

# interpretation

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“AN EXQUISITE PLATFORM”: *UTOPIA*

EVA BRANN

1. Utopias as Political Poetry

Two poems purporting to be by the poet laureate of Utopia were prefixed to More's *Utopia* by his Dutch friend Peter Giles, whose house is the setting for the narrative. One of them says:<sup>1</sup>

Me Utopie cleped Antiquity,  
 Void of haunt and herborough,  
 Now I am like to Plato's city,  
 Whose fame flieth the world thorough;  
 Yea, like, or rather more likely  
 Plato's plat to excell and pass.  
 For what Plato's pen hath platted briefly  
 In naked words, as in a glass,  
 The same have I performed fully,  
 With laws, with men, and treasure fitly.  
 Wherefore not Utopie, but rather rightly  
 My name is Eutopie: a place of felicity [21].

I cannot resist first quoting from the original of the other, which is given in the Utopian language and alphabet:

Bargol hē maglomi baccan soma gymnosōphaon.  
 Āgrāmā gymnosōphōn labārem bāchā bōdāmīlōmīn.  
 I one of all other without philosophy  
 Have shaped for man a philosophical city [19].

Both poems make the same point. Utopia surpasses other cities “platted briefly in words” by its actuality. The original of this claim is to be found in Plutarch's *Lives*, where it is made for the work of Lycurgus, the Spartan polity:

... all those who have writ'en well on politics, as Plato, Diogenes and Zeno, have taken Lycurgus for their model, leaving behind them, however, mere projects and words; whereas Lycurgus was the author, not in writing but in reality, of a government which none else could so much as copy; and while men in general have treated the individual philosophic character as unattainable, he by the example of a complete philosophic city raised himself high above all the other lawgivers of Greece [*Lycurgus*, ch. xxxi].

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the *Utopia* are from Ralph Robinson's translation of 1551, but the page references in the text are to the modern annotated Latin and English edition: *Utopia, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 4, ed. E. Surtz, S. J., and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965).

References to works named in the text are by standard divisions.

Now the utterly obvious observation that Utopia is not "actual" in quite the same way Sparta was can serve to introduce the question concerning the way in which a utopia has being.

The answer to the question is not hard to formulate. Utopias are communities constructed in the *imagination* and expressed in words; they are word pictures, a kind of poetry. Their "reality" is nothing but their imaginative vividness. Or, to put it negatively: What Utopia shares with Sparta is the absence of "naked words"; just as Lycurgus "would never reduce his laws to writing" but made Sparta to *embody* them, so Utopia *pictures* its polity. Accordingly, Sir Philip Sidney includes the book Utopia among the poetic works in his *Defense of Poesie* and says of the utopian poet:

... whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he gives a perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth [para. 21].

Utopias, then, may be called *political poetry* and belong to the faculty of the imagination. It remains to be seen whether Sidney is right in claiming that this "feigned city" of the poet is an image in the particular of the philosopher's city, or whether it is perhaps rather a place in its very nature "*without* philosophy."

## 2. Utopias as Daydreams

The first kind of imagining that utopias suggest is daydreaming, a sort of exoteric dreaming undertaken by one man in behalf of a band unified by a common desire. In the case of the first utopia this aspect is expressed in the playful web of make-believe factuality spun about the island of Utopia by More and his international circle of friends (3-45, 249-53), such as Peter Giles' mellifluous Utopian language, and so persuasive was this pleasant conspiracy that a certain cleric could be reported to have expressed a longing to be sent to Utopia by the Pope as bishop (43). In just this vein More wrote to Erasmus telling of a daydream in which he had seen himself as the chosen king of Utopia "marching along crowned with a diadem of wheat, very striking in my Franciscan garb" (c. December 4, 1516).

There is a whole class of such utopian daydreams. Among these are the foundation of More's reader Rabelais, the community founded by Gargantua, the son-in-law of the king of More's Utopia, which is called the Abbey of Thélème, the Abbey of Wish (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*, I, 5), and the commonwealth of simple Gonzales in *The Tempest*, who, like More, makes himself king of a state. In his realm Gonzales would "by contraries execute all things":

... for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;

Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none; . . .  
...  
All things in common nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavor . . . [III, 1].

Such utopias, be they more witty or more naive, are as lands wished but not willed.

But this aspect of utopias as Lands of Cockayne, places either of effortless virtue or easy pleasure, is inadequate. In fact, More's Utopia—and almost every subsequent utopian construction—is a sober and disciplined place, which, although More's contemporaries delighted in its virtuous ways (e.g., 29), induces strong misgivings in more recent readers. These misgivings concern, interestingly enough, not the obvious weakness of utopias, that irresponsibly diversionary nature for which they were castigated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* as unscientific and ultimately reactionary (III, 3). On the contrary, the dissatisfaction comes precisely from the apprehension of utopias as practical proposals. Utopias offend because they are felt to be "static": monotonous, regimented, drably uniform, barrenly restrictive. So Mumford, for instance, thinks of every utopia as a kind of human machine, to be regarded as original social evil, as "kakotopia or hell"; while another writer entitles an article on More's *Utopia* "A Detestable State."<sup>2</sup>

### 3. More Against His Own Utopia

The most significant fact, however, in considering why utopias are so often unacceptable is More's own relation to his book. I shall give an abbreviated list of items in respect to which More expressed disapprobation of his own Utopian institutions. It includes almost every feature that is fundamental.

He comments in his own behalf both at the end of the first and the second of its two books, in each case after Raphael Hythloday, the discoverer of Utopia, has finished speaking. In the second book he says:

. . . many things came to my mind which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded of no good reason, not only in the fashion of their chivalry and in their sacrifices and religion and in others of their laws, but also, yea, and chiefly, in that which is the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say, in the community of their life and living without occupying of money . . . [245].

More still opposed Hythloday's most forcefully expressed opinion, that this is "the only way to wealth in a commonality, if equality of wealth should be brought in and established" in his last year in the Tower, when

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<sup>2</sup> *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. F. E. Manuel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 15; and *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Utopia*, ed. W. Nelson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 88.

he wrote in the *Dialogue of Comfort*<sup>3</sup> that if all the wealth were portioned out equally "it would be on the morrow after worse than it was the day before. . . . For surely the rich man's substance is the wellspring of the poor man's living"(II, 22). In fact, far from regarding communism, with his narrator, as Christian, More condemned it as one of the "horrible heresies" of the Anabaptists in his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*.

Even more fundamental than the communism of the Utopians is their love of pleasure: ". . . they think that all our actions, and in them the virtues themselves, be referred at last to pleasure as their end and felicity," and they regard religious ascetics as holy but not quite sane (167, 227). But More, who is reported in the *Life* written by his son-in-law Roper secretly to have worn a hair shirt next to his skin and to have punished his body with whips,<sup>4</sup> considered, with his model Pico, that "a perfect man should abstain not only from unlawful pleasures but from lawful."<sup>5</sup>

Again, the Utopians permit free choice of religion, and therefore have no idea of doctrinal heresy (221). More, on the other hand, argues in several places, for instance, in the *Dialogue on Heresies* (IV, 13), that heretical books should not be suffered to go abroad and that the burning of heretics is sometimes "lawful, necessary, and well done."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, one of the first Utopians to be baptized immediately preaches the faith with so much zeal as to show Christianity and toleration in effect incompatible (219).

The Utopian priests recommend suicide to the desperately sick (187)—More regards it as a devilish temptation under all circumstances (*Dialogue of Comfort*, II, 16); the Utopians permit divorce under the condition of incompatibility (191)—More opposed it unto death; the Utopians use no images in their worship (233)—More strenuously defends their necessity (*Dialogue on Heresies*, I, 3).

How then did More manage to conjure up the image of an ideal commonwealth whose institutions were so thoroughly contrary to his own views?

Nicholas Harpsfield, in the first formal biography of More, speaks of *Utopia* as follows:

But the book that beareth the prick and price of all his other Latin books of witty invention, for profane matters, is his *Utopia*. He painteth me it forth so lively and so pleasantly, as it were an exquisite platform, pattern and example of a singular

<sup>3</sup> Saint Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, ed. L. Miles (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 135, 136.

<sup>4</sup> William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield, *Lives of Saint Thomas More*, ed. E. E. Reynolds (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1963), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. W. E. Campbell (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), Volume the First: *Early Poems, Pico della Mirandola, Richard III, The Four Last Things*, p. 378.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume the Second: *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies and Matters of Religion* (= *The Dialogue Concerning Tyndale*), p. 301.

good commonwealth, as to the same neither the Lacedaemonians', nor the Athenians', not yet, the best of all others, the Romans' commonwealth is comparable. Prettily and probably devising the said commonwealth to be in one of the countries of the new found lands declared unto him at Antwerp by Hythlodaye, a Portuguese, and one of the sea companions of Americus Vespusius, that first sought out and found these lands; such an excellent and absolute state of commonwealth that, saving the people were unchristian, might seem to pass any state and commonwealth, I will not say of the old nations by me rehearsed, but even of any other even in our time.<sup>7</sup>

Harspfield has put his finger on what might seem to be the answer to the question—the Utopians are not Christians, while More himself was a most devout Christian. But that is not a sufficient explanation, for first of all, More's friends, for instance, the scholar Budé, thought of Utopia as possessing "the true wisdom of Christianity for public and private life" uncorrupted (11). And even if, as will be shown, his friends were deceived, it does not explain why More should have chosen to imagine "the best state of the commonwealth" on the one hand as pagan, but on the other, as pagan of such a sort that it might readily be mistaken for Christian.

Thus, in sum, it appears that the first Utopia is not a mere dream, although it *is* a complex and characteristic product of the *imagination* as opposed to the intellect, a city which "without philosophy has shaped for man a philosophical city," a very "witty invention" and subtle almost to the point of perversity.

#### 4. Utopias as Products of the Imagination

Since reflection on such a place ought to begin with a brief inquiry into the imagination itself, it seems justifiable to cite the treatise *On the Imagination* by Pico della Mirandola,<sup>8</sup> the model of More's life, whose biography More had composed in his youth. Pico's treatise, a Renaissance work, draws on the whole tradition concerning the faculty of the imagination, especially on Plato and Aristotle's *De Anima*. It is well to note here that as a Christian work of moral intention the treatise deprecates the productive or poetic fantasy, while as a pre-Romantic summary it knows nothing of the "creative" imagination as a faculty for the deliberate innovation of pure "artistic" form. But this will make no difficulty in the case of Utopian genres which will appear to be neither quite poetry, nor, indeed, "art" at all. Pico says:

... the foundation-stone of the discussion we have undertaken... is that there exists a power of the soul which conceives and fashions likenesses of things, and serves, and ministers to, both the cursive reason and the contemplative intellect; and to this power has been given the name *phantasy* or *imagination* [ch. IV].

The product of "phantasy" can be called an "arrest of things that have appeared" (Greek: *stasis phanthenton*) or, as Plato says, a "picture,"

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *On the Imagination*, trans. H. Caplan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930).

because "the various appearances receive form and are fashioned at will, in a manner not unlike that in which painters depict the various and dissimilar forms of things" (ch. I). However, this deliberately constructive and combinatory productive "phantasy" is not a power separable from the reproductive imagination that fashions a purified but particular likeness of an object of sense no longer naturally present (chs. II, IV). Men's lives are largely governed by this power. For it is to the imagination that the sense consigns, in the form of "perpetual sense impressions," what it has drawn from without; such sense memories become the objects that the imagination, acting as a mean between sense and the rational part of the soul, supplies for recognition by the latter as objects of desire or ends of action (chs. V, VI).

The modes of imaginary communities do indeed seem to be in accord with the imagination so described.

First of all, utopias have the modes of pictures, although of pictures readily expressed in speech. Hence they are usually accompanied by maps, plans, and views. Furthermore, since they are conceived in the world-mirroring power as pictures of perfect and self-sufficient human wholes, they are, or at least the early utopias often are, microcosms, cosmographic miniatures that project the whole world into *the island* or *the city*. Thus Andreae calls his island of *Christianopolis* "a whole world in miniature" (ch. II), and Campanella's *City of the Sun* is in fact a cosmological model. The island of Utopia itself was once, to signify that it is a world unto itself, called by the occult name "Abraxa," which signifies the highest, all-encompassing heaven. In this, utopias display that world-feigning power of the fantasy, which Tolkien calls "the Sub-creative Art."<sup>9</sup> A corroborative contrast to this original, premodern, utopian mode is offered by *A Modern Utopia*, in which Wells projects the trends of progress onto a whole fictive counter-earth, in contrast to the original utopias, which are small, well-framed, and symbolic place-pictures.

Furthermore, utopian communities, because they are visually conceived, exhibit brightly delineated styles of life, usually leaning to one or the other extreme of possible public form. Some utopias, especially those celebrating technique, like the old Atlantis of Plato's *Critias*, display a somewhat sinister splendor, or like Bacon's *New Atlantis*, a mysterious but punctilious ritual magnificence; others, like Houyhnhnm Land in *Gulliver's Travels*, are depicted as rejoicing in sedate and sober rustic decorousness; Utopia itself, with its Franciscan monastic habits and absence of gilded ornament—gold is used only to make fetters and chamber pots (153)—furnished the first example of the latter style. And indeed, Swift [who numbered More in the unmatched sextumvirate of statesmen that includes Socrates' name (III, 7)] said of his horses, which are falsely rumored to have "no more existence than the inhabitants of Utopia" (Prefatory Letter), that they have not even a name for the vice of pride (IV, 12); thus they

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<sup>9</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *Essays presented to Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 66-67.

are, in their simplicity of life, first cousins of the Utopians, whose essence is, as we shall see, precisely the absence of pride and magnificence. calls "quasi-christalline structures"<sup>10</sup> because it is in the nature of the imagination, are "arrested appearances," and as such, motionless and fleshless. Hence a static and two-dimensional character does almost invariably pervade utopia; it is flatly formed, an "exquisite platform," in Harpsfield's apt phrase. It is this in utopia that offends those modern critics who regard social mobility and opportunity for experience as necessary conditions for a good society. Utopias are what Lévi-Strauss Circumstantially painted though they may be, utopias, as beings of the imagination to arrest motion.

Secondly, utopias show modes of place and time that are appropriate to their origin in the imagination.

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, writes of his imaginative memory as containing "the fields and spacious palaces of memory, where are the treasures of innumerable images, brought into it from things of all sorts perceived by the senses." These images can be recalled and reconstructed at pleasure:

All this do I within, in that huge court of my memory. For there have I in readiness the heaven, the earth, the sea. . . . Yet did I not swallow them into me by seeing, whenas with mine eyes I beheld them. Nor are the things themselves now within me, but the images of them only [X, 8].

The imagination then is a power of unreal places that can be visited at will. Most utopias appear to have their origin in such voyages within the imagination; they are places of the imagination expressed as imaginary places. Therefore almost all in fact have the form of narrations of voyages of discovery. The *Odyssey* is the prototype, and the narrator of *Utopia* is indeed compared to Odysseus (49). In fact, Odysseus' last discovery, Phaeacia, is almost a prototypical utopia: a sea land not of earthly but of nautical beings disporting themselves, as we shall see the Utopians do, in safe and stable luxury between nature and artifice, and as Scheria, the Sheared-off Land, forever lost to the world once a human narrator has penetrated it (*Odyssey*, XIII, 146 ff.).

But utopian voyages differ from odysseys in the *mode* of their fictitiousness. For utopias are not pure inventions but images whose existence is—on one level—ardently desired. Hence their descriptions do not have the ingenious verisimilitude appropriate to tales of adventure. For while they strive "to bear a good countenance of truth" (such as *Utopia* bore, Harpsfield says, by reason of appearing at a time in which "many strange and unknown nations and many conclusions were discovered"), insofar as utopian accounts are ardently interested in existence, being institutions of desire in the places of the imagination, they intrude the fact of the unreality of their place purposefully and persistently—the very word "utopia" means "no-place."

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<sup>10</sup> Inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.

But what most intimately characterizes utopias is that they tamper with time.

They do so because the sole source of the imagination is the past; it is stocked with the "perpetual sense impressions" left by what is no longer present, and so is a commemorative power, a power of bringing the past, stamped with the seal of perfection, into the present or into an otherwise empty future. Hence the products of the imagination are often cast in the past tense, in the "once upon a time"; hence the golden age is the paradigm product of this purifying and simplifying imagination. That resurrector of the past, Don Quixote, appropriately paints a picture of it, and it is one that has much in common with the first utopia: no "mine" and "thine," no gold or ornament, no going to law (I, 11). But since utopias invariably stand as accusations against a particular present, they are often resurrections of a particular past, civic myths representing the pristine community "behind" the degenerate actual one. Thus they share the nostalgia, the "aching for a return," which animates their private counterpart, the idyll, a genre that Schiller characterized as putting the end behind rather than before (*On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, "Idylls"). An example of this kind of utopia is the never-written tale promised in Plato's *Timaeus*, the "festivity" prepared for Socrates' pleasure in which the polity of the *Republic* was to be imaginatively realized in a moving picture, planned as an account of the primeval Athens (st. 24). So also Utopia with its fifty-four cities, corresponding in number to the English shires, its capital Amaurotum, the "Darkling City" built like a foggy but salubrious London, and its unenclosed countryside unspoiled by rampaging sheep and fostered in harmonious balance with the cities, presents the old and merry England behind that of the fallen present.

Sometimes in the later utopias, the past is brought not into the present but into the future, as in Morris' *News from Nowhere*, which is a revival of a pastoral England in cinquecento garb projected into a future century. Here the device used for tampering with the time sequence is the Odyssean one of translation during sleep (*Odyssey*, XIII, 187), which projects the narrator, like Rip van Winkle, into the future, having conveniently killed the crucial time of crisis during which the world is converted into utopia; such future utopias are not so much "feigned commonwealths" as half-hopeful plans presented in pictures. Again there is a confirming contrary type of modern "utopia," that in which the past is suppressed and the present projected into the future. Since utopias by their nature arise from dissatisfaction with the present, those that do not draw on the past are utopias of terror, in which the evils incipient in the present are (excepting some products of an invincibly optimistic era like Bellamy's *Looking Backward*) projected on a magnified scale into the frightening void of the future and there depicted with fascinated and even avid horror, and—that being the nature of the imagination—even glory in their terrors. Such anti-utopias are warnings based on a modern notion of history as progress, but in this case as pejorative progress. The best-known

examples of futurist utopias are Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and it is significant that both, but particularly the latter, understand the realization of their nightmare to depend primarily on the obliteration of the past.

All this is not to say that as *political* poetry, *Utopia* is not very much a work of the intellect as well as of the imagination, but that thought in this case draws out and carries to their last conclusion the principles specifically appropriate to a product primarily of the imagination.

### 5. The Special Place and Time of Utopia

More's book shows itself most clearly as a reflection on the political imagination in the special modes of time and place it employs.

"Utopia" (ou-topia) is Greek and means "no-place," or, to render the exact meaning of the negative adverb "ou," "no place actually in existence" (as contrasted with a possible "me-topia," "non-place" or "un-place," that is, not having the property of place). Utopia is a place of the imagination worldly in all respects but that it lacks bodily existence, the quality of being *there*, that is, of real location. More signifies this by having Hythloday fail to specify exact geographic coordinates, although as the counterpart of England, he places Utopia as far south of the equator as England is north (197), and as a land reached by a member of Amerigo Vespucci's expedition (51), in the new world (so that ever since the Americas have been the place for the splendidly self-contradictory enterprise of locating Utopia). In addition, some of the names, especially the place names of this region, are privative, like the land "Achoria" (Un-country), and the river "Anydrus" (Waterless) (251). More and his friends engaged in much pleasantry concerning this lack of geographic placement, giving each other circumstantial explanations of how the location came to be omitted in the account (23) and earnest commissions to inquire further of Hythloday (43). This game underscores the claim that More's Utopia, although feigned in the imagination, is also in its way a place on earth—in deliberate contrast to Plato's polity, a product of the intellect about which Socrates says that "it is a pattern laid up in heaven" (st. 592).

Now, curiously, vague as is Utopia's location in place, its setting in time is very precise. Three exact dates are supplied: the date of its founding, according to the annals of Utopia 1,760 years before Hythloday's account in 1516 (121), that is, in 244 B.C.; the arrival of some Romans and Egyptians 1,200 years ago (109), that is, in the beginning of the fourth century A.D.; and the arrival of Hythloday's company, who were left behind during Amerigo Vespucci's last voyage which took place in 1504.

Each of these dates is significant. Utopia's present government was founded in the first year of the rule of King Agis IV of Sparta, who lost his life in an unsuccessful attempt to revive the long-lived—but far short of perpetual—constitution of Sparta's original lawgiver, Lycurgus. Lycurgus had instituted "a common way of life" not unlike that of Utopus except

that land was privately held, though equally shared out, and not within the disposal of the holder; this latter provision had been nullified by a law that, Plutarch says, was “the ruin of the best state of the commonwealth,” since it permitted the accumulation of wealth (*Life of Agis*, ch. V). Utopia is thus marked as Sparta’s purer and stabler double.

The Romans and Egyptians—note, no Greeks—arrived just before Constantine made Christianity the Roman state religion, so that these bearers of the useful arts and inventions of Rome and perhaps of the sectarian wisdom of Egypt might be understood to have come without either the texts of the waning Greek philosophy (159) or the news of the rising Christian faith. And finally, Hythloday arrives with a light load of humanistic learning (which—a clever touch—a monkey has well chewed into).

The effect of these three dates is to mark the Utopians as being outside of the tragedies and passions, the rises and declines of our, human, history. They have a beginning but no genesis—Utopus simply lifts a “rude and wild people to that excellent perfection in all good fashions, humanity, and civil gentleness, wherein they now go beyond all the people of the world . . .” (113). Hence they live in natural but not in human times, they are not atemporal but they *are*, to use a modern term, ahistoric, that is to say, they are not bound by the conditions that arise from prior human action and passion, in particular from that primeval historical event for Christians, *the fall of man*. Hythloday startlingly observes of the Utopians that if their chronicles are to be believed “cities were there before men were here” (107). In other words, the Utopians are not descended from Adam, since they antedate him, nor, it would follow, are they creatures in the sense of *Genesis*, namely such as are capable of rebellion against their creator.

More’s friend Budé was therefore right when in his prefatory letter he named Utopia alternately “Udepotia” (No-when) (11), if that is taken to mean something more significant than merely “at no time,” namely, “outside the epoch of created humanity.” But he was, as we shall see, wrong in naming it also “Hagnopolis” (Holy City) (13), that is, in considering it the New Jerusalem. [Here Bacon’s new Pacific, that is to say, peaceful, Atlantis is more in the spirit of More’s secular city, as Bacon signifies by calling the Atlantic capital “Bensalem” (*Good Salem*), as opposed to “Hierusalem” (*Holy Salem*).

The diverse treatment of place and time in Utopia rests, of course, on the fact that communities very remote from each other in place yet share the same time. So the land Utopia is sufficiently an imaginary place in being simply a New World, *terra incognita*, but the Utopian inhabitants must be distinguished as being imaginary natures by living through a time precisely parallel to, and hence vividly distinguishable from, ours.

## 6. More’s Utopia as the “First City” of Plato’s Republic

A very good way further to define Utopia as a city having its place and time in the imagination is to see it in the light of its ostensible source and

defeated rival, the polity that is preeminently the product of the intellect, namely that set out in Plato's *Republic*. Plato is the name most frequently in Hythloday's mouth, although he has that reduced view of the Platonic teachings that will turn out to be appropriate to his enterprise. Now when he particularly speaks of "those things that Plato feigneth in his weal-public or that the Utopians do in theirs," he is referring to Utopia's communism.

In Plato's dialogue Socrates raises the question "What is justice?" The way of answering this question assumes that justice is to be found in the relation of the parts of the human soul and that political communities are magnified expressions of these relations. He therefore constructs a sequence of three cities, each arising by the addition of a part of the soul and corresponding to the dominance of that part, proceeding in order from the most supine and common to the most superior and rare constituent of the soul.

Now the city in which a common way of life obtains is only the third city, which is under the dominion of the reasonable part of the soul, that is to say, which is ruled by philosopher kings. And even in this, the "philosophical city," only the rulers and their warrior auxiliaries live communally: ". . . no one was to have any of the ordinary possessions of mankind. They were to be warrior athletes and guardians, receiving from the other citizens instead of annual payment only their maintenance . . ." (st. 543). This is the first principle of unity of the philosopher's city; the second, and as Socrates acknowledges, even more offensive one is "that the wives of our guardians are to be common, and their children common and no person is to know his own child, nor any child his parent" (st. 457).

Since the social foundation of Utopia is the family, or rather the extended family or household (135), it certainly does not share the human aspect of Socrates' communism. But neither does it share the economic one.

The actual title of the book referred to as *Utopia* is *On The Best State of the Commonwealth* (47). The Latin term translated by "commonwealth" is "res publica." Sir Thomas Elyot, one of More's posthumous circle, in his *Book named the Governor*, speaks of the implications of this translation, referring to those who "do suppose it so to be called for that, that everything should be to all men in common without discrepance of an estate or condition" (I, 1). Hythloday more than once alludes to this meaning of shared wealth. And precisely here lies the distinction between the two "republics," Utopia and the philosopher's city: The communism of the latter is an ascetic communism of poverty and deprivation (st. 466), while Utopian communism means shared or common wealth or well-being (239). If Utopia has anything to do with Plato's polity, it is not with its third or philosophical city—as Peter Giles' poem had hinted.

The first Socratic city corresponds to the desiring part of the soul and has two stages. In the beginning there arises a "city of craftsmen," a small,

simple, moderate, and merry community based on division of labor for the purpose of satisfying basic necessities (st. 370). Then, as desires become more complex and luxurious, the city of craftsmen, which Socrates calls the "true and healthy city," undergoes a transformation and becomes, in his word, feverish. To the simple crafts are added the arts of the embroiderer, gold and ivory are used, and people devoted to "forms and colors" are introduced into the city (st. 373). This inflammation of desire makes the city predatory and brings about the formation of a warrior class, whose presence will institute the second city.

Now Utopia clearly corresponds to this first city, the "true and healthy city" of craftsmen. There is a sign of this in the following. When Socrates' interlocutor Glaucus first hears a description of their simple and healthy banquets, he exclaims that this is a "city of pigs" (st. 372), by which he does not mean that they wallow but that they like simple and natural foods. Accordingly, the lowest official of Utopia, who sits over thirty families and whose chief function is the control of idleness, is one "which in their old language is called the Syphogrant, and by a newer name the Philarch" (123). Both terms are Greek (for the Utopians are said to be descended from the Greeks); phylarch means "tribal ruler," but syphogrant means "pig-sty elder." The next higher officials, who rule over ten sties, are called "tranibors" or "protophylarchs," namely, "first tribal rulers" or "plain [or clear] eaters," meaning I suppose, that they eat perspicuously prepared dishes.

Furthermore, the craftsmen of Socrates' city are limited to farmers, weavers, shoemakers, carpenters, smiths, and merchants (st. 370). The Utopians also limit their crafts to farming, which all alike do, and to these special crafts: wool and linen working, masonry and metal working, and merchandising (125). The Utopians, like the Socratic craftsmen, have common banquets with converse and music (145).

But the Utopians never become luxurious. With them that sophistication of the desires that is the occasion for the genesis of the second, the warrior, city never arises. The part of the soul that dominates in this second city is called by Socrates "spiritedness" (st. 375), which is a certain readiness to righteous wrath and a disposition to honor. As we have seen, the warring element is directly consequent on complexity of desire, especially on a taste for magnificence and splendor—whence, Socrates says, arise all evils in cities (st. 373), although it is from this spirited element in turn that philosophy arises in Socrates' city, a good alongside evils.

Magnificence, however, is totally absent in Utopia. The sign of this is that there gold, the material of splendor and property, is debased into the metal of bonds and baubles (153). This is a consequence of "the community of their life and living without any occupying of money, by the which thing only"—to continue More's criticism of Utopia quoted above—"all nobility, magnificence, worship, honour, and majesty, the true ornaments and honours, as the common opinion is, of the commonwealth, utterly be overthrown and destroyed . . ." (245). The Utopians

prefer comfort to honor. To be sure, they too make war, though only in defense of their borders or their friends' rights, for they regard it with loathing as beastly (199), and they have no special class of warriors and no "chivalry"; their soldiers are the citizens of the land supplemented by mercenaries whenever possible. These citizen soldiers fight bravely, but they have no taste for gallantry, and "count nothing so much against glory as glory gotten in war" (201), always preferring to win through calculation and cunning, if possible. Among the Utopians only one class of people is rewarded by a marked display of honor—the virtuous dead (225).

### 7. The Utopians as a People Without Pride

The next question is what More means to signify by thus truncating the *Republic* in associating his Utopia with Plato's city of craftsmen.

Plato's first city is a *natural* city that arises naturally and whose citizens are close to nature, if nature is taken as the given and stable appearance within and without men. In this sense Utopia too is a natural city. As a sign of this, Utopians are said to have a language resembling Persian (181). For the description of the Persians in Herodotus' *History* (I, 131), which, incidentally, Hythloday brings to Utopia, shows them as worshipers of nature who use no images, and who, unlike the Greeks and Christians, do not believe that the gods have the same nature as men, that is, that they can be imaged or made incarnate in human form. All this holds of the Utopians, of whom some are, to be sure, radical humanists who pray to a man as the highest god, but of whom many are pantheists and many worship the moon or one of the planets, while all agree on the worship of a sun god, who is the artificer of the universe and bears the Persian name Mithras (217)—It is only appropriate that the land that is a nowhere of the imagination [Nusquama, as More called it in Latin (xv)] cannot contain God the Creator, who according to Augustine has "nowhere a place" (nusquama locus) in the imaginative part of memory (X, 26).

So also all the crafts of Utopia are close to nature and, of course, particularly so the universal craft, farming. Sometimes the Utopians themselves act as a force of nature, as when King Utopus, the founder of Utopia, like a more felicitous Xerxes, cut the channel that made Utopia into an island (113), or when the chicks they artificially hatch adopt them as mothers (115), or when they transplant whole forests to have a closer source of wood (179). And they appear natural—their woollen garments, for instance, are natural in color. So even their artifice is an intelligent and familiar adaptation of nature to their own use; Utopia represents a perfect fusion of artifice and nature.

Thus the "unchristian" Utopians are not so much pagans as children of nature. This can be put another way.

To say that the Utopians correspond to the inhabitants of Plato's first city only, is to say that they are lacking in certain principles of the soul, particularly in that which gives rise to and dominates the second or

warrior city and occasions in it magnificence, honor, and luxury—spiritedness, that is, self-assertion. Now the Christian translation of the faculty of spiritedness is *the vice of pride*.

Pride, “the craving for undue exaltation,” says Augustine in his *City of God* (XIV, 13), was the origin of our evil will, that corruption of our nature that causes a self-assertive craving for forbidden fruit because it is forbidden. Pride is thus the origin of perversion in the nature of man, and as More says in his *Four Last Things* (“Of Pride”), “the very head and root of all sins,” among which wrath and envy are the first and best known as children of pride, but which include even “gluttony, sloth, and lechery.” Now as Hythloday points out, the Utopians have no such perverse feelings and pleasures—a sure sign of which is in their music, which expresses even their strongest affections without that consequent civil disruption that the wise lawgivers of ordinary mortals fear (Plato, *Laws* II). They have indeed no “taste infected by the sickness of sin”; they never prefer the bitter to the sweet, would never “liefer eat tar than treacle” (*Four Last Things*, “Infected Taste”); their desires are all satisfied by natural objects; they do not know the inverted pleasure of self-love; they are never unnatural. This is the case precisely because the Utopians were *not created* and therefore do not know that rebellion of the creature against its creator, called the fall of man, which is the original case of perverse pleasure. Hence they, unlike our pagans, are incapable of salvation by conversion to Christianity, although they absorb easily—for they are facile in absorbing everything profitable (109)—those features of Christianity superficially congenial to them (219). So it is by reason of their Utopian nature that Hythloday leaves them as “unchristian” as before his coming and only ostensibly because there is no priest among his company. It is then merely a consequence of their nature that their own teachings, which simply support their practice, are implicitly in opposition to Christianity on the crucial matter of the origin of sin. For they are, as we shall see in a moment, Epicureans, and a first dictum of the Epicureans is that “nothing comes out of nothing.” But Augustine, again in *The City of God*, explains of fallen humanity “that it is a nature, this is because it is made by God; but that it falls away from Him, this is because it is made of nothing” (XIV, 13). The Utopians, then, not being descended from Adam, do not know the “serpent from hell,” as Hythloday calls pride (243), identifying it with the tempter in the tree. “This hellhound,” so Hythloday concludes his narration, “. . . is so deeply rooted in men’s breasts, that she cannot be plucked out.” Among the Utopians alone “the chief causes of ambition and sedition with other vices be plucked up by the roots. . . .” By this is not meant that individuals do not, somewhat unaccountably, on occasion go wrong (185), but that private crime is rare and political crime absent, so that there is among them an occasional private crime (187) but no large-scale manifestation of sin—they do not share the human condition. They display the characteristic conditionless character of imaginary cities in the form of original sinlessness.

In his youth More read a series of well-attended lectures on Augustine’s

*City of God*, so we may well suppose that he considered the relation of his Utopia to the two cities of Augustine's work, which "have been formed by two loves: the earthly city by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God even to the contempt of self" (XIV, 28). He must have conceived of the Utopians as a *tertium quid* whose nature is *nothing but* absence of perversion, who have neither contempt of God nor, as we shall see, contempt of self. Consequently they are made to inhabit an earthly paradise that displays the essential flat character of the painted city of the imagination: The missing dimension of the "exquisite platform" is original human evil, which, as the bas relief of nonbeing, lies beyond the likeness-making imagination. For the pictorial imagination, which in civil poetry touches badness with pleasure and turns terror into magnificence, in political poetry appropriately overlooks evil.

#### 8. Utopia as a Community of Pleasure

But if Utopia is privative with respect to pride, it is positive with respect to pleasure. Freedom from the vices of the will is the particular condition that leaves the Utopians to the enjoyment of their goods, and that enjoyment is the end and center of their community. What is its nature? To answer that question, we must examine their education and their "philosophy."

All major utopias follow Plato's *Republic* in being essentially "educational provinces," transforming Socrates' deliberately imageless program of learning (st. 529) into vivid pictures of ideal institutions of instruction and inquiry. In the *Republic* itself, education forms both the political beginning and the philosophical end of the city. Campanella's *City of the Sun* is itself nothing but a large teaching model, a museum for the induction of the citizens into the secrets of the cosmos; Andreae's *Christianopolis* presents a vivid picture of a perfect Protestant school; and Bacon's *New Atlantis* is dominated by the College of the Six Days Works, dedicated to the "interpretation of nature" for the sake of its mastery. But in the first Utopia this preoccupation takes a strange, although appropriate, form.

For only in the island of Utopia is education reduced to a pleasure, which, moreover, has pleasure for its object of concern. This view is encouraged by the rule of Utopian life, a firm disposition of time with respect to work and study, similar to that of a monastic order, as found in *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries* (for example, ch. 48, "On the Daily Manual Labor"). Under it, the life of leisure, the classical condition for liberal learning, is replaced by a life of scheduled work with time freed for the election of lecture courses, and almost all of Utopia is indeed up before dawn to indulge in this superior amusement (129). But such activity plays the central role neither in forming rulers—Utopia is governed not by philosopher kings but by learned officials—nor in making citizens—when Utopians say "education," they do not mean mainly instruction in their doctrines and letters but a rearing among

their own good institutions (159) supplemented by moral training directed by the priests (229). Nor, finally, does it lead to some inquiry whose end is beyond the city. Utopia, which surpasses Plato's city in being a living expression of philosophy, is itself without it—Peter Giles cleverly expresses this in his poem by making the Utopian word for “philosophy” refer to the Egyptian sect of Gymnosophoi, the “Naked Sages,” worshipers of the Nile, whose simplicity of life was accompanied by great meagerness of thought and whose antics More and Giles will have found described in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (VI, 6 ff.).

The liberal arts are, to be sure, studied in Utopia [the Utopians have, without hearing of a single one of our philosophers (159), made the same discoveries in learning as the Europeans], though Hythloday never mentions a book of their own. Our *trivium*, which deals with the arts of language under grammar, rhetoric, and logic, is reduced by them to one *useful* art, dialectics, “the ways of reasoning which reasoning has observed useful for investigating things” as More defines it in a letter to Dorp.<sup>11</sup> Hythloday emphasizes their lack of concern with pure logic. They have no ability at all for speculating on any “second intention” or universal (159), the reflective product of the intellect “which,” as More says elsewhere, “is nowhere” (437). No-place has nothing that is nowhere, no intellectual beings.

They possess the full *quadrivium*, which concerns the world of nature, and in it especially pursue astronomy (159), for they regard the world as a spectacle made for man—in fact the whole section on education appropriately comes within the section on sightseeing (145). They—characteristically—regard medicine as among the most useful branches of philosophy.

Now what characterizes this education is clearly the absence of almost all philosophy, and first of all an absence of physics understood as the inquiry into causes; they confine themselves to engaging in desultory and inconclusive debates, inventing new theories to add to those of the ancients (161). Second, there is a notable absence of politics; inquiries concerning “the best state of the commonwealth” are absent in the commonwealth that is the consequence of such interests. Public political debate outside the senate of tranibors is a capital offense (125). This prohibition is borrowed from the *Laws*, Plato's book on the second best but possible city, which, as one might expect, furnishes Utopia with more of its fundamental positive law than does the unrealizable *Republic*. More cites the relevant passage, significantly, in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*:

Plato, the great philosopher, specially forbiddeth those as be not admitted thereunto, nor men meet therefore, to meddle much and embusye themselves in reasoning and

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<sup>11</sup> October 21, 1515. *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. E. F. Rogers (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 15.

disputing upon the temporal laws of the city, which would not be reasoned upon but by folks meet therefore, and in place convenient [III, 16].

And finally, as for metaphysics, that is, inquiries into being or god, they have none, but for their highest inquiry they conduct debates “in the part of philosophy which entreateth of manners and virtue,” where they consider not “the good” but the various goods of soul and body. Having thus replaced metaphysics by ethics, their chief question is:

in what thing, be it one or more, the felicity of man consisteth. But in this point they seem almost too much given and inclined to the opinion of them which defend pleasure, wherein they determine either all or the chiefest part of men’s felicity to rest. And (which is more to be marvelled at) their defense of this so dainty and delicate an opinion they fetch even from their grave, sharp, bitter and rigorous religion [161].

Indeed they never have any philosophical discussions without resorting to religious principles (161), thus employing the exact converse of More’s often repeated contention that reason should and can serve religion (*Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, I, 23) and that theology is the end of a liberal education (Letter to Oxford University, March 29, 1518). The religious principles that they employ are two: They believe in a wise providence that governs the world and ordains felicity for man and in the immortality of the soul and its reward and punishment after death (161). In all other respects Utopians are free to choose what religious practices please them, but these two principles they are strictly forbidden to deny (221), for, as we shall see, they are the requirements of a communal pursuit of pleasure. In other words, their religious dogma has a political object; again Utopia borrows from the *Laws* (X).

Beyond this they have a public ritual, but as nature worshipers, no scripture or revelation. They hold their views as the best attainable by man’s reason “unless godlier be inspired into man from heaven” (179). But this is not the case, for the Utopians have no revelation of their own, nor does Hythloday—who plays among them the role of a Renaissance scholar, reviving for them the Greek strain of their partly Hellenic and partly Persian heritage by bringing them Plato, Aristotle, Homer, and the Greek tragedians (181)—bring them a Bible or teach them Hebrew. Indeed, in *Utopia* the Hebrew references characteristic of succeeding utopias, like Solomon’s House of the *New Atlantis*, the island Caphar Salama of *Christianopolis*, and the cabalistic background of the *City of the Sun*, are conspicuously absent.

Now the content of their doctrines of pleasure is, as one might guess, what we would call Epicurean, such as is conveniently set out in Cicero’s *De Finibus* (I). It is the notoriously apolitical teaching of Epicurus modified to become the political philosophy of the most unlikely republic ever devised—a stable community of pleasure, “a commonwealth as shall continue and last not only wealthily, but also . . . shall endure for ever” (245).

These are the modifications the Utopians make: The Epicureans believe

that the gods, if there are any, do not guide the world—as mentioned before, the Utopians assert divine providence presumably because without it the natural circumstances of man would not necessarily be conducive to pleasure. The Epicureans believe that the soul dissolves with the body—the Utopians require the immortality of the soul to assure that the calculus of pleasures is not so short term as to admit impermissible or false pleasures. The Epicureans believe in private property (449)—the Utopians hold wealth in common for they regard all wealth as “*materia voluptatis*,” the material of pleasure (165), though they abate their communism to the degree that privacy is necessary to pleasure; this is why they base their society on the family and why the only fixed punishments they have deal with the violation of its privacy (191).

As far as the chief doctrine of Epicurus, that pleasure is the highest good, is concerned, they agree, but:

they think not felicity to rest in all pleasure, but only in that pleasure that is good and honest, and that hereto as to perfect blessedness our nature is allured and drawn even of virtue, whereto only they that be of the contrary opinion do attribute felicity. For they define virtue to be life ordered according to nature and that we be hereunto ordained by God. And that he doth follow the course of nature, which in desiring and refusing things is ruled by reason [163].

Now they “of the contrary opinion” to the Utopians, who think that the chief good is virtue, are those called among us Stoics, and it is a chief saying among them that the chief good is “to live in agreement and in harmony with nature” (*De Finibus*, III, 9). It follows that the Utopians find it possible to absorb the Stoic position, which means that they obviate the question of the priority of virtue and pleasure as ends among which a choice must be made, the reflection on which choice was precisely what ennobled the pagan philosophers.

In this they argue as follows. They say that the virtue most peculiarly belonging to human beings is “humanity,” implying by this that virtue is simply the realization of man’s essential nature. “Now the most earnest and painful followers of virtue and haters of pleasure exhort you to relieve the lack and misery of others praising such deeds as humanity.” Hence the Utopians convert the second Christian commandment (*Mark* 12:31) into the merry maxim “Love thyself as thy neighbor”:

Then, if it be a point of humanity for man to bring health and comfort to man . . . and . . . to restore them to joy, that is to say to pleasure, why may it not be said that nature doth provoke every man to do the same for himself? . . . Therefore even nature . . . prescribeth to us . . . pleasure, as the end of all our operations [163].

Thus virtue itself is nothing but an argument for and an instrument of pleasure, understood, however, in such a way as to become the basis for a theory of private and social contracts:

But in that nature doth allow and provoke men one to help another live merrily . . . verily she commandeth thee to use diligent circumspection, that thou do not so seek for thine own commodities, that thou procure others’ incommodities. Wherefore their opinion is, that not only covenants and bargains made among private

men ought to be well and faithfully fulfilled, observed, and kept, but also common laws, which either a good prince hath justly published, or else the people, neither oppressed with tyranny, neither deceived by fraud and guile, hath by their common consent constituted and ratified concerning the partition of the commodities of life, that is to say, the matter of pleasure (165).

In this way the Utopians institute a political community based, not merely on the pursuit, but on the actual procuring, of pleasure. It is a community based on nature, their unhumanly natural nature, and therefore stable—a community that "shall endure for ever," since it knows no political problem. There exists a Latin epigram by More whose title is the name of the Utopian book turned into a question, that is, "What is the Best State of the Commonwealth?" In it More asks what is better, a king or a senate. Having decided in favor of a senate, which "would occupy a position between good and bad," while a king would be either good or bad, mostly the latter, he stops himself and points out the futility of the inquiry:

Is there anywhere a people upon whom you yourself, by your own decision, can impose either a king or a senate? If this does lie within your power, you are king. Stop considering to whom you may give power. The prior question is, whether there is a need to give it at all [No. 182].<sup>12</sup>

In *The Best State of the Commonwealth*, More gives himself, or rather King Utopus, the pleasure of kingship and duly institutes the senate of tranibors, but the "prior question" of the epigram, the question of power, is obviated in the island of the Utopians. Their first question needs to be only which pleasures are true and which false.

To help their citizens make this discrimination is the one discernible serious object of their education. By false or "counterfeit" pleasures are, of course, meant those that run counter to natural desire, for "pleasure they call every motion and state of the body or mind wherein man has actually delectation." False pleasures are therefore *perverse* pleasures, namely, those that yield no intrinsically pleasing state, but are pursued mostly for the sake of asserting oneself. First among these are the pleasures that result from a "futile conspiracy" of men, beginning with the mistaken pleasure of magnificence in dress, and going on to the pleasure taken in honor and in nobility derived from property. Thus the prideful pleasure of conspicuous consumption would be the cardinal sin of Utopia (139).

Of the genuine pleasures, the most extensively described are those of the body that are attached to the natural functions, such as elimination, and, in general, health, which is not only considered a positive but the fundamental pleasure (173). Then come the aesthetic pleasures, such as the perception of musical consonance and beautiful forms—natural

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<sup>12</sup> *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. L. Bradner and C. A. Lynch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 205.

forms, for they apparently have no pictorial art; these too are by them considered pleasures of the body (177).

The pleasures of the soul, although the Utopians are said to value them most highly, are disposed of in three sentences. They consist of the use of the intellect, of the sweetness arising from contemplation of the truth, and of pleasant recollections of a virtuous life. Clearly that activity of the soul about which there can be worthwhile discourse, the pursuit of being, which is at the center of Plato's city and which Hythloday's reading of the *Republic* omits, is neither painless nor unspirited nor unsubversive enough for Utopia. To put it another way: Utopia knows no happiness.

In sum, Utopian pleasures are reinterpretations of pleasure (*voluptas*) into pleasantness (*jocunditas*), and it is with respect to the gentle character of their pleasures that the Utopians can be said (as they sometimes are) to be humanists, namely, in that sense in which humanism means self-cultivation by means of human studies and the pursuit of concomitant urbanities (135). It is in this respect that More paints, with real delight, avocations and tastes close to his own: the growing of gardens, banquets attended by music and kindly conversation between young and old, simplicity of dress and contempt of ornament, the enjoyment of the spectacles of nature, particularly the heavens, the pleasures of erudition, and most characteristically, the study of Greek. But these details are only the froth on the flow of the imaginative narration.

## 9. The Uses of Utopia

Utopia, then, is a land of pleasure without pride. When Erasmus, in his biographical sketch of More, says of this book entitled *On the Best State of the Commonwealth*, that in it More "proposed to illustrate the source and spring of political evil," he must mean just this—that More in his Utopia has disclosed and eradicated the root of all evil in pride. Erasmus goes on to say that More first, at his leisure, wrote the second book (which contains Hythloday's narrative of Utopia) and "recognizing the need for it" hastily added the first (Letter to Hutten, 1519). Where was the need to prefix this latter book, which at first sight seems to contain merely the obverse of Utopia, an account of the particular political evils of More's England together with the *specific* cures Hythloday had found among the Polylerites, the Achorians, and the Macarians, peoples that he had visited before he found the *radical* cure in his last discovery, Utopia?

The answer is in this: It is "utopian" in the derogatory sense of the term to paint a pattern of a political community from which human evil is radically removed, and it is culpably futile to do so if the plan is set out as a straight political proposal. But when Hythloday solemnly closes, saying that all the world would long ago have been brought under the laws of Utopia "were it not that one only beast, the princess and mother of all mischief, Pride doth withstand and let it," he is taking a fierce pleasure in vitiating the book by underscoring precisely the futility of his narrative. Hence the first book was written to rehabilitate the second and contains *directions for the proper use of utopias*.

That More was intensely sensitive to the use to which political writings might be put is shown by the fate of his *History of King Richard III*, a book written just before the *Utopia* and in the same year that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. Richard III and his cohorts, especially the wickedly well-spoken Buckingham,<sup>13</sup> are the perfect and vivid incarnation of tyranny presented with all the vigorous beauty of a still fresh language—for this history, written almost simultaneously in Latin and in the vernacular, is the first such undertaking composed in English. There is reason to think that it was intended for the instruction of the young English monarch on whose business More was when he wrote the *Utopia* and with whose praise it begins, Henry VIII. But as eagerly as More forwarded the publication of the Latin *Utopia* abroad, so carefully did he suppress the English *History* at home, leaving it unfinished and unpublished, presumably because he had begun to fear that Henry would use it, not as intended, for a horrible example, but as instruction in the perfection of wickedness, in the manner of *The Prince*. For in contrast to Machiavelli, who, in a chapter inveighing against "imagined republics and principalities" (for very un-Morean reasons), threatens with ruin him "who abandons what is done for what ought to be done" and advises the prince "to learn how not to be good" (ch. XV), More thought that in counseling a king one must "ever tell him what he ought to do, but never what he is able to do" (Harpfield, *Life*, "After his resignation").

Furthermore, More was at the time of the writing of *Utopia* (1516) in his own behalf intensely concerned with the problem of giving political advice. Averse as he was to court life, he was being urgently invited to join the king's council—an invitation he was, after working out the first book of the *Utopia*, bound to follow.

This first book is sometimes, appropriately, called a "dialogue on counsel" (xxxvii). For the occasion of Hythloday's relation of the evils of England is his decided refusal of Peter Giles' suggestion that he should get into a king's court to instruct him with examples and help him with counsel (55). Hythloday allows that he has learned in his travels of institutions that would cure the conditions he had so acutely observed in England, but he shows by serious and comical examples how his solutions would never be taken seriously at court.

Raphael Hythloday's first name is Hebrew for "the physician of health," and his last name is Greek for "knowing in babble." Hythloday brings salvation, which is, first, in itself impossible, and which he, secondly, even refuses to advocate in the places that matter. He is a babler on two counts.

More himself now attacks Hythloday, pointing out to him his misconstruction of Plato:

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<sup>13</sup> *The History of King Richard III, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 2, ed. R. S. Sylvester (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 28 ff.

For whereas your Plato judgeth that weal-publics shall by this means attain perfect felicity, either if philosophers be kings, or else if kings give themselves to the study of philosophy, how far, I pray you, shall commonwealths then be from felicity, if philosophers will not vouchsafe to instruct kings with their good counsel? [87].

Hythloday objects that philosophy can have no power among kings. More counters:

Indeed, quoth I, this school philosophy (*philosophia scholastica*) hath not which thinketh all things meet for every place. But there is another philosophy more civil (*philosophia civilior*), which knoweth, as ye would say, her own stage. . . . And this is the philosophy you must use [99].

The "Citizen and Sheriff of the Famous City of London"(1), king's councillor to be, and future Lord Chancellor of England then gives the content of this "more citizen-like philosophy," tacitly transmuted Plato's most radical proposal into practical wisdom:

If evil opinions and naughty persuasions cannot be utterly and quite plucked out of their hearts, if you cannot even as you would remedy vices which use and custom has confirmed, yet for this cause you must not leave and forsake the commonwealth. You must not forsake the ship in a tempest because you cannot rule and keep down the winds. No, nor you must not labor to drive into their heads new and strange information which you know well shall be nothing regarded with them that be of clear contrary minds. But you must with a crafty wile and a subtle train study and endeavor yourself, as much as in you lieth, to handle the matter wittily and handsomely for the purpose, and that which you cannot turn to good, so order it that it be not very bad. For it is not possible for all things to be well unless all men were good, which I think will not be yet this good many years.

Many books on counseling princes, such as Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince* and Machiavelli's *Prince*, were written in More's age; from these the *Utopia* differs in being a book of counsel for subjects and citizens, and its first advice to them is *not to inject utopia into their counsels*. It is an attack on radical politics among the advisors of rulers. It is a condemnation of Hythloday's impatience with conservative obtuseness (59), and of his interpretation of human sinfulness as social conspiracy (241). But what then is the profit, not in the book *Utopia*, but in the land Utopia of the second book, the ideal commonwealth, the place of absent evils, itself?

First of all it seems to me that Utopia negatively (only negatively, since this imagined country has no clearly identifiable polity—it is not even possible to say whether it is a monarchy) proposes a great political principle, true in fact and potent as a conviction: that originally and fundamentally communities are expressions of human nature and that the converse is not so much the case. This understanding of the book is, of course, at variance with what Utopia appears to exemplify, namely the reconstruction of human nature through a perfectly planned society—and what the utopias, particularly of the last century, like those of Fourier, Cabet, and Bellamy, which were programs seriously proposed for realiza-

tion, did in fact intend. Utopia is then a surreptitious conversion of the study of politics into the study of human nature.

And secondly, in pointing to human perverseness as the spoiler of politics and naming it pride (in which opinion More concurs with the author of the book named after the serpent of pride and the "King of the Proud," the *Leviathan*, II, 28) and by painting an "exquisite platform and pattern" of a prideless community, More shows positively, by means of ostensibly delightful detail, what it would mean to live in Utopia, what the life of pleasure in abstraction from the original human condition looks like, a lesson he drives home in his deeply ironical closing words: "In the mean time, as I cannot agree and consent to all things he said . . . so must I needs confess and grant that many things be in the Utopian weal-public which in our cities I may rather wish for than hope for" (247). Utopia, he means, is no more to be wished for than hoped for. The student of Utopia will, then, become very sensitive to that in proposals for supposedly viable societies based on gratification of desire, which really implies at once an *alteration of human nature* and the imposition of an unexpected new discipline. Utopia is, thus, an exemplary exercise in carrying out in all vividness the life implied in certain perennial political dreams and, conversely, in drawing forth the abstractions from the human condition that those dreams imply. In short, it is an education in recognizing *inadvertent* utopias, that is, political proposals based on false views of human nature.

Finally, Utopia, again by the negative influence of its imaginative realization, effects a kind of celebration of, and satisfaction in, the given human condition; it is an oblique praise of folly and fall contrasted with shallow joviality. In his last long work written in the Tower of London, and called *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, More argues that tribulation is the condition of salvation (I, 6), a truth that, even when it is not taken in its precise Christian meaning, exercises a powerful influence on the politics of those who believe it. The social eudemonism of *Utopia*, its most peculiarly "modern" aspect, turns out to be an edifying *trompe l'oeil*, vividly presented to be thoughtfully declined.

And last, Utopia is the convivial occasion for a kind of civic festivity, the communal game of making communities, a game for statesmen such as More and Bacon. More, who resembles Socrates both in many particulars of the mode of his life and the crucial parts of the manner of his death—on account of which Harpsfield calls him "our noble, new, Christian Socrates"—resembles him in nothing so much as in his serene playfulness. It was said of More that he "looks sadly when he means merrily," and he said of himself in his *Apology* that "a man may say full soth in game." The "Island of Utopia" is a "trifle" (letter to Tunstal, November 1516) written in that dissembling spirit, the spirit of irony. One of More's favorite writers, whom he and Erasmus had translated in his youth, was the ancient writer of comic and fantastical dialogues, Lucian. Hythloday brings his dialogues to the Utopians, who take special delight in him for "his many conceits and jests." Lucian wrote two accounts, the *Icaromenippus* and the *True Story*, of voyages to the moon, whence the foibles of

earth come into sharpest focus. The Utopians, that “facile and facetious” people, sober in pleasure and shallow in thought, equipped with golden chamber pots and followed about by loving chicks, are just such mat, reflected moon people—in fact the first thing Hythloday mentions about the island is that it is moon-shaped (111) and that before being isolated it had the occult name Abraxa, signifying “the highest heavens” (585). More can afford such jocosity, for, although like Socrates, himself a participant in dialogues, he is, unlike the latter, also their author—a writing Socrates. This effects a difference in the form of Socratic and Morean irony; the latter, being writer and interlocutor in one, can by sober speech from the inside of the dialogue control what merriment he has set afoot from the outside by inditing it. Consequently, the very form of the Utopian dialogue tends to turn it into a grand game.

More’s book is, therefore, an invitation to a common exercise of wit and imagination, intended to draw together a secular band in a merry and melancholy inquiry—a band distinct from, and yet not without reference to, the communion of saints representing the City of God on earth, a band of those who would like to be citizens of the best commonwealth. Just this is conveyed in the full title of the book as printed in the first edition:

A Truly Golden Booklet, as Salutary as it is Mirthful, on the Best State of the  
Common-Wealth and the New Island of Utopia.

#### 10. Utopias as a Genre

If, then, it is true that the book *Utopia*, a dialogue concerning a narration, contains views from which the author distances himself, that the land “Utopia” is a place of the imagination in which the roots of evil in human nature have been excised, and that the enterprise “utopia” yields a product of the imagination that is a community pictured “apart from philosophy,” what must be said of the many works commonly assigned to the “utopian tradition” that are quite different in character? In respect to the lineage of works of human art, as distinct from the growths of nature, it is a defensible claim that the first of a kind should be acknowledged as the truest of that kind. More’s *Utopia* is literally the original of the utopian tradition, a tradition that by now is so remote that it is quite justly said that “Utopia is dead.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one might argue—somewhat seriously—that *Utopia* had but two true successors, the community of pleasure called Thélème and the community without pride found in Houyhnhnm Land.

Nevertheless, the name is alive and the way its matter has changed is a perfect paradigm of the course of modernity. To summarize: The utopian

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<sup>14</sup> J. Shklar, “The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia,” *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, *op. cit.* Pt. II (Utopia is Dead), p. 102.

mode ceased to be *ironical* and became *oppositional*.<sup>15</sup> Utopias, instead of being peculiarly imaginary products, that is, political poetry, became rational discourses, that is, social theory; instead of being images of a small, self-sufficient, well-ordered political community, they became tracts advocating theoretical societies; and instead of being exercises in the understanding of human nature, they became *instruments of action*, proposed for universal realization—no-place instituted in the world (though it is only fair to point out that the term "utopian" is usually applied only from the outside, in a derogatory spirit, to such blueprints for future ideal communities).

But since even this transformed utopian enterprise, at its height in the last century, has worn thin, a revival of the utopian tradition has recently been proposed. A yet newer kind of utopia is demanded as a part of a new discipline sometimes called "futurology," the art of conjectures concerning the future:

The lack of any clear images of the style of life we are building is a cause of anxiety. . . . It is time that experts represented the many different outcomes which can be obtained by many different uses of our many and increasing possibilities. This representation should be in pictures, according to the utopian tradition. . . . Plot, as it were, the sequence of [the ordinary man's] pleasurable and unpleasurable impressions and now imagine what "a good day" should be. Picturing this "good day" is the first step into a modern utopia; then you will have to seek the condition which can bring about this "good day."<sup>16</sup>

Such new utopias would be *neither* ironical *nor* oppositional. They would differ by a world from the work that begins the tradition to which they are assigned and to which they do, by reason of being pictures of ostensibly desirable lives, belong. It is instructive to articulate the poles of opposition.

The new utopian enterprise would be a project proposed for experts by experts on the basis of a theory of social change—the original utopia was the felicitous find of a learned statesman at leisure, submitted to his friends for their delight. Hence the former is a program for making utopian programs and the latter a serious amusement for reflective citizens. The former is to be a project of the "creative" imagination, the deliberate

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<sup>15</sup> So K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, n.d.), p. 192: "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs. . . . Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time." I cannot resist pointing out that this definition also holds of insanity. On the other hand, the following relevant definition is to be found in Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities*: "Utopia signifies that experiment in which are observed the possible alterations of an element and the effects which it would call forth in that composite appearance which we call life" (I, ii, 62).

<sup>16</sup> B. de Jouvenel, "Utopia for Practical Purposes," *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, *op. cit.*, pp. 226 ff.

innovation of a variety of "life styles"—the latter was a work of the imaginative memory bringing up pictures of a purified past and unifying these into a unique polity based on settled principles. Hence the former is a matrix of plans for the future, of ways of directing the profusion of present possibilities, while the latter deliberately posited the impossible. And finally, the newest utopias will assume the "good day" to consist of the ephemeral pursuit of private pleasure, while More, in depicting a community of pleasure with permanence, holds his truth concerning the human condition, his Christian faith, in reserve, implying that the good life lies elsewhere than in the pleasures of Utopia.

As a recognized genre, utopian writing has, then, grown very remote from its beginnings, and thence arises an urgent question: Which form of the effort makes for a better state of the commonwealth?