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Peter New (Great Britain)

### THOMAS MORE, *UTOPIA*: FORM AS MODEL

To write with any confidence about the purposes of a book as notoriously enigmatic as *Utopia* may seem a very foolhardy enterprise even at this date. Some of the more tendentious interpretations which were put forward in the past, have been so convincingly challenged that they can no longer be regarded as seriously tenable: it would require wilful blindness to believe now that More's book was either a blueprint for a proto-Marxist state or an early plan for British imperialism. Yet disagreement remains such that of the two editors of the standard modern scholarly edition,<sup>1</sup> one regards the passages on Utopian religion and philosophy as a relatively insignificant *tour de force* ("humanistic intellectual fancy-work") and the other thinks them so important that he has written two books about them. And I have the temerity to believe that the first is mistaken and the second very gravely misinterprets what he rightly sees as important.

Literary texts are by nature permanently open to varied interpretation; but of *Utopia* there is not normal variety but a quite abnormal multiplicity of mutually contradictory interpretations. The reason, I think, lies not in an incompetence in either More or his critics, but in the particular nature of the book's form. Although it is concerned much more directly with ideas than with narrative, character or feelings, it does not present the ideas as an articulated body of thought to which responses might vary within a limited range. The reader is in fact quite deliberately made radically unsure how to respond. The man

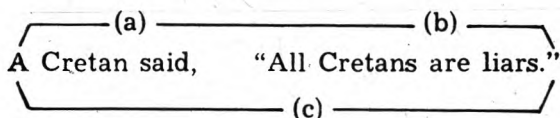
<sup>1</sup> I refer to the Yale edition (1965) and in the following sentences to J. H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation* (1973), p. 119, and to E. Surtz, *The Praise of Pleasure* (1957) and *The Praise of Wisdom* (1957).

who describes the island of Utopia has two names, one of which means 'Messenger of God' and the other 'Distributor of Nonsense'. Even those critics who can resist the temptation to convert the complexity of *Utopia* into the simplicity of a programme often find it difficult not to make in effect an exclusive choice between the two names. But like Erasmus's Moria (Folly) in the book he dedicated to his friend More, *The Praise of Folly*, Raphael Hythloday speaks both sense and nonsense; and in both books it is very largely left to the reader to sort out the sense from the nonsense. The reader is not told what to think; he is made to think.

The chief disadvantage of such a form is sadly obvious from the history of critical accounts and indeed from the history of the word 'utopia' itself: the point on which more critics are agreed than on any other is that More's imaginary island does not correspond to the current dictionary definition, "an ideally perfect state." The chief advantage is that the very act of reading becomes an educative intellectual effort. The reader is made to work his way through certain intellectual problems concerning political and moral life, just as in different sorts of fiction he is made to live through certain emotional problems concerning personal relationship. Throughout his life More was profoundly interested in education, and he was well acquainted with the ancient principle that one learns better what one is made to think through than what one is merely told. It is also not merely more effective but far more pleasurable. In fact the intellectual involvement required to sort out sense from nonsense takes the place of the imaginative involvement demanded by most forms of drama and novel. The writer of fiction of this kind is as dependent on suspiciousness in the reader as the novelist is on his imagination. Creative reading is in general more pleasurable than passive reading, and the particular kind of creative response required by a work such as *Utopia* can be seen as one of the primary sources of its aesthetic power. So the difficulty of form which has made criticism look more than ordinarily foolish has in itself two important purposes: to stretch the reader's moral intelligence and to give distinctive aesthetic pleasure.

In this essay I shall be concerned primarily with an analysis of Book I, since its function within the economy of the whole seems to me to be to create in the reader the frame of mind in which More wanted Book II to be read, that is, a radically questioning state of mind in which certain moral issues are seen to be profoundly difficult, but not ultimately insoluble. But before proceeding, I want to clarify the kind of literary reading which seems to me appropriate to a rather short tradition, confined, I think, in its pure form, to Erasmus, More and Swift, by dwelling shortly on the ancient paradox of the Cretan liar (A Cretan

said, "All Cretans are liars.") Discussion can be facilitated by setting it out thus:



On the face of it, this is a rather trivial puzzle: if the statement (b) is true, the Cretan (a) must be lying, therefore the statement (b) is untrue. But if we do not regard it as an isolated puzzle and try instead to envisage it in a literary context, we shall see some things central to the mode of works like *Utopia*. If, on the basis of what we know about him, we think the Cretan (a) is trying to speak the truth, we shall have to say that he obviously refutes himself, and must therefore be regarded as foolish; on the other hand, he may well be largely correct (have the wisdom of the Fool). Alternatively, if we think he is lying, his statement (b) may confirm our suspicions about him, but can tell us nothing reliable about other Cretans (application of the text to the world may be perilous). But so far 'liar' has been taken to mean someone who always lies, whereas we are well aware that no such person has ever lived. If we take 'liar' to mean only someone who lies sometimes, then clearly the Cretan (a) is almost certainly right and the form of the statement (c) would indicate, in a literary context, that he has self-knowledge of a wise man. In order to appreciate fully the total statement (c), we have then, firstly to decide, on the basis of what else we know of him, how reliable the speaker (a) is, and secondly to bring to bear some of our independent knowledge of human nature, though in the awareness that such a procedure is perilous. If Folly says, "All things are foolish", we shall have to be careful in deciding how far to believe her.

We can, however, go a little further. Statements of the form of (c) are only interesting when truth has the status it would self-evidently have had for More: that is, when it is agreed to be both verifiable and objective. If it is held that truth cannot be clearly distinguished from falsehood, the statement (b) becomes empty and (c) therefore totally uninteresting. If truth is held to be subjective, the statement (c) can only tell us that the Cretan (a) has a low opinion of his compatriots. Unless he is a character in a quite different sort of fiction, such as a modern novel, this also is uninteresting. The form is thus one which is enjoyed by those who perceive complexity but who envisage truth as verifiable and objective. It is not difficult to understand why in its pure shape it died out in the eighteenth century.

The following analysis will, then, be based on the dual assumption

that More wished to emphasise the immense difficulty of the questions raised by Raphael Hythloday's discourse, but that he did not regard them as ultimately unanswerable. This will place me in the unenviable position (unenviable because so frequently claimed by previous, mutually contradictory critics) of implying that I have understood the intentions of the book better than anyone else who has written about them. My own procedures will provide fitting ammunition to punish such arrogance where needed.

The relation between the two books of *Utopia* is far from obvious. J. H. Hexter has demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that the work falls into two parts, roughly but not exactly corresponding to the division into two books. One part is written in a discursive manner and consists of the description of the Utopian commonwealth; the other is in the form of a dialogue which is concerned with the question of counselling princes in sixteenth-century Europe. Hexter proves that the description was written first, in the Netherlands in 1515, and the dialogue some months later, when More had returned to London. But it remains uncertain whether More merely added the discussion of a problem which had become more directly important to him, or whether he had an aesthetic purpose in placing it where he did. I think the second of these views is correct, but I do not think that proof is available: all I hope to do is to persuade by accumulation of probability. Firstly, there is on the face of it little connection between the two parts. If More's preoccupations changed completely because his personal circumstances presented him with a new and difficult dilemma, one would expect him to have written a separate work in dialogue form, rather than to have cobbled a discussion about the political responsibility of a 'philosopher' to a traveller's tale about a land with alien institutions. But secondly, there are in fact several connections between the parts which I shall discuss below. If he merely added, then he spoils the coherence of what he had written in the Netherlands, which was foolish; but if the two parts interact, then he had good reason for joining them. Thirdly, Hexter can separate the parts so conclusively only because the seams are visible four centuries after they were made. This shows Hexter's intelligence; but it also shows that integration was not wholly successful. It would have been much easier, much more natural and much more likely to be undetectable, if More had simply written a Book II of dialogue between the characters referred to in a Book I of description, the dialogue taking up some aspects of the description and then moving into a more particular political issue. If a man, who as a Northern European Humanist regarded good writing as educationally and morally crucial, adopted a more difficult means

of achieving an untidier result, it seems sensible to assume he had good reason. I shall, then, assume that, in addition to its intrinsic interest, Book I has relevance to Book II. What I hope to prove is that, granted this assumption, the specific intention is that Book I should provide the reader with important clues as to how to respond to the more enigmatic Book II.

The most important of these clues is an emphasis on the dual nature of Raphael Hythloday, the man who can at times be taken to be speaking in praise of wisdom, in contrast to Moria speaking in praise of folly, yet who also distributes nonsense. But there are also other pointers to an ambivalent response.

In Book I Hythloday describes at some length the penal system of another country he has visited. As a system it is in some respects superior to what was current in Europe, though a certain scepticism must be reserved for something developed by a people whose name, Polylerites, may be translated 'People of much nonsense.' But in addition to providing a perspective on Europe, as Hythloday intends, the passage also provides a perspective on Utopia as he describes it later. The life of convicted criminals in the land of the Polylerites resembles extremely closely the life of honest citizens in Utopia. They are fed by the community; they are all dressed alike; they live in effect without money; they are confined to particular districts; the punishment for plotting to escape is just as severe as for actually escaping; informing is encouraged by high rewards; in general they are so regimented that they become "good" of necessity (*ut bonos esse necesse sit*). The most substantial difference is that, unlike the Utopians the Polylerite criminals have some prospect of ultimately earning liberty by good behaviour; though even this bears an ironic resemblance to the Utopians' use of the prospect of a happy after-life as an ultimate argument for behaving well. In short, the implication is that the Utopian social organization is more suitable for criminals than for free men. It is as a system for dealing with criminals and vagrants that such an organization has the provisional approval of Cardinal Morton.

Almost immediately, however, this perspective on life in Utopia is displaced by an opposite. In response to the proposal that English criminals and vagrants might be treated in this way, the Hanger-on at the Cardinal's table suggests that a third category of public nuisances, beggars, could be removed by forcing them to become monks and nuns. There is clearly in *Utopia* an element of the monastic way of life which is well known to have been admired by More. What may seem fitter for thieves than for honest citizens may in another perspective be a desirable means of achieving spiritual discipline.

But there are other pointers more specific than such vague indications of both approval and disapproval. One of the very few fictional proper names used in the book which is not pejorative is that of the Macarians, which means 'blessed.' Their king has to swear an oath at the beginning of his reign that he will never keep more than £ 1000 in his treasury at one time. The purposes of this are partly that he should have enough to quell any rebellion or invasion which might occur and to keep his country's economic system active, but primarily that he should not have enough to "encroach on the possessions of others." By this less drastic means they would achieve the public justice, which is the best purpose of the Utopians' total abolition of money, without substituting an almost penal austerity and regimentation for personal profit as a motive to work. But the specific reference is in the Macarians' primary purpose: the Utopians do "encroach on the possessions of others" in ways which are of very dubious morality. In the form of an unadvertised cross-reference the reader is given the means of questioning the desirability of a Utopian institutions and the consequent behaviour.

The clearest general indication of the complex response demanded by the book is in the passages concerning Cardinal Morton. He is described for us by Hythloday as a man whose wisdom, integrity, public service and congenial company command the admiration and liking not only of More but also of Hythloday himself. Unlike the lawyer, Morton responds with open though critical mind to Hythloday's description of the Polylerite penal system: it might be worth experimenting along such lines, though only experience would show if it would work, so the present system would have to remain in reserve in case the new one broke down. His wise caution is clearly contrasted with Hythloday's failure to see any reason why the new one should not be immediately adopted, as well as with the lawyer's irrational conservatism. As for the proposal of the Hanger-on that beggars should be forced to become monks, Morton's guests all take it "in earnest;" only Morton himself has the sense to take it "in jest." His subsequent remarks to the Friar make it clear that it is unprofitable to answer a fool with further folly. The proper response is to select from the words of the fool what wisdom one may, to laugh at the folly which remains, and then courteously to transfer one's attention to one's responsibilities: the episode is concluded with Morton "tactfully" changing the subject and soon leaving to attend to his public duties. Neither the bigot, to whom anything new is folly, nor the fool, who takes folly "in earnest," will be silenced; the wise man listens critically and in due course returns to his own tasks.

But the Morton episode provides an essentially simplified paradigm.

It indicates the kind of response which is appropriate, but not the difficulty of making it when the issues are as demanding as they are in Hythloday's description of the island. The difficulty is registered by the form of the dialogue between Hythloday and the character to whom More gives his own name. One of the main unifying strands running through Book I is a debate between 'More' and Hythloday concerning the role of a wise man in a political system dominated by fools, and although it has great intrinsic interest as an issue which faced More personally and has faced many others, its rhetorical function within the book as a whole is to emphasise that on difficult questions there is much which is cogent to be said on both sides. This intention is so successfully carried out that critics remain in almost exactly balanced disagreement about which character finally wins the argument, and some think the issue is deliberately left unresolved. As I suggested in considering the paradox of the Cretan liar, it seems to me, however, that More believed the matter to be finally resolvable despite its difficulty, and I shall therefore concentrate on trying to prove that the character 'More' wins. The importance of this to an interpretation of *Utopia* as a whole is that one effect of 'More's' victory here is to throw doubt on the validity of Hythloday's convictions about Utopia. A parallel analysis which I hope to undertake elsewhere will show what there is in Book II which undermines Hythloday's views. Ultimately Utopia is to be taken as a false ideal; but the route to that conclusion is not meant to be obvious. Many of the details are in fact never conclusive but remain provocative. (A society where all wear a kind of uniform is not attractive; but is the reason for that human vanity or a harmless desire for trivial expression of individual freedom?) Other details, as I shall try to show, are, after strenuous questioning by the reader, conclusive. But the effort is an essential part of the aesthetic and moral demand of the book.

Much of what Hythloday says in Book I clearly commands assent. In his very perceptive analysis of Book I, David Bevington<sup>2</sup> divides the main body of the argument into three stages, concerning respectively domestic policy, foreign policy and fiscal policy. In the second and third stages, 'More' capitulates so completely that he can put no answer forward at all. Hythloday's assertions that it would be hopeless for a wise man to attempt to moderate the desires of kings to conquer foreign land and to increase taxes are unchallenged in the book. On matters incidental to the main argument also, it is impossible to doubt that More the

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Bevington, *The Dialogue in Utopia: Two Sides to the Question*, "Studies in Philology" 58 (1961), pp. 496-509.



man and the writer wholly agreed with him. When Hythloday speaks of a king being chosen for the people's sake rather than for his own and as a shepherd who should care more for his flock than for himself, the Yale editors can produce very direct parallels from words written and spoken by More in his own voice. When he particularly emphasises the vices of Pride, Greed and Sloth as the roots of social and political evil, it is unthinkable that More would have wished him to be regarded as mistaken.

More's chief means of counterbalancing the weight of this body of sound thought, and thus holding open the more contentious issues, is the characterization of the two figures. This is not a novel and I do not wish to imply by the word "characterization" that we are made emotionally interested in them as individuals. But moral characteristics are attributed to them which should, I think, influence our response to the opinions they express more than is allowed for in previous critical accounts.

Apart from what he says on the contentious matters, little direct evidence is given concerning the moral character of 'More,' but what does emerge is very important. At the beginning of Book I, he comes across as a modest man, anxious primarily to emphasise the good qualities of others, and as fond of the company of friends. He is engaged in public service, on a diplomatic mission of some importance, but he is eager to return to his family, despite the strong pleasure he takes in the conversation of such men as Peter Giles. Although there is no question of name-dropping, his friends are well-known men of great moral intellectual stature. In particular, Tunstal, already renowned for integrity and learning, has just been promoted to high office by Henry VIII, and Peter Giles holds a high position in the public life of Antwerp. Emphasis is also put on Giles's modesty and hospitality and his desire to give pleasure to 'More.' 'More' is thus set in a historical context, among actual people, in a situation of honour, hospitality and good company. His fictional status is not that of, for example, Moria; he is as the title-page expresses it, "the renowned figure, Thomas More, Citizen and Sheriff of the famous city of Great Britain, London." This being so, I shall cease my concession to "sensitive critics" and put inverted commas round More's name from now on only when I think there is point in distinguishing the persona from the writer. For the most part I think there is no point: the More apparent to me is only once put in the position of stooge. It is Hythloday who has the fictional status of Moria, though he is by no means altogether a fool. The hints at a resemblance between More and the clearly idealised Cardinal Morton are emphasised at the end of Book II, when, though expressly disagreeing with Hythloday, he thinks

it best not to argue and with quiet tact and protective courtesy, "taking him by the hand," leads him in to supper.

In the prefatory letter from More to Giles,<sup>3</sup> these impressions are confirmed: in excusing his delay in publishing, More explains that his public duties are very extensive and that he believes spending time with his family to be a responsibility as well as a pleasure. But two other points of importance are added. More says he thinks Hythloday said the bridge at Amaurotum was five hundred paces long. His servant thinks two hundred must be deducted as the river there is only three hundred paces wide, and More says he will be guided finally by Giles's memory as he would prefer repeating an inaccuracy of Hythloday's to making deliberate alterations. Obviously this is not altogether serious: it is the sort of question which would have interested that fictional bishop who complained that he could not find on his map the countries visited by Gulliver. But at the same time, it does have the effect of establishing, with appropriate absence of solemnity, that Thomas More, Citizen of London, takes no responsibility for what he reports Hythloday as having said. The second point is even more important. More asks Giles to try to find Hythloday again so that he can check details, but also so that More can be sure he is not planning to publish a description of Utopia himself: More does not wish to steal the glory by forestalling him. He then goes on, in a passage aimed ostensibly at readers who will be unable or unwilling to understand the book, to imply a contrast between himself and Hythloday: "those persons who pleasantly and blithely indulge their inclinations seem to be very much better off than those who torment themselves with anxiety in order to publish something that may bring profit or pleasure to others, who nevertheless receive it with disdain or ingratitude." Writing up Hythloday's account has been largely a responsibility undertaken at personal cost; what pleasure it has included, More is prepared to resign to Hythloday if he chooses to claim it. But Hythloday evidently does not think the pleasures of writing outweigh the pains.

This is central to the moral character of Hythloday. When Peter Giles asks him, in Book I, why he does not put to use the wisdom he has acquired from his travels, by engaging in public service, the centre of Hythloday's reply is "I now live as I please" (*nunc sic vivo ut volo*). He has seen very clearly that the way to remain free to do as he pleases is to decline all responsibility and stay independent. There may be some irony in his contempt for court parasites: he is currently the guest of Giles and More; he gained provisions and a guide for his travels to Utopia through a "ruler's generosity;" in fact he has spent his life, and

<sup>3</sup> That is, the letter printed in all three of the important early editions.

intends to continue, as a permanent itinerant guest. But the important contrast is with More, sheriff, diplomat, and, in what time remains, writer of books he intends to benefit and please others. Hythloday's fundamental aim is to please himself. The difference extends to his attitude towards his family: in place of More's concern, Hythloday is "not greatly troubled about" his relatives and friends. With a very strong irony, in view of his admiration for the Utopians' contempt for possessions, he considers he performed all his duty towards his family long ago by distributing his possessions among them in his youth. Hythloday's personal isolation might be compared with the geographical isolation of Utopia, made as it was into an island by human effort under the direction of Utopus.<sup>4</sup> But Hythloday comes off worse even from that comparison: as the "Quatrain in the Utopian Vernacular" added by Peter Giles makes clear, Utopia is willing to share its benefits with others. Hythloday does not write a description of what he learnt there; indeed he is only drawn into giving an oral description of it in the course of defending his own choice of life.

The important contrast is, as I have stressed, with More, but the main debate is opened by Peter Giles in order to clarify the basis of Hythloday's thinking while keeping More's consistent. Peter Giles first puts the question less in terms of public service than of personal and family advancement. Hythloday's response, radically utilitarian, is that the greater pleasure lies in isolation. It is only then, when More introduces the alien concept of a *duty* to the commonwealth, that Hythloday starts arguing that no-one would listen to him. His ultimate end is his own pleasure. Consequently he never really understands what More says.

More's presentation of himself has been careful. He does not reject pleasure: he finds it in the company of his friends and family, and is grateful when Peter Giles finds it for him in the acquaintance of Hythloday. The primary difference is that it is not his ultimate end. Cardinal Morton, too, enjoys the company at his table, though in due course he leaves it, to attend to his responsibilities.

One can see how deeply infected with the principle of self-interest Hythloday's thinking is by glancing at the end of Book II, where he is introducing his diatribe against Pride: "Nor does it occur to me to doubt that a man's regard for his own interests or the authority of Christ our Saviour [...] would long ago have brought the whole world

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<sup>4</sup> In his stimulating article "*Si Hythlodaeo Credimus*": *Vision and Revision in Thomas More's Utopia*, "Soundings" 51 (1968), pp. 272-289, R. S. Sylvester points out that Hythloday "wrested permission" from Vespucci to be left behind: his exile is completely self-willed. One might add that the contrast with More is carried through in great detail: the church More attends in Antwerp is *Nôtre Dame*, "the most crowded with worshippers."

to adopt the laws of the Utopian commonwealth, had not one single monster [...] striven against it—I mean, Pride.” The order of thought in the first part of the sentence is radically characteristic of Hythloday. But the end of it is also ironic, for this diatribe against Pride is being delivered by a man who thinks all kings too corrupt ever to be influenced in the slightest by his borrowed wisdom. In his prefatory letter to Lupset, Budé elegantly contrasts More’s modesty with Hythloday’s pride by switching briefly from Latin into Greek for the purpose. But the point is made more delicately and with a fine dramatic sense when More takes the hectoring Hythloday by the hand and leads him in to supper, with the tactful flattery he clearly needs.

So in three important respects Hythloday resembles Moria: we know he is wholly fictional (unlike More); his ultimate good is pleasure; and he is proud. Moria names three of her attendants Pleasure, Self-love and Flattery. As I have stressed, this does not prevent Hythloday from being often right: even Moria is often right and Raphael Hythloday’s name itself suggests he is likely to be more often right than Moria. But when his views conflict with those of Thomas More, sheriff, diplomat, husband, father, and friend of famous Humanist scholars, the pressure to question them is extremely strong. As in *The Praise of Folly*, the reader is left to do much of the work of selecting wisdom from folly; but here the pull in both directions is stronger. As Hythloday speaks more sense than Moria, so More is introduced to indicate more firmly the basic form of the nonsense. How finely More calculated the balance is shown by the continuing disagreement among critics about where the sense ends and the nonsense begins. It now remains to attempt proof that the balance is tipped slightly, but nonetheless crucially, against Hythloday.

The basic premises of the two men are unmistakably clarified at the beginning of the major confrontation: self-interest against obligation. To Hythloday’s *sic vivo ut volo*, More’s immediate response is that it would be more worthy of a wise man to serve “the public interest, even if it involves some personal disadvantages.” But Hythloday immediately deflects the argument into questions of possibility rather than desirability. The line of his argument is: even if I preferred to serve, no-one would take any notice (“in disturbing my own peace and quiet, I should not promote the public interest”). The line of More’s is: even though the possibilities of success are limited, the obligation remains. There is thus a damaging but not immediately apparent circularity in Hythloday’s case: the counsel he proposes to offer is impossible, and he argues that since it is impossible that his counsel will be welcomed, it is not worth offering it. More replies that it would therefore seem sensible to offer counsel which is possible.

Initially, Hythloday puts forward two reasons why he will not be listened to: kings prefer conquering more kingdoms to administering well what they already have, and royal councillors are both bigotted and obsequious towards the chief royal favourites. In calling others bigotted he is not on strong ground. When he says, "it is but human nature that each man favour his own discoveries most", the reference to himself is obvious. And even he slips in a qualification, which he later forgets, to the point about kings: he says here "*almost* all monarchs" (my italics). But on the whole More accepts this point. As I have mentioned already, he agrees, in the second and third stages of the argument clarified by Bevington, that it is futile to oppose the territorial ambitions of kings or to reduce their income by moderating taxation. Or to be more precise, he agrees that it would be futile to oppose them head-on in the way Hythloday suggests. It is in the first area that he will not give ground ("I cannot change my mind"), the area of domestic policy concerning enclosure and the death-penalty for theft. This is clearly to one of More's persuasion the most important area, for what is at issue is justice. Through war and through heavy taxation, kings can cause suffering, but an unjust legal system can do worse than that: it can cause men not only to suffer but to do evil. Suffering is ultimate evil to one whose ultimate good is pleasure; to More suffering was an evil, but not ultimate evil.

One of the means by which More's victory, in this part of the dialogue, is indicated for the careful reader, has been clarified very well by Bevington. Hythloday is here not only speaking to More in 1515; he is reporting a discussion at the table of Cardinal Morton which took place in 1497. In 1497, enclosure was a social evil about which nothing was being done by the king or his councillors. But by 1515-1516, the government, under the direction of Wolsey, was acting on a large scale to remedy the evils of enclosure and to prevent further enclosure. Hythloday had every right to speak with such passion in 1497, but as an argument in 1515 that kings take no account of good counsel, the passage backfires on him completely. Much of course remained undone, but enough had been done to destroy his argument that good counsel is always rejected.

The other means is aimed very precisely at Hythloday's point about royal councillors. The most obvious is sometimes the most subtle. Morton is praised highly as a wise and virtuous man by Hythloday, who is arguing that wise men stay out of politics. But Morton, as he tells us, was in 1497 Lord Chancellor of England. In fact Hythloday even adds, "The king placed the greatest confidence in his advice, and the commonwealth seemed much to depend upon him." A man who can both say this and

argue that it is pointless for a wise man to attempt to influence a king, cannot altogether be relied on for accuracy of judgement or clarity of thought. A man who says this in the middle of such an argument might even be said to seem rather foolish. Morton is in fact so far from being bigotted that he is willing to entertain the possibility of experimenting with penalties against theft along the lines mentioned by Hythloday. The detail is of course fictional, like Hythloday. But Morton, though he has a function within the fiction, is not fictional: he stands as a factual, historical contradiction of Hythloday's argument that a truly wise and honest man will not succeed in public office. As to Hythloday's point about the obsequiousness of councillors towards court favourites, the episode registers that here he has hold of a half-truth. When the lawyer expresses disapproval of Hythloday's views, everyone present follows suit. But when Morton expresses approval immediately afterwards, they all vie in praising what they had just rejected with contempt. Hythloday's point is correct in so far as they praise particularly the detail added by the Cardinal; but another tacit implication is that when a wise man has attained the position held by Morton, the fools, flatterers and former bigots will follow his lead. Again the fundamental point is that a wise man can have effective political influence. Characteristically, it is made silently: the reader has to reflect in order to perceive it. Neither More nor Morton says very much, which might seem on a hasty reading to make the dialogue one-sided; but Hythloday's loquaciousness puts him in the unenviable company of the lawyer, the Hanger-on and the friar. "A fool uttereth all his mind." <sup>5</sup>

At the end of this first stage of the argument, the differences between the two men are again stressed. More uses the concept of *duty*: giving counsel which will benefit the commonwealth, he tells Hythloday, "is the most important part of your duty as it is the duty of every good man." Hythloday's reply is very much in character: he thinks first of advising through books rather than in person, and he would give his advice if kings were "ready" to take it—in other words if it were an easy undertaking. Yet he then goes on to reveal the total impossibility of the advice he has in mind: "If I proposed beneficial measures to some king and tried to uproot from his soul the seeds of evil and corruption ..." The difference between proposing beneficial measures and uprooting the seeds of evil in a man is a difference between the possible and the impossible, and Hythloday, characteristically, does not perceive it. Benefitting the commonwealth requires a change in human nature; but human nature cannot be changed by offering counsel to kings; there-

<sup>5</sup> *Proverbs* 29.11.

fore there is no point in trying to benefit the commonwealth. This is not an entirely foolish line of argument; but there is an element of childishness in it. ('If I can't make up the rules, I shan't play.')

Even though Hythloday clearly does win the next two stages of the argument, since More agrees that in foreign and fiscal policy a councillor will have little influence, this tendency to simplify and exaggerate persists and at least slightly weakens his case. The French king whom he uses as an example has, in his own words, "already for a long time" (*iam olim*) thought of usurping foreign territory. Similarly on fiscal matters, he says that his ideas will have no effect on "men strongly inclined to the opposite way of thinking" (*in contrariam partem vehementer inclinatos*). That this is certainly true of many kings does not imply that it is necessarily so of all.

The major statement of More's position is directed at the unreality and wilful hopelessness of Hythloday's. He generalises, from his agreement that Hythloday's proposed fiscal counsel will not be welcome, to the point that advice should not be given when one is "positive [it] will never be listened to," and he twice repeats that it is useless to force new ideas on people who are of "opposite conviction." This already implicitly diagnoses Hythloday's case as that of a man who excuses himself from the possible by declaring that the impossible is impossible. But More emphasises the point by making a distinction between bookish philosophy and practical philosophy: the bookish philosophy Hythloday has had in mind is only appropriate in the company of like-minded friends; in the world of practical politics one must do what one can with the situation as it is.<sup>6</sup> The primary implication of his famous image of political life as a play is that one must adapt to the play which is actually being performed, an adaptation which will require tact. The comic element implicit in Hythloday's stance is brought out very vividly by the image of him delivering a tragic speech in the middle of a low comedy. But More does not laugh at him. The tone is the same as when he takes him by the hand at the end of Book II: "would it not have been preferable to take a part without words...?" He is practising the tact he is preaching. Yet despite the tact, he is very firm and very precise in his rejection of the basic assumption Hythloday has made: there is a difference between

<sup>6</sup> This has, of course, only superficial verbal resemblance to what in modern Protestant circles is called "situation ethics." In "situation ethics," the ground of action is dependent on the situation; in More's view, the ground of action exists previously and independently, and one acts accordingly as far as the situation will permit. According to "situation ethics" More should have forgiven Henry VIII and accepted his new queen and new title as Supreme Head of the Church in England. Hythloday would have charged either to precipitate self-martyrdom, or back to Utopia. More used the law as long as the law could preserve his life; when the law was abused, More would not change the ground of his action.

improving a particular situation and changing the nature of reality. "You must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds." The final emphasis is again on the importance of duty: "You must not [...] desert the commonwealth." He concedes the half-truth which Hythloday has clarified—"it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for a great many years to come." He does not, however, argue from impossibility to excuse but to realistic imperative: "You must not abandon [...] because you cannot control." And the nature of the imperative, as the language makes clear, is that of an emotive moral responsibility ("desert the commonwealth," "abandon the ship"). Despite the tact, More speaks with emotional vehemence: "you must seek and strive to the best of your power to handle matters tactfully"—as he is doing in this very speech.

The floor is then taken, again at length, by Hythloday. His manner is as mixed as his understanding. The senseless squabble between the friar and the hanger-on, which he reported earlier, has partly the function of emphasising by contrast the civilised nature of the present dialogue. But Hythloday's opening remark is the sort of adolescent debating-point in which the element of truth is so obscured that it is nearer falsehood: "By this approach [...] I should accomplish nothing else than to share the madness of others as I tried to cure their lunacy." On his own showing, Morton shared no trace of madness, and Hythloday had total freedom of speech in his company. The word which stood out before now recurs (*volo*): "If I would stick to the truth." What matters to him is what he wants to do. "To speak falsehoods, for all I know, may be the part of a philosopher, but it is certainly not for me." Apart from the arrogance of it, this is on a level with the friar: what More said was, "take a part without words." As it happened, More showed very vividly at the end of his own life that the difference between lying and remaining silent is not slight. Hythloday's sense of tact, however, is slight: "what did my speech contain that would not be appropriate [...] to have propounded everywhere?" His sense of obligation is even shakier. The words I omitted from my last quotation are "or obligatory". To score a debating-point, he is now saying it is obligatory to propound everywhere what he has at length been arguing it is pointless to say anywhere. And in such a context it becomes easy to pretend that what More said implied that "all the things which by the perverse morals of men have come to seem odd are to be dropped." From that it is a very small step, via the friar's method of taking a biblical phrase out of context, to arguing that More is actually anti-Christian. In the Gospels, Christ commanded His disciples to preach His Truths from the housetops, yet More has suggested, according to Hythloday, that the truth



should be accommodated to the perverse morals of men, and not spoken openly at all times.

Instead of meeting More's argument, Hythloday, like the friar, concentrates his attention on making a rhetorical impact. Through a combination of question-begging and simplification, he gives a surface impression of an unanswerable case. He would not have any effect in council meetings, he says, "For I should hold either a different opinion, which would amount to having none at all, or else the same, and then I should [...] help their madness." This seems to leave little room for answer, but it is wholly specious. For a start, when he expressed a different opinion, it was listened to intelligently by Morton. Secondly, if he held the same opinion as others he would (if he was right) not help any madness: it would not be mad. But the tacit assumption here in fact is that everyone else is always wrong: if he thought as they did, he would also be wrong. The pride is grotesque. He seems determined to be in the strict sense of the word an idiot, that is, one who thinks in a manner peculiar to himself. Finally, the alternatives are not of course exclusive: as always, Hythloday thinks in black and white terms—either he will think the same or he will think so differently that no-one will listen. More's quietly insistent point about tact is simply not confronted.

As Hythloday reaches the nadir of his specious rhetoric, there are two very pointed references to what happens in the description of Utopia. Hythloday both complains that men have accommodated Christ's teaching to their own perverse morals and says he cannot see what has been gained in this way, "except that men may be bad in greater comfort." In describing the Utopian way of life one of his main efforts is precisely to accommodate Christ's teaching to it.

Thus far he has grossly mis-represented what More has said, and has damaged his own case by self-contradiction and disreputable modes of argument. But just where one might be relaxing into the assumption that he is merely distributing nonsense, there is placed a passage in which he not only confronts directly More's point about tact, but brings out extremely powerfully both the difficulties and the dangers of acting in the way More has proposed. It would be very difficult in a court situation where, flattery being the convention, even faint praise is likely to be regarded with suspicion: one is likely to be forced into open approval of what one knows to be evil. Worse still, there is danger of being corrupted, or, more subtly, of one's integrity being used as a "screen for the wickedness and folly of others." Although he wins the argument, More was not only aware that what he proposed was difficult and dangerous, but wished to make the reader appreciate directly how

hard a question is at issue. The attractions of Hythloday's point of view are largely specious; but they are by no means wholly so.

Accordingly, the climax of his speech is the reference to Plato's image of philosophers keeping themselves dry indoors, while the people rush about outside in the rain, getting wet: "They know that, if they go out, they can do no good but will only get wet with the rest. Therefore, being content if they themselves at least are safe, they keep at home, since they cannot remedy the folly of others." In imaginative force, this seems to balance More's image of life as a drama, and it carries in addition the authority of Plato. But more is happening than Hythloday is aware of. In context, Plato's image is the climax of an argument that the philosopher can do nothing in such societies as at present exist. What follows is an argument that in a changed society his wisdom could prevail. The nature of the change envisaged by Plato is nearer to Hythloday's dreams of changing the human character than to More's realism, but Plato is arguing fundamentally that the philosopher has a responsibility to bring it about. So the image is working thus far in a complex way, partly supporting Hythloday's argument and partly undermining it. But to anyone acquainted with Plato's *Republic*, the image Hythloday refers to will immediately bring to mind also the one which follows quite shortly afterwards: the image of the present life as inside a dark cave and of truth as the light outside, where the primary implication is quite the reverse of Hythloday's argument. The philosopher there has an unquestionable moral obligation to go back into the cave and share with the common people the wisdom he has gained in the daylight. Hythloday cannot really enlist Plato in support of the main line of his argument.

But the image of the rain in fact moves even further beyond his control. He has just referred to St Matthew's Gospel in his tag about preaching from the roof-tops. A little earlier in the same gospel, there is a famous image which defines with great clarity a profound difference between Christian belief and the thinking of Hythloday and the Utopians he admires. "[God] maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?"<sup>7</sup> What Hythloday wants, fundamentally, is justice in the very naive sense of each man getting due reward in terms of prosperity. The words 'justice' and 'prosperity' are almost interchangeable in his vocabulary: in a society based on cash values, he says, "it is scarcely possible ... to have justice or prosperity"; whereas in Utopia "virtue has its reward."

<sup>7</sup> *Matthew* 5.45-46.

In Christian thinking, on the contrary, as More expounds at length in his *Dialogue of Comfort*, there is no guarantee at all that good behaviour will lead to prosperity. Good is to be done because it is good, not because it will be rewarded; to do good on the assumption that good will be returned is in fact the 'cash morality' of the publican. We found before of Hythloday that his mode of thought was to weigh up which course would be of most advantage, which would repay him best. Despite his contempt for money, his moral thought is essentially based on an account-book principle. It is More, with his concept of duty, so radically alien to Hythloday, who really escapes money-values. Yet at the same time it is More who is living in the world of reality. Hythloday is certainly unaware of the play he is acting in if he conceives it possible that the rain will ever not fall equally on the just and the unjust.

How far he has lost sight of reality is emphasised at the end of his long speech. After mentioning a number of expedients which might lead to a possible improvement in social justice (expedients which are listed in a throwaway manner, but which indicate the sort of thing More would have thought it sensible to attempt) he says, "By this type of legislation, I maintain, as sick bodies which are past cure can be kept up by repeated medical treatments, so these evils, too, can be alleviated and made less acute. There is no hope, however, of a cure and a return to a healthy condition as long as each individual is master of his own property." "Sick bodies which are past cure"—this, as More stresses at length in *The Four Last Things*, is what we inescapably are. "A return to a healthy condition"—what, in a Christian frame of thought such as Hythloday professes to be thinking in, could this be a return to? He can't really mean a reversal of the Fall, but the image prevents him from meaning anything else. He has lost his sense of the direction of his argument as well as of reality. He is talking about No Time as well as No Place, never as well as nowhere. He doesn't want to act in any play which has ever been performed; he wants to write his own. *Sic vivo ut volo*.

But again, in case we are inclined to think that what he has to say is too easily to be regarded as nonsense, our sense of security is shaken. More raises two objections to Hythloday's preliminary hints about the organisation of Utopian society, that it doesn't provide motivation for work and that there could be no respect for magistrates if all men were "on the same level." The first objection is intelligent: the Utopians have largely to substitute regimentation for incentive. But the second is stupid: respect for magistrates should be based on their degree of integrity, not on a social rank dependent on personal wealth. This is the

only time 'More' speaks foolishly,<sup>8</sup> so the effect is a sharp warning that the reader is likely to trip unless he walks with the greatest care. We must follow the hint dropped by Peter Giles in a letter to Busleyden: "in all the five years which Raphael spent on the island, he did not see as much as one may perceive in More's description." But perceiving more than Raphael saw is not a matter of breaking a simple code, but of sustained intellectual effort. In Raphael's dream-play he would like the rules to be very simple; More knew that the real play is not simple at all.

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<sup>8</sup> 'More' is frequently taken to be foolish at the end of Book II when he says that the abolition of money "utterly overthrows all the nobility, magnificence, splendour, and majesty, which are, in the estimation of the common people, the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth." But this opinion is not his—he explicitly attributes it, without injustice, to "the common people" (*publica est opinio*). Abolish such things and the common people, as opposed to austere intellectuals, will not like it: the point is not at all foolish.