

Utopia in Context

Paul Kincaid

It is not love of liberty that makes men write Utopias.
(C.S. Lewis)

One day, late in August 1485, Thomas More joined the crowds along Cheapside to watch Henry Tudor, fresh from his victory at Bosworth, arrive in the capital. More was just seven years old, but Henry was the fourth person to ascend to the throne of England in his short lifetime, and two of them had died violent deaths. The accession of Henry VII would bring to an end thirty years of sporadic fighting, betrayals and usurpations collectively known as the Wars of the Roses and initiate a period of peace and prosperity. But none of the people along Cheapside that day could have known that: for them, this was simply the latest stage in the turmoil with which they were all too familiar.

That early awareness of chaos, and of helplessness in the face of such chaos, seems to have left an abiding mark on More. One of the consistent themes of his later writing is the desirability of order. Both *Utopia* (1516) and *The History of Richard III* (1557), for instance, specifically contrast just and unjust government and the order of the new Tudor rule with the disorder of Richard's reign. Of Richard's reign, for instance, More says:

And so they said that these matters bee Kynges games, as it were stage playes, and for the more part plaied upon scaffoldes. In which pore men be but the lokers on. And thei that wise be, wil medle no farther. For they that sometyme step up and playe with them, when they cannot play their partes, they disorder the play and do themselves no good. (qtd Baker-Smith 1982: 375)

In contrast to such disorder, in *Utopia* 'Everyone is to have [...] a job which is to be willingly and joyously performed because the result will be individual and collective happiness and harmony precisely because of the order imposed' (Sullivan 1983: 36). As Chris Ferns puts it: 'for More, with the memory of the Wars of the Roses still relatively fresh [...] the notion of a sane, orderly, rational, and above all peaceful society must clearly have exerted an almost irresistible appeal' (Ferns 1999: 14).

The disordered realm brought about by the Wars of the Roses, just one of a number of dynastic struggles across Europe at a time which also saw the expansion of France, the Holy Roman Empire, Muscovy and Poland, was only the most immediate of the changes going on in the world around him that would come to affect More and his writing. In 1453, Constantinople, the bastion of Christian Europe since time immemorial, finally fell to the infidel Turks. It was the start of a new wave of Ottoman incursions into Europe as the Turks extended their rule around the Black Sea and the Aegean, capturing all of

Greece, even invading Italy. The Genoese were beaten in battle in 1475 and Venetian sea power in the Adriatic was severely eroded. Among the refugees that were sent fleeing west were many Greek scholars, bringing with them documents previously unknown in Europe, or at least known only in translations of translations, and providing a new impetus to learning eagerly taken up by the nascent humanist movement.

Known more commonly as the New Learning, humanism originated with Petrarch in Florence in the fourteenth century. Petrarch's ideas inspired a generation of scholars to seek out Roman and Greek works that had been forgotten in monastery libraries, their efforts boosted by the influx of classical scholars from Constantinople. Humanism (its name was derived from the Latin *humanitas*, meaning 'culture') began to spread across Europe, bringing with it a form of critical enquiry that quickly became associated with anticlericalism and religious reform. Although many humanist scholars were, or had been, churchmen, and most would remain devout followers of the Church, their critical approach nevertheless would eventually foster the most serious challenge of all to the authority of the Universal Catholic Church.

But if Islamic power was expanding in the east, in the west it was in decline: in 1482 the newly united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon began their conquest of the Moslem kingdom of Granada. Their new power established, the rulers of Spain and Portugal began to turn their attentions further afield. With old-established trade routes blocked by the expansion of the Ottoman empire, new sea routes were sought, aided by developments in naval technology which allowed European sailors to make ever longer voyages. Under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portuguese explorers sailed south along the mysterious coast of Africa until, during his voyage of 1497–8, Vasco da Gama finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the Spanish sponsored Christopher Columbus who, on his first voyage in 1492, found an entire new world, unimagined by Europe before that moment. Columbus and his successors, notably Amerigo Vespucci, would bring back tales of these new lands that combined bizarre curiosities with notions of perfection. In his account of his third voyage in 1498, in which he identified the mainland of South America, Columbus said: 'I believe that the earthly Paradise lies here, which no one can enter except by God's leave.' He went on to say: 'I believe that this land which your Highnesses have commanded me to discover is very great, and that there are many other lands in the south of which there have never been reports' (Columbus 1969: 221).

Thus the world in which More grew up was very different from the one his parents had known. Old certainties were undermined: Christendom was under siege, new powers were emerging, the very shape of the world had changed, and with that change came tales of extraordinary beings and extraordinary riches to be found in Africa or the Americas. At the same time an intellectual revolution was under way; dramatic rediscoveries of classical texts led in their turn to the development of new ideas in education, politics, culture and

religion. The Universal Catholic Church was not only seeing its geographical reach restricted by Ottoman expansion, but its very authority challenged by new religious thinkers such as John Wyclif in England and the Hussites in Bohemia. Eventually, these various challenges to the secular might of the Church would lead to the Protestant reformation.

Above all, the intellectual, political and cultural turmoil that More would find on every side was more widely and more rapidly disseminated because of perhaps the most important invention of the period. In Mainz, in 1455, Johann Gutenberg produced an edition of the Bible using moveable type. Other entrepreneurs quickly spotted the opportunity this new technology presented and set up their own printing presses, among them an English cloth merchant, William Caxton. In 1475 Caxton printed the first book in English. A year later he established, within the precincts of Westminster Abbey, the first press in England. Caxton would publish a hundred titles in little more than a decade, while the impact of this new technology can best be judged by the fact that by 1500 in Europe '40,000 separate editions of all kinds of works had been issued – roughly nine million volumes from more than a hundred presses' (Barzun 2001: 4–5). More, who would become one of the leading humanist scholars of the age, was to benefit from all of these changes, but at the same time he was unsettled by them. This tension between the excitement of new ideas and the dis-ease they generated found expression in his most influential work: *Utopia*.

The creation of a utopian

More trained as a lawyer and by the time he was in his twenties he was already developing an international reputation as a scholar and a wit. A complex, contradictory character, he was humorous yet scathing, so intensely pious that he habitually wore a hair shirt next to his skin yet he was fond of scatological language; he had a gift for friendship but could be a difficult man to get along with. Nevertheless, his fame as a scholar drew other like-minded men to him, and from that would develop lifelong friendships. In the summer of 1499, still only a twenty one-year-old law student, he met the Dutch churchman, Erasmus, who was already on the verge of being the most renowned scholar in Europe. Both were phenomenally well-read and quick-witted, with the same sceptical approach to the ways of the world. The two struck up a friendship that would last the rest of More's life. In 1506 they produced a joint translation (from Greek into Latin) of a selection of the *Dialogues of the Gods* and *Dialogues of the Dead* by the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata:

[More's] translations of Lucian became by far the most popular of his productions; estimates of the number of editions within his lifetime vary from nine to fourteen but on any count they outdistance the sales and general reputation of the now more famous *Utopia*. (Ackroyd 1998: 91)

This is significant for two reasons. First, it illustrates the weight given to all forms of Greek literature and culture among humanist scholars, and also the enjoyment of satire, jokes and puns that Erasmus and More shared. Secondly, it points us to one of the most important forebears of *Utopia*:

In the work of the satirist More discovered the possibilities of dialogue as a way of exploiting the dramatic possibilities of the world; most of his own prose works would eventually assume the same form. (Ackroyd 1998: 92)

There is another possible reason why dialogue plays such an important part in More's work: his training as a lawyer. As part of More's studies at the Inns of Court, he would have learned to argue either side of a question. This ability to carry an argument from opposite positions finds a natural literary expression in dialogue, and certainly the debate between More and Raphael in the first part of *Utopia* allows both sides to make telling points. Nevertheless, More does acknowledge a debt to Lucian in *Utopia* when he includes 'Lucian, whom they find delightfully entertaining' (More 1965: 100) on a list of authors that Raphael introduces to the Utopians.

An even more important model for *Utopia* would be provided by Erasmus himself. In 1509 Erasmus published *In Praise of Folly*, a sharp and comic satire on monasticism that shows the humanists feeling free to criticize some of the old habits and traditions of the Church. The first part is a lightly told story (following the pattern of a colloquy, a form which Erasmus had also made his own); the second part is more overtly political, a lecture rather than a story. In other words, from its structure to its satirical intent, *Utopia* precisely follows the pattern of *In Praise of Folly* (cf. Jardine 1995: 111–22; 180–7), though there was one important difference: Erasmus, after leaving holy orders, remained outside the institutions he satirized, whereas More remained a part of the court, which explains the characteristic 'double-faced apprehension' (Baker-Smith 1982: 373) and the complex irony of his work.

At the same time that More's reputation as what we would now call an intellectual was growing, so was his involvement in public policy. In the same year that *In Praise of Folly* was published, a new king, Henry VIII came to the English throne. Although Henry VII had brought peace and firm government, he was not mourned for he was seen as a miser and an extortionist: he turned round the fortunes of a country ravaged by war to the extent that he passed on an estimated £1,250,000 to his son, a tremendous sum in the sixteenth century, roughly the equivalent of £375M today. His son was as unlike his father as it is possible to imagine: large, exuberant, cultivated, romantic, handsome. He wrote poetry and music and loved the company of brilliant men. In a letter to Erasmus, Lord Mountjoy, a humanist and distant cousin of Henry VIII, described the new king as:

a prince with whose extraordinary and almost divine character you are acquainted? When you know what a hero he shows himself, how wisely he behaves, what a lover he is of justice and goodness, what affection he bears to the learned, I will venture to swear you will need no wings to make you fly to behold this new and auspicious star! If you could see how here all the world is rejoicing in the possession of so great a prince, how his life is all their desire, you could not contain your tears for sheer joy. (qtd Weir 2002: 1)

When, in a coronation address, More says: 'What may we not expect from a king who has been nourished on philosophy and the Nine Muses?' it is clear that Henry VIII is being seen as a philosopher king on the model of Plato, yet within twenty years Henry would be 'the most loathsome tyrant ever to sit on England's throne' (McLynn 2002: 16). For now he represented a golden future, the very embodiment of every humanist dream, the harbinger of utopia.

One of the ways in which the new century marked a change in the character of English history was the contrast between the New Learning and the old knightly traditions. As late as 1484 Caxton was still promoting the medieval order with his *Order of Chivalry*, but by the time of the coronation of Henry VIII the new king could be presented in medieval terms as a perfect knight (though Henry's ever more elaborate armour, some of which survives, suggests that such knightly virtues were more play-acting than an everyday reality), and at the same time in modern terms as a wise and learned ruler who surrounded himself not with champions but with courtiers, diplomats, learned men. More was typical of this new breed.

In Bruges

In 1499, not long after their first meeting, More had taken Erasmus to visit the young prince, which, if nothing else, suggests that More was already moving in royal circles. Indeed, Henry and More, both young, creative, fun-loving yet learned, seem to have taken a shine to each other. In 1510 More entered Parliament and in the same year was appointed under-sheriff of London. Other official posts followed: More had caught the eye of the most powerful in the land and his route to high office was now assured. So it was that in the spring of 1515, at the age of thirty-six, More was invited to join an important mission to Flanders to renegotiate commercial and diplomatic treaties. It was a delicate mission, but not an arduous one; in fact, for the first two weeks after their arrival in Bruges in May More's party had nothing to do at all since the commissioners from the Regent of the Netherlands had not yet arrived. More was one of those people who seem to find it hard to do nothing and during this forced inactivity he began to think of other projects.

Erasmus visited him at this time, having himself just completed *The Education of a Christian Prince*, which promotes the wisdom of being a philosopher king

as a means by which a virtuous society might be created. Their conversations must have touched on the book, and at the very least we can see it as one more impulse pushing More's thoughts in the direction of *Utopia*. Another such impulse came in July that year when More went to Antwerp to visit a close friend of Erasmus, Peter Gilles. More had a talent for friendship, particularly with those who shared his humanist interest in what Peter Ackroyd calls 'the nature of equity and civic duty' (Ackroyd 1998: 165), and the two men clearly hit it off; this meeting would be immortalized in the first book of *Utopia*. Everything was now clearly in place for the writing of one of the founding texts of British science fiction. More had a subject: the creation of a virtuous society, a hot topic among humanists, and like his fellows he would not be afraid to criticize the status quo as a way of approaching that better state. He had an idea: order, the peaceful and desirable opposite of war, which is almost by definition a non-virtuous state. He had a structure: the combination of dialogue, as practised by Lucian and another Greek model, Plato's *Republic*, and which he had learned while studying law; and treatise, following the model of his great friend and exemplar, Erasmus. He even had a starting point: Amerigo Vespucci had written a pamphlet about his voyages, *New World*, about 1505, and another piece, *Four Voyages*, in 1507, both of which More (and much of his audience) would have known. Vespucci reported that he had left twenty-four men at a fort at Cape Frio, and in a move calculated to add verisimilitude to his story, More made Raphael Hythlodæus one of these twenty-four men, while Cape Frio is where his journey to Utopia begins. As Ferns puts it:

In an age of exploration, such narratives had a particular immediacy. Indeed, for More and his circle, one senses that this was not simply part of the appeal, but also part of the joke: it was actually possible that someone might take it seriously, as a factual account. More's Raphael Hythlodæus, in the account he gives of his travels, is hardly less credible than many other visitors to exotic parts who returned home to tell the world of the wonders they had witnessed. (Ferns 1999: 19)

More wrote the second part of *Utopia*, the treatise which describes in detail the character of Utopia and the nature of its society, while he was still in Bruges. It was originally described on the title page as 'concerning the best kind of commonwealth and the new island of Utopia', which clearly illustrates the intended social comment of the work. More showed this portion of the book to a number of his humanist friends who 'were so enthusiastic about the modern parallel that nine of them, with Erasmus most prominent, contributed letters or poems for inclusion at some convenient point in the story' (Barzun 2001: 118). Some or all of these additions, including a Utopian alphabet devised by Gilles, tend to be omitted from modern translations of the book, but they do show a prototypical science-fictional intent to make the imaginary world as real as possible.

Encouraged by this positive response, More wrote the first part of the book, the dialogue between More and Hythlodæus, after his return to England. Amy Boesky sees this portion of the book as introducing ‘the complexity of constructing a new category of utopian readers and preparing them to receive this novel form’ (Boesky 1996: 50), in other words as a way of softening up his readers for the unusual task of abstracting a serious message from a fictional work. The complete book was published by Thierry Martens’ press in Louvain, in Latin, in November or December 1516 (perhaps allowing More to present the book as a New Year gift to friends), with More himself producing the first English translation, of the second part, two years later. It was an immediate success: ‘Four editions quickly appeared in different cities. Nevertheless, the satire of Part I was felt to be so biting that it could not be published in England for another forty years, fifteen years after More’s death’ (Barzun 2001: 118).

The book of nonsense

More considered *Utopia* to be a comedy, describing it on the title page of the first edition as ‘a truly golden book, no less beneficial than enjoyable’ (qtd Jardine 1995: 119). It is, perhaps, difficult for a modern reader to recognize a book like *Utopia* as a comedy, unless we think of More’s claim as protective coloration, allowing him to say hard things by pretending they are light jests. But we must remember that More had a reputation as a wit; as Erasmus pointed out, he had ‘from earliest childhood such a passion for jokes’ (qtd Turner 1965: 8). There is, after all, a certain playfulness in the pun embedded in the title, which was made explicit in one of the poems appended to the book: ‘The ancients call me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words alone I have displayed in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land’ (qtd Ginzburg 2000: 3). There is a similar playfulness in More’s naming of places:

Thus, if I had done nothing else than impose such names on ruler, river, city and island as might suggest to the more learned that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without a people, it would not have been hard to do and would have been much wittier than what I actually did. Had I not been bound by a fidelity to history, I am not so stupid as to have preferred to use such barbarous and meaningless names as Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus. (qtd Ginzburg 2000: 10)

As to our guide to Utopia, Raphael Hythlodæus: Raphael is Hebrew for ‘God is healed’ and in the Apocryphal Book of Tobit the Archangel Raphael is instrumental in curing Tobit’s blindness, so ‘the name is quite appropriate for

a character who tries to open people's eyes to the causes of social evils, and the sources of prosperity' (Turner 1965: 8). But that seriousness is offset by the surname, Hythlodæus, which means 'dispenser of nonsense'. How can the criticisms sting, one imagines More saying, when the book is nonsense dispensed about no place?

The camouflage is effective: as late as the 1950s the historian Geoffrey Elton could describe *Utopia* as 'on its own both in literary merit and in irrelevance' (Elton 1955: 185). Later generations of historians, however, have recognized in the book a distorted but very revealing mirror of its age. Alison Weir, for instance, notes that the humanists advocated a Platonic society in which learning was not the province of the Church, but rather laity and princes alike were educated to a high standard as preparation for public service. So in *Utopia*, for instance, 'the description of the perfect courtier [...] could be that of the ideal Tudor gentleman' (Weir 2002: 147). More's friend, John Colet, had founded St Paul's School in 1509, one of a flood of secular schools being opened for the children of the emergent mercantile classes rather than the aristocracy. Here children were taught not religious virtues but the more practical ones of diligence, discipline and nationalism. The timetable at Colet's school is eerily reflected in the timetable of daily life in *Utopia*. Many commentators have noted how More's *Utopia* directly mirrors More's England:

The dimensions of this island are the same as those of England and the number of its city-states equals the number of English counties together with London. It is also approximately the same distance from the equator as England. Its principal city, Amaurotum, is itself like some reversed image of London; it has the same expanse as the city [...] and is situated below gentle hills from which a river flows as does the river Fleet [...] It is London redrawn by visionary imagination. (Ackroyd 1998: 167)

It is this element that helps to persuade me that *Utopia* is a work of science fiction. It is the fantastic detailed as if real; it is the displacement in space and time in order to look more clearly upon the here and now. The grotesque, the unreal, are dispensed with: 'We did not ask him if he had seen any monsters'. More reports with a nod toward the fantastical tales coming from Vespucci and other voyagers, 'for monsters have ceased to be news. There is never any shortage of horrible creatures who prey on human beings, snatch away their food, or devour whole populations; but examples of wise social planning are not so easy to find' (More 1965: 40).

One thing that makes *Utopia* a modern work, and indeed a work that stands in direct line to the subsequent development of sf, is More's 'great discovery' that human institutions, that politics and society, can be instrumental in 'eliminating misery, sickness, and injustice' (Suvin 1979: 58). This is in opposition to earlier medieval satires and wishful tales of the land of Cockayne. Cockayne was the

utopia of medieval imagination, a translation of ancient ideas of the Islands of the Blessed or the Elysian Fields into a place of sloth and plenty. It is a Paradise on Earth precisely because it is the exact opposite of the popular experience of life on earth, which was one of hard labour, plague, shortage of food, the disruptions of war and of want. It is, in other words, heaven but available here and now, by magical rather than human means. More's more rational Utopia shares some of the desires of Cockayne – peace and plenty – but More rejects their ahistorical, magical framework. Where Cockayne (along with other medieval fantasies such as *Hy Brasil*) is a pastoral world, people having space amid a beautiful landscape bursting with all the good things of life; More's Utopia is essentially urban, a place where the good things of life are earned through the proper working of human society, where living together rather than living apart is what produces plenty. His Utopia is precisely placed in space and in time; in other words it is accessible. And it is not a simplistic heaven on earth, for there are wars, there is work; it is just that the application of human rationality makes these non-threatening and comfortably sustainable. Where Cockayne dreams of a future magical transformation of everyday experience, More posits a transformation that can be achieved by human intervention here and now.

But if we don't have monsters, we do have technological innovation, such as the artificial incubation of eggs: 'they hatch out dozens at a time by applying a steady heat to them' (More 1965: 71). Hence of agriculture, the most important and widely practised industry of the day, Hythlodæus says: 'Thus, by scientific methods, they've done wonders with a country that's naturally rather barren' (99). We also have medical and sociological innovation: at a time of plague in England the newly reintroduced ideas of Galen (recently translated by More's friend, Thomas Linacre) proposed that health is the result of harmony, in both the humours of the body and the body politic, and More repeatedly stresses this aspect of Utopian society. In addition, with such ideas as effective sewerage systems (among his other appointments, More was made Commissioner of Sewers in 1511) Utopia was, according to the very latest medical opinion, better protected against plague than anywhere else. Treatment of the sick was also far in advance of medical practice, with four well-designed, spacious and well-equipped hospitals for every Utopian city. London, by contrast, would not even have two far more cramped and unwelcoming hospitals for at least another century (cf. Totaro 2005). However, what makes this most clearly a work of science fiction is the engagement with time, and with the notion of change.

One of the things we recognize most strongly in sf is that it is a literature of change in which difference, otherness, progress and the future are such fundamental assumptions that we often take them for granted in our considerations of the genre. Yet the generally accepted view is that utopias are static. This, after all, is why so many of them make such dreadfully unengaging fiction: in a perfect society there is no reason for the opposition which makes for drama. More, however, is careful to make clear that his Utopia is not perfect:

‘what you can’t put right you must try to make as little wrong as possible. For things will never be perfect, until human beings are perfect – which I don’t expect them to be for quite a number of years’ (More 1965: 64). There is, moreover, an awareness of change inherent in the Utopian prayer: ‘If I am wrong, and if some other [...] social system would be better and more acceptable to Thee, I pray Thee in Thy goodness to let me know it’ (128). Utopia presents a better commonwealth, an ideal towards which one might aspire, yet it is still a land in which the Utopians must deal with criminals within and wars without. In part, this is because a land without criminals or wars would have seemed too fantastical for belief for any of More’s readers; but More also wanted to show that there are other, perhaps better, ways of dealing with these disorders in the body politic. Though it is important to note that the powerful dialogue in Book 1, in which More argues that only by serving a prince and compromising one’s standards could one hope to make changes for good, and Raphael argues that an honest man could not compromise like that and so could not enter public service, actually reflects a debate within More himself. More does not question Hythlodæus’s assumption that kings are tyrants, but says a counsellor must still work with them: ‘If you can’t completely eradicate wrong ideas, or deal with inveterate vices as effectively as you could wish, that’s no reason for turning your back on public life altogether. You wouldn’t abandon ship in a storm just because you couldn’t control the winds’ (63). Behind More’s argument here is the principle of public decorum that Renaissance writers derived from the Romans, which prescribes that each element of an artwork or oration should be appropriate to its context. It presupposes that circumspection will be more effective than tackling errors head-on; Cicero pronounced: ‘if at some time stress of circumstances shall thrust us aside into some uncongenial part, we must devote to it all possible thought, practice, and pains, that we may be able to perform it, if not with propriety, at least with as little impropriety as possible’ (qtd Warner 1998: 54). Despite arguing for circumspection, More and other humanists, including Erasmus, believed with Hythlodæus that it was better to abandon public life rather than compromise one’s beliefs. Already in 1510 More had published a translation of *The Life of John Picus Erle of Myrandula*; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had refused to enter public life so he could give himself wholly to philosophical contemplation, and when it was suggested that he enter the service of a prince he rejected the idea as a betrayal of his liberty (see Baker-Smith 1982: 378). By the time he came to write this part of *Utopia* (it was finished around September 1516) More was faced with just such a choice: he had already been offered a place on the King’s Council, which he would accept by mid-1517 and which would lead directly to his Lord Chancellorship. Hythlodæus’ views are also the views of Erasmus, and when More did join the King’s Council he kept his promotion a secret from Erasmus for a year, rightly suspecting that Erasmus would be baffled by the move.

There is another sense in which Utopia lacks perfection. Among the ideas of

European culture that Hythlodæus brings to the Utopians (an early example of a canon of great works with which, More is suggesting, any civilized ruler should be familiar) is Christianity. The Utopians offer us the example of tolerance, and Hythlodæus is allowed to make many caustic remarks about the English clergy along the way, but More, who would within a year be transformed into one of the most intolerant defenders of clerical powers, was not about to admit that any society could be perfect and yet ignorant of Christ. On the contrary, as E.D.S. Sullivan points out: 'Not only did [More] not intend [Utopia] as an ideal state – an unattainable goal – but, indeed, he was pointing out that, by combining reason with divine revelation, the Christian nations of Europe should not only be able to attain to Utopian excellence, but surpass it' (Sullivan 1983: 35). Or to put it another way, as Sullivan does, quoting Edward Surtz, More's purpose 'is to demonstrate that "conditions in Christian Europe are worse, not better, than those in pagan Utopia" and thus to shock Christians into a recognition that they, "fortified by revelation and grace" plus natural reason, could and should remedy contemporary evils and surpass the Utopians in "high morality, intellectual culture, and benevolent government"' (40).

The idea of perfection

Book 1 of *Utopia* is a satirical attack on England's social ills, an attack which focuses particularly upon the greed and the non-Christian negligence of the nobility of both Church and State. It is in answer to this attack that Book 2 presents 'a radically different model of sociopolitical life' (Suvin 1979: 91), and the difference lies in the extreme way in which it mirrors contemporary European practice, literally a world turned upside-down. Thus gold is used for chamber pots, there are no elites, living is communal (based on an idealized form of monasticism), and war is conducted not through bravery and glory but through bribery and assassination. Because the aristocrats of the Church are the subject of so vicious an attack in the first part, the Utopians are ignorant of Christianity, the satire lying at least in part in the fact that, though they are ignorant of Christ, the Utopians are more Christian in their behaviour than the Church fathers.

To an extent, despite all this awareness of change within the book, the society with which we are presented is still static. We are told that the Utopians organize their society in certain ways, many of which still seem liberal to us today: a six-hour working day, equal education for men and women, the notion that rather than execute a man for theft it would be better to change the economic system so that a man had no need to steal in order to survive. Some ideas, however, would be considered slightly too idiosyncratic even today; for instance, the notion that prospective brides and grooms should examine each other naked before making a decision (though it must be remembered that in More's society marriage was usually arranged for dynastic or business reasons,

and to suggest that sexual compatibility should be part of the mix was radical indeed).

These patterns have been in place since time immemorial, and we are told they are so sensible that there should be no need for change. Many aspects of Utopian daily life would have been familiar to More's contemporaries precisely because they copied a pattern of life that had indeed been in place since time immemorial: the monasteries. As Northrop Frye has observed: 'the monastic community, though not intended as a utopia, has some utopian characteristics. Its members spend their whole time within it; individual life takes its pattern from the community; certain activities of the civilized good life, farming, gardening, reclaiming land, copying manuscripts, teaching, form part of its structure' (Frye 1965: 35). Such a community would have been especially familiar to More, who had spent part of his youth in a Carthusian monastery, an experience that informs the book: 'Certain features such as the regular exchange of houses, the material uniformity of life, the communal meals, the public reading and moral conversation reflect a monastic ethos. All are designed to wither egotism. Since there is no privacy there is no property, all goods are held in common' (Baker-Smith 1982: 376). According to Krishan Kumar, the 'community of work' was 'embraced as a necessity which also dignifies, and which is central to the whole communal purpose' (Kumar 1987: 27) that has seen More's book taken up by a wide variety of political theorists as a model for communism. Though it is certainly communistic to some degree, the main thing that would have made Utopia utopian, to More and to most of his readers, was not the sharing of property, the commonality of life, the lack of an aristocracy, but the result of these novelties, the consistent, unchanging character of the society:

In a Renaissance context, where the notion of a static society seemed neither implausible nor undesirable, this presents few problems: while with hindsight we may see the process of historical change leading to the emergence of the modern world as well under way, neither process nor change would have seemed inherent features of society to the writers or readers of the period. While the Renaissance imagination was quite capable of conceiving of alternative, indeed better forms of society, there was less concern with the process of how they might come into being. (Ferns 1999: 20)

In fact, a static society would be part of the attraction in an age where change was mostly associated with war and disorder. Yet I think it would have been impossible to write *Utopia* without such an awareness of process and change, and that, as Kumar says, what makes it such an indelibly modern work, is 'a novel and far-reaching conception of the possibilities of human and social transformation' (Kumar 1987: 24).

Utopia was a young man's book, an optimistic book, written in the belief that a better way of ordering society was attainable and indeed might be close

at hand under a learned and energetic and powerful ruler such as Henry VIII. It was a book written in the knowledge that the world had changed. Without Columbus finding his earthly Paradise, without Vespucci sending back stories of this strange new world, there would have been nowhere on this Earth for Utopia to exist, except in the fantastical lost lands of Cockayne or Lyonesse or Hy Brasil, though such locations would have changed the nature of the book from a politically relevant lesson to a dream. Instead, it was a book written as part of the process of the change. Without the new technology of printing, ideas would not have spread so rapidly among the educated of Europe, providing the fertile soil in which the new humanist thinking developed. And the new humanist thinking grew from an awareness of what was happening across the continent, indeed across the globe, and was spurred by an awareness of a changing political balance within Europe in which the idea of Christendom, of all Europe united under the Church, was giving way to a rise in national consciousness. Although no one seems to have realized where all this would lead within the next few years, it gave rise to a climate in which criticism of the Church and its institutions became acceptable as a way of prodding at the monolith to change and become better. Satire became part of the literary arsenal of the new intelligentsia. And *Utopia* would not have been possible without that atmosphere. It was a book that grew from, fed upon, and presented to its readers the intellectual, social, political and cultural changes that the world was going through.

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