See *Utopia* 49/17-51/21 for the subtle way in which Raphael is introduced, *Complete Works*, volume 4, Yale University Press, 1965. All references to *Utopia* will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses within this article. **10.** *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric and Fiction in the Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst, 1986), 80. See also his *Rhetoric and Poetic in Thomas More's Utopia* (Malibu, 1979) and his "Rhetoric as Poetic: Humanist Fiction in the Renaissance," *ELH* 43 (1976), 413-443. **11.** Bradshaw's critique of revisionists Elton, Fox and Trapp appears in "The Controversial Sir Thomas More," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 36.4 (1985), 535-569. For his critique of Hexter's theory and his own reading of *Utopia* see "More on Utopia," *The Historical Journal*, 24.1 (1981), 1-27. **12.** See John Gueguen's "Reading More's *Utopia* as a Criticism of Plato" in *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore (Boone, NC, 1978), 43-54; Thomas White's "Pride and the Public Good: Thomas More's Use of Plato in *Utopia*" in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20.4 (October 1982), 329-354. Curiously, the best introduction to the nature and objectives of the Platonic dialogue

structure is demonstrated in an article that never refers to Plato, yet understands clearly the nature of dialectic activity elicited by More's irony: Peter New, *Fiction and Purpose in Utopia, Rasselas, The Mill on the Floss and Women in Love* (New York, 1985), 13 and 19 esp. **13.** R. Bracht Branham, "Utopian Laughter: Lucian and Thomas More," *Moreana* 86 (July 1985), 25-43. T. S. Dorsch, "Sir Thomas More and Lucian: An Interpretation of *Utopia*," *Archiv für das Studium der neuen Sprachen und Literaturen* 203 (1966), 345-363; a shorter version appears in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Utopia*, ed. William Nelson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 88-99. Douglas Duncan's *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1979) has a general chapter on Lucian and one on More's *Utopia*. Warren Wooden, "Thomas More and Lucian: A Study in Satiric Influence and Technique," *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 13 (1972), 43-57. **14.** Quentin Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Language of Renaissance Humanism" in *The Language of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (London, 1987), 132-135, 153, 155; Logan, 51-52, 85-86, 102-3, 109n, 179-80; Kinney, '86, 77-78. **15.** See Ward Allen's "Speculations on St. Thomas More's Use of Hesychius," *Philosophical Quarterly* 46.2 (April 1967), esp. 157, 160-63, 165. **16.** Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More* (New York, 1928), 9. **17.** Since this article was written, I have made a beginning attempt in "The City of God in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *Renascence* 44.2 (Winter 1992), 115-135.