

HALFHEARTED BUSLEYDEN

In "Jerome de Busleyden and Thomas More" (*Moreana* 121/3-10), Karl Schroeder asks two questions about Busleyden's contribution to the parerga of *Utopia*: "More had been looking for continental approval, and he got it. Yet, did Busleyden write the letter less than wholeheartedly? Was it because the *Utopia* was a work of fiction, a *jeu d'esprit*, and not a serious treatise on some classical subject?" (7). It would seem to be easy to answer "yes" to the first question, as Schroeder implies, but for reasons other than those implied in the second. That other answer turns upon the difficulties in which *Utopia* placed those, like Busleyden, who were asked to provide congratulatory satellite texts, the parerga.¹

How *Utopia* came to be equipped with its parerga need not be recanvassed here because it is epitomized in Schroeder's essay (6-7) and detailed by Hexter and others, nor is there any need to recapitulate Warren W. Wooden's excellent "Reconsideration of the Parerga of Thomas More's *Utopia*" and the essays he cites.² Although his perception of the game-like character of the whole performance is central here, the present essay nevertheless attempts to move back yet another step, so as to see the cost and risks of that game to its players, whom I will label the parergists.

These difficulties are implied both by the content and by the texture of the prefatory letter to Giles (*CW*4, 38-45). The letter announces through its ironies the multiple responses that the text requires if it is to be understood fully, and realization of the letter's irony marks the reader equipped to proceed further. How one interprets the letter predicts how one understands the *Utopia* (even

¹ *Parerga* is a term appropriated by R.S. Sylvester in " 'Si Hythlodæo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *Soundings* 51 (1968), 272-89. Reprinted in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marchadour (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 290-301.

² J.H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 43-47; Wooden, in *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore (Boone, NC: Albion, 1978), 151-160.

though interpretation and understanding are hardly linear), and incapacity to perceive ironies here means that perception of the discourse to follow will be fundamentally distorted: More even provides a glimpse of such a mistaken reader in the would-be bishop (CW4, 43/11-16 and note). The letter to Giles is a gauged filter for all readers: as it identifies the well-equipped, appropriate reader, so it also identifies an incompetent one. The letter both opens the following text for interpretation *and* restricts the number of readers to whom that "openness" is visible.³

Proving their membership in the group of "good readers" was thus one important problem for the parergists. These first readers, caught up in the quasi-game of the central text, contributed letters that mix the serious and the playful. Balancing earnest and game is always difficult, however, and here paradoxically most difficult in its most ludic element, style, as Busleyden notes to Erasmus in the covering letter to his parergon, quoted here complete in translation:

Here at last is the letter that you told me to write, and if I have perhaps done less well than you expected or than the importance of the subject required, you have only yourself to thank: it is your own fault for entrusting the task to such an unpractised writer and one so unsuitable in other ways. I consoled myself with having at least attempted what I could not fully perform, and even hoped that from this point of view you would not wholly disapprove of my efforts, but even find them acceptable, the more so since in making them to please you I have risked my reputation and sacrificed some self-respect. It is certainly an outstanding and more than obvious proof of my devotion to you, and therefore I trust you will take it in good part; and much the best way of doing this will be, if you think fit to rub off the tarnish that lies thick upon it with the keen abrasive of your own polished style. In the meantime, farewell, and pray commend me to his excellency

³ See Elizabeth McCutcheon, *My Dear Peter: the Ars Poetica and Hermeneutics for More's Utopia* (Angers: Moreana Publications, 1983).

the envoy of the English king [Tunstall].⁴

Busleyden is concerned to match More's decorum, the ability to do so being (then and now) a measure of the writer's control and understanding of the text to which he responds. In Busleyden's situation, a parergon in the wrong key would be not a fault of the ear so much as of the mind, not an opportunity for displaying his acuity but a demonstration of obtuseness.

Why should this possibility concern him? Because, although the published form of the parerga obscures the contention among them, these readings, mutually independent and thus mutually threatening, are not designed to bring the readers closer together to join forces against the progressively more distanced text; instead, they add to the central complexity the further ambiguity latent in the writer's ignorance of another reader's reactions to the work. Each writer, that is, presents a parergon that testifies to the quality of his reading, so that the parerga together compete with each other as valid readings; the competition is multiple, each writer not only struggling with the meaning of the central work but also with the anticipated alternative readings of the other contributors. In this latter struggle, not only the authority of interpretation but the writer's membership in the circle of readers is at stake, a further contention obliquely represented in variable groups of parerga included in subsequent editions.⁵ For each writer, the parergon is a game of sleights and feints by which each writer disguises his own incapacity to resolve the central game (i.e., to grasp the full meaning of the *Utopia*), and then to conceal the further defects of that attempt by yet another, in a prospect of infinitely receding planes of deception that become more risky as they are less public, more delicate as they are more narrowly aimed at a specific audience.

The three parts of the *Utopia*, including the letter to Giles, are thus the focus of a far larger group of satellite works, including both

⁴ *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen et al., volume 2 (Oxford UP, 1910), Letter 484; English trans. from the Collected Works of Erasmus, volume 4: *The Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 446 to 593*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thompson (Toronto UP, 1977), 120.

⁵ See Edward Surtz's analysis, "The Editions of *Utopia*," CW4, clxxxiii-cxcii.

the parerga and the missives like More's and Busleyden's to Erasmus. In the letter from More, the actual author and the nominal character vie for attention: the public letter to Giles is confident, off-hand, understated, sharply contrasting with the letters for Erasmus alone, which are full of anxiety over approval and publication.⁶ Busleyden's double responses are even more telling. His parergon praises More's perspicacious design for a commonwealth, concentrating upon the abstract political constitution that underlies Hythloday's diffuse account (CW4, 32-37). Apart from this praise, which occupies most of the letter, two specific references intimate Busleyden's uneasiness in coping with the text. Early on, Busleyden ignores Morus' claim to be an amanuensis transcribing Hythloday's *neglecta simplicitas*, referring instead to More's learned style that has its base in experience (cf. Wooden 152). In the peroration, Busleyden also leaves ambiguous the practical reality of the Utopian state: it may be an ideal polity, but the European audience cannot experience it until they have realized its form in their own states (CW4, 36/15-19). In each case, Busleyden's letter fails to observe the decorum that the letter to Giles goes to such lengths to establish, and the failure here seems not to distress the writer. All the distress, however masked by the modesty topos and litotes, appears in the accompanying private note to Erasmus quoted above. Busleyden's vagueness about the risk to his reputation and the loss of his self-respect makes his reasons uncertain, but -- given the note's insistent concern with style -- his uneasy awareness of a disparity in tone, a fault in decorum, may be a partial motive. Apparently unwilling (and perhaps unable) to play the game to the full, Busleyden used his paired letters to indicate his own perceived uneasiness about his role in the fabrication of the larger *Utopia*, of which they will be a part.

In addition, his gambit makes clear that the public encomium he enclosed was, at least in one way, a work made to preserve Erasmus' good will (Surtz, clxxxiv) and, further, to demonstrate Busleyden's eligibility for participation as a knowing reader of More's text. Thus, within the politics of the humanist circle, Busleyden's pair of letters represents the private uncertainty and ambivalence that underlay the

humanists' confident performance on the larger European stage. By extension, the uncertainty Busleyden expressed echoes in letters of less prominent contributors: even today, experience suggests that such apparently easy familiarity with competing points of view is, at least in part, a fiction, as Wooden shows through the writers he cites.

This apparent capacity to call forth response in *pairs* of other texts testifies to the ironic complexity of the central work: no single response was sufficient in a game where quality was measured by the multiplicity of response. Furthermore, the artfulness even of the nominally "private" letters -- those not intended for publication with the *Utopia* -- suggests that they too were not outside the central game of the text but instead implicated their writers' varied attempts to achieve and retain control over essential, central meaning.

In an unusually graphic way, the first editions of the *Utopia*, together with surviving ancillary texts like More's and Busleyden's letters of transmittal to Erasmus, give some evidence of a developing "discourse community" coping with profound ambiguity. Hexter, Wooden and others have pointed to the remarkable consistency of the interpretations presented in the parerga, without also noting that this impression is the product of editorial design: More and Erasmus were no more likely to use a negative announcement than any modern author or editor would be. The author (or his agent) shaped the reception of the central text by the inclusion of these parerga and the order of their appearance. This exercise of editorial authority (even without a more active intervention, such as Busleyden seems to invite) annexes the parerga to the central work, providing thereby an authoritative body of interpretation, the existence of which both canonizes the central text and marks out the direction of authoritative (i.e., authorially approved) interpretation yet to be made. As documents in the sociology of discourse communities, the parerga say to the independent reader not "Here is the right way to interpret this text" but rather "Here is the line of interpretation that certifies membership in this group." In a sense different from that used by Hexter, the parerga represent the "orthodox view" not because they tell "what More's friends believe" -- implying that the community of readers exclusively determines the meaning of the work -- but because

⁶ Allen, Letters 461 and 467.

these expressions are approved as orthodox by the guarantor who controls publication. These statements tell what the contributors were allowed to believe or, at any rate, to express.

The parerga, therefore, serve to approve the text as a humanist tract only insofar as the contributors themselves are approved as authoritative readers. In such a situation, no wonder that the prevailing trope is irony, the figure notoriously expressive of negative meaning. Here the contributor's object is *not* to be pinned down to explicit, positive statements of meaning that, if unorthodox, would prohibit membership in the authoritative group of readers. From his perspective, More's request for Erasmus' help in finding the parerga is not an abdication of power over the text but an extension of control over the readers, both the contributors and the independent readers of the "complete" text, with map, alphabet, poems, letters and dialogue, multiple forms requiring or implying different kinds of literacy from the reader. This ironic complex, however, because it is expressed in Latin, is reserved to readers who are presumably prepared to cope with it -- to those who are themselves scholars, even if almost sophomorically eager to show how little they are taken in by the ploys of More-the-author, as Wooden shows. When such readers are safely within the preserves of humanist discourse in Latin, ideas that might be dangerous or absurd can safely be traded upon and moved about as counters in a seriocomic game.

"Yet, did Busleyden write the letter less than wholeheartedly?" One can answer by supposing not a lack of wholeheartedness so much as complex, anxious perceptions: of competing interpretations, alternative at least in detail if not in overall outline; of possible misapprehension and error; even of potential ridicule. While certainly agreeing with Wooden's assertion that "in both the *Utopia* and its parerga there is a serious center ringed by humorous snares for the unwary" (153), one need not also imply that the parergists had some key to *Utopia* that we have since lost, which made its difficult ambiguities lucid and forthright. The hyperbolic praises that distinguish so many of the parerga may also disguise the doubts and uncertainties under which the parergists themselves labored; we and Busleyden are perhaps not so far apart in our perplexity as the long

passage of years might seem to suggest, nor was his situation then so different from that of one who will shortly write the last words of this essay and then compose its covering letter in a different key.

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In *LUCAS* no. 17, Bruce E. Mansfield publishes the paper he read at the fourth Thomas More International Conference (Sydney, July 1992), on "Erasmus and Frederic Seebohm: the 'Oxford Reformers', down but not out?" (19-30). *The Oxford Reformers*, in its final (1887) edition was highly influential, and lastingly so through its inclusion in *Everyman's Library* (1914). Seebohm offered the little band of Colet, Erasmus and More "as a kind of alternative reformation to Wittenberg's and Geneva's" (20). He decreed that Colet was "Erasmus's master or mentor" (22), and adopted the (then current) view of Colet's reformism as "decidedly proto-Protestant" (22). John Gleason's *John Colet* has shown this position to be untenable. Why did it then become classic?

- 1) Because it humored "the classic nineteenth-century tendencies of liberalism and nationalism" (23). At the time, even Erasmus was 'nationalized' as a Burgundian, a Frenchman, a German, a Netherlander (25-26).
- 2) Because it de-isolated Erasmus, by showing him in the context of a circle: "To that extent it played a constructive role" (28).

In endnote 13, Mansfield refers to J.B. Trapp's *Erasmus, Colet and More* as a 1991 addition to Gleason's biography, and to his own review of Gleason in *Moreana* 111-112.

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