

soul, silencing it from crying “out of the depths,” as did Moussorgsky to Vladimir Stassov, the great art and music critic who had introduced him to Hartmann: “My dear friend, what a terrible blow! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life—and creatures like Hartmann must die! ... There again—what a fool I am! Why be angry when you cannot change anything! Enough then—the rest is silence!”

1. Michael Polanyi, “What is a Painting?,” *Society, Economics & Philosophy: Selected Papers*, edited with an Introduction by R. T. Allen (New Brunswick, N.J., c1997), 350. 2. *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York, 1958), 90.

Thomas More: Man of Principle

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The Life of Thomas More, by Peter Ackroyd, *New York: Anchor, 1999. x + 447 pp.*

Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage, by Gerard Wegemer, *Princeton: Scepter, 1999. ix + 307 pp.*

Thomas More on Statesmanship, by Gerard Wegemer, *Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998. viii + 262 pp.*

ANY DEPICTION OF Thomas More is fraught with difficulties. The Renaissance prized paradox and ambiguity, and More was no exception to the trends of his age. The famous Holbein portrait of More shows him arrayed in court finery, yet beneath

it he is wearing a hair shirt. Biographers of More have had to struggle with his seeming contradictions and have tended to fall into two extremes. Some, like More’s first biographer, his son-in-law William Roper, have stressed the hagiographical at the expense of the real. More recent biographies, such as those by Richard Marius (1984) and Alistair Fox (1983), have stressed the psycho-historical and sexual at the expense of the sacred. However, we are now well placed to benefit from two important scholarly developments: the completion of Yale University’s critical edition of Thomas More’s complete works and the publication of new historical studies on the Reformation era. Peter Ackroyd and Gerard Wegemer both make good use of these resources. They let More speak in his own words, and thereby provide the reader with new insights into More for the twenty-first century.

Of the two biographies, Ackroyd’s *The Life of Thomas More* has received the greater attention, and it is by far the more literary work. Much of this is perhaps due to the fact that Ackroyd is a prizewinning novelist, and a biographer who writes with a novelist’s sense for narrative. Ackroyd is also a consummate Londoner, whose works often center on London and Londoners of different eras. Thus, it is no surprise that his recreations of sixteenth-century London are the best part of the book. He makes the reader experience the sensual vividness of the city and daily life within it. To a new historicist’s “thick reproduction” of an era he adds a novelist’s skill, and for the reader the end result is as sumptuous as the Holbein portrait that graces its cover. Particularly well depicted are all the religious trappings of pre-Reformation Catholic England, with many expressions of a vigorous and thriving lay piety, and in this respect the book can be seen as a counterpart to Eamon Duffy’s recent *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992). Indeed, it is

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possible that Ackroyd has done *too good* a job on London, which emerges almost as a character in itself; though More himself was a consummate Londoner who rarely traveled, his ultimate allegiances and interests lay elsewhere.

Ackroyd does a good job in portraying the details of More's life, starting with his baptism and ending with his neck upon the block at Tower Hill. Along the way we are treated to the high points of More's life, and while Ackroyd's portrait is superb, even compelling, he does not seem to understand the man as a whole. What drove More? Ackroyd is time and again baffled by More's ambiguity and paradoxes, as other biographers are. His attempts to understand More hinge upon what he makes of him. First and foremost, More was a lawyer, and a very good one. Ackroyd gives extensive attention to More's legal career, and from this, he comes to the conclusion that More was more than just a lawyer—he was a champion of Law, that principle that supports and protects a society. More's vehement opposition to Luther and other Protestants, and his silent opposition to his own king were due, in Ackroyd's view, to More's perceptions of the illegality, and even the antinomianism, of their actions. More saw a dangerous undercurrent of anarchy in their ideas, and fought them to the knife. In Ackroyd's estimation (perhaps somewhat anachronistically), More saw within Protestantism the destruction of an entire way of life, which would end in a future in which there would be "no more lights and images, no more pilgrimages and processions, no guild plays and no ringing for the dead, no maypoles or Masses or holy water, no birch at midsummer and no roses at Corpus Christi." For Ackroyd, More was a man of law and a martyr, not just for faith, but for a particular way of life.

Wegemer's portrait has received less attention than Ackroyd's, and although

it is less well written, it understands More better. *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* is the product not of a novelist but of an academic with a wide background in literature and political theory, and focuses more on More the man and, in particular, More the writer. If Ackroyd considers More as a figure in a landscape, Wegemer considers him as a denizen of the republic of letters, and he always allows More's personality and identity to shine forth from his works. The events of More's life are presented and illustrated with relevant excerpts from his literary works upon which he was working, obscure as well as famous. Furthermore, the excerpts from More's writings have been regularized into modern English usage and spelling, which makes Wegemer's book easier to read than Ackroyd's. Although there is an inherent difficulty in taking Renaissance works at their face value, particularly those of so subtle a writer as More, Wegemer's academic abilities allow him to thread the maze of More's mind with considerable skill.

Several elements of More's life stand out particularly vividly. Wegemer, like Ackroyd, stresses More's strong relationship with his father, as well as his early vocational struggle over entry into religious life, but Wegemer provides us with a closer look into More's family life after More's decision to marry—and a warm, happy life in a big, bustling household it appears. More emerges as a loving *paterfamilias*, and it is clear his interests in education and humanism were not theoretical, but based on family need. Indeed, Wegemer quotes More's defense of a liberal arts education in a way that would have pleased Russell Kirk. More's humor and friendship with some of the less famous figures of his day are also lovingly presented. The shift from More's early life and successful legal career to a life of public service is thus seen to be a hard choice. Wegemer believes that More

knew that he risked paying a cost for doing so, not only in serving a potentially unstable monarch, but also by losing time with his precious family—but so great was More's sense of duty that he willingly undertook it.

More's tribulations in public life are given great attention, as are the words More used in his public controversies. Wegemer does not wallow in the scatological details of More's diatribes against Luther which cause so much shock to Ackroyd (and the modern reader); he excuses the excess as a literary device, much in keeping with More's beloved classical-era Latin satirists. More's distaste for Protestantism is for Wegemer what it was for Ackroyd: the instinctive reaction of a man who put law first, and who feared the consequences of anarchy.

A full quarter of Wegemer's book deals with the tribulations of More's final years after his resignation. It is here that the book triumphs. We are made to realize—acutely—More's isolation, not only from his political peers, but also from a family that did not understand his actions. Wegemer places great emphasis on More's religious nature as seen through his writings during this period, noting how More almost literally wrote himself into martyrdom, preparing in his pages what he would in fact undergo in life. Notably absent in these final works are any words of malice towards anyone responsible for More's situation, which reveals in contrast the artificial character of the scatological language he used in his anti-Protestant writings. Wegemer's shift in tone towards the spiritual shows

the saint inside the man, without once veering into the hagiographical. In the end, More's trial was to serve as an example of the triumph of tyranny working through law against which More had fought so long.

In his exposition of More's political thought, *Thomas More on Statesmanship*, Wegemer focuses upon what More considered to be the task of the statesman, which was to maintain personal and civic

harmony, to be achieved through the prudent use of reason in government. However, More was not blind to the fact that "to expect reason to exercise such power is almost utopian, given the fact that history seems to present more war than peace, more discord than harmony." Reason can be blinded by ignorance, or worse, by pride, which is one of the greatest dangers to the statesman. To remedy this sin of pride, More recommends a few safeguards. Chief among them is self-control,

since a statesman must govern his own passions before he is fit to govern his people, especially given the corrupting nature of power. Centuries before Lord Acton, More wrote that "unlimited power has a tendency to weaken good minds, and that even in the case of very gifted men." A statesman, then, must be virtuous, and to that end education, particularly in good literature, is important. Sometimes, however, even this is not enough to instill virtue in a leader, and to effect a further brake on his powers More recommends the collective reason of a nation, as seen in its laws and customs.

Wegemer goes on to consider More's most famous and most difficult work,



Utopia. Much ink has been spilled over the meaning of this work, and doubtless much more will be, but Wegemer comes up with an interpretation that is challenging. Although he is content to take More's works at face value elsewhere, here he focuses on the notorious ambiguity of Renaissance writing. Does *Utopia* really mean what it says? Wegemer focuses on More's classical antecedents to observe how irony and satire can be effective tools for "deconstructing" an idea. Wegemer does not rely on spurious contemporary literary theories for his analysis, but rather on his own deep knowledge of Latin language and style. Thus, in *Utopia* More has written not a treatise but a satire, informed by a Chaucerian "good mother wit" to give insight and teach wisdom.

Finally, Wegemer concludes with an appraisal of some of the issues in More's career as a statesman. In this connection, he considers in depth some of More's later anti-Protestant writings. Between 1529 and 1534 More wrote more literature on polemical subjects than in the previous fifty years of his life. Many readers are troubled by the harsh and often scatological language used in these works: Yet it should be remembered that More was very much a product of his times; moreover, with regard to his language, none of his contemporaries thought him extreme, and most thought that he did not go far enough! More was well aware from experiences in his own life how thin the crust of civilization can be, and how dangerous passions can bubble to the surface to threaten it. He knew well that in some cases of heterodox belief, reason was ineffective against people who were corrupted by pride. Even a figure so beloved of the moderns like Erasmus began with reasoned debate against Luther, then discovered that it was useless, and concluded that Luther was likely to "destroy the unity and peace of Christendom."

In ending his study of More's politics, Wegemer poses a question that bedeviled More himself, as *Utopia* so well illustrates: Should a man of principle serve in the often-sordid world of politics? More had more to lose than most of his peers—indeed, if he was a man who had everything, in the end he was a man who lost everything. More was under no illusions about Henry VIII's character and failings. Yet for him, one of the most imperative duties of the statesman was to give the monarch good advice. Good advisors are a check on the power of a king, and More could not refuse his duty in this matter. For him, the worst action of a statesman or political leader was negligence, and he had some particularly sharp words to say about the bishops of his day in this regard. More had to do his duty, and not just for England. Criticizing Henry's excessive and foolish French wars, which weakened Christendom while the threat of the Turks lurked at Europe's southeast, More knew that he acted not just for England, but "for the good he might do for Christendom."

Of course, More failed. We all know the story of his death, even as few people in his time considered him a great political theorist—his works had minimal influence. But perhaps More's real value was not to his own age, but to all ages—not only to Renaissance England, but also to the Christian world. No saint, even if he is ignominiously martyred, is ever truly a failure, as More's life and thought prove. His value is timeless; his personal integrity and sound statesmanship are paradigms for future leaders. Above all, his political thought has great truth in it, and deserves more attention than history has given it. A man for all seasons (*omnium horarum homo*), Sir Thomas More deserves to be a patron saint for all politicians, who so desperately need one.