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INJUSTICE, NOT COUNCILORSHIP:
THE THEME OF BOOK ONE OF *UTOPIA*

Many readers have assumed the structural weakness of the *Utopia* ever since Erasmus indicated that More wrote the first book as an afterthought to the second. In his well-known letter to Ulrich von Hutten, Erasmus says that More "had written the second book at his leisure, and afterwards, when he found it was required, added the first off-hand. Hence there is some inequality in the style."¹ The wide acceptance of the assumption that the *Utopia* lacks unity can be presumed from the tendency to discuss one book to the exclusion of the other. Russel Ames, for example, observes that "the Utopian second part seems to dominate the mind whenever *Utopia* is mentioned."² Yet Book I seems to receive more attention from those readers interested in the person of Thomas More.

In discussing how More's personal dilemma of deciding whether to enter the service of Henry VIII informs the subject matter of Book I, surprisingly few critics have explicitly identified the book's theme. The critical consensus seems to be that it deals primarily with councilorship. J. H. Hexter, for example, in his scholarly study of the composition of the *Utopia*, reconstructs how More wrote Book I in separate portions as he encountered specific problems relating to his decisions: "How much further he got before he was again diverted we cannot say. At some point, however, he became acutely aware of another dimension of the problem about counsel."³ From his analysis Hexter concludes that Book I "is a tight-knit dialectic exploration of the problem of counseling princes in sixteenth century Europe."⁴ David Bevington goes further to interpret both books in terms of councilorship: "The description of the island of Utopia in Book II deals similarly with the problem of the philosopher in deciding whether or not to participate in a government. The respective stands of *persona* More and Hythloday are merely the obverse of their previous positions concerning tyranny."⁵ Although both Hexter and Bevington demonstrate cogently how More's quandary informs his creation of the *Utopia*, their emphasis on the motif of councilorship tends to divert attention from the main theme of Book I and how it relates to the theme of the whole.

1. *The Epistles of Erasmus*, trans. F. M. Nichols (London, 1904), III, 398.

2. *Citizen Thomas More and His Utopia* (Princeton, 1949), p. 4.

3. *Utopia*, eds. Edward Surtz, S. J., and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London, 1965), Vol. IV of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (16 vols. ; New Haven and London, 1963-), p. xxxii. All citations from the text of the *Utopia* are taken from this edition. Quotations are designated in the body of the text with page and line.

4. *Ibid.*, p. xx.

5. "Dialogue in *Utopia* : Two Sides to the Question," *Studies in Philology*, LVIII (July, 1961), 496-509.

The emphasis of modern critics on councilorship is in marked contrast to that of More's contemporaries, particularly Guillaume Budé and Jerome Busleyden, who see the opposition between justice and injustice as the unifying link between Book I and Book II. Even the structure of Budé's letter to Thomas Lupset reflects his perception of this unifying theme. In the first half of the letter he laments that Europeans neither understand nor follow justice because they are concerned with the letter of the law instead of being guided "by the standard of truth and by the command of the gospel to be simple" (7/29-30). In the second part he praises Utopia as the only place where justice is practiced. He suggests that justice has flown from Europe not to the skies but to Utopia: "In Utopia the assertion could be made that Aratus and the ancient poets were dangerously close to being mistaken when they stationed Justice in the zodiac after her flight from earth. If we are to believe Hythlodæus, she must have remained behind on the island of Utopia and not yet have made her way to the sky" (11/36-13/2). Busleyden, like Budé, stresses justice in thanking More for giving the "world a description of the good and just contribution, which all must desire, in the commonwealth of Utopia" (33/15-16).

When the theme of injustice in Book I is seen in contrast to the theme of justice in Book II, then the connecting thread of the whole work, and hence its unity, becomes clearer. As Father Surtz points out, "the focus upon Hythlodæus helps to pinpoint the theme: it can be none other than 'The Best State of a Commonwealth'... The main practical problem for the interlocutors is the achievement of justice for the poor laboring classes and therefore for the whole nation."¹ To see this structural plan is to see more clearly the *Utopia's* descent from its great progenitor, Plato's *Republic*. For in Book VIII of the *Republic*, Socrates turns the dialogue from a consideration of the best to the worst form of government "in order that, after observing the most unjust of all, we may oppose him to the most just, and complete our inquiry as to the relation of pure justice and pure injustice in respect of the happiness and unhappiness of the possessor..."² In contrasting the picture of Utopia in Book II to the picture of Europe in Book I, More then imitates the rhetorical device used by Plato.

To see clearly the theme of Book I, we must put the debate on councilorship in perspective. My insistence that councilorship is not the primary theme arises from the three following considerations: first, the actual exchanges between *persona* More, Peter Giles, and Hythlodæus on the question of whether the philosopher should enter a king's service do

1. *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J. (New Haven and London, 1964), Yale University Press paperback, p. xxi.

2. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, ed. T.E. Page (2 vols.; rev. ed.; Cambridge and London, 1963). All quotations from the *Republic* are taken from this translation and are cited by book and marginal number in the text: (*Republic*, VIII 545 A-B).

not pervade the discussion, as does the theme of injustice -- rather, they recur at relatively infrequent intervals; second, the "dialectic exploration" is neither "tight-knit" nor a "close argument," pace Hexter; and third, the point at issue in the debate, namely, the duty of a good man in an evil society, is subordinate to the main theme. The exchanges of views which specifically relate to counseling occur at three junctures (55/13-59/17; 85/38-87/25; 97/39-103/23) which comprise about one-fifth of the entire book, that is, roughly 220 out of 1100 lines. The interspersed anecdotes narrated by Hythlodæus -- the dialogue at Cardinal Morton's and the council meetings of the two kings -- only obliquely relate to the question. Moreover, the debate itself, as well as the other four-fifths of the book, concerns the question of justice.

Close analysis of the debate reveals that Hythlodæus argues evasively and spuriously in responding to the suggestion that he become a councilor. Peter Giles and *persona* More reason that the philosopher not only has a duty to be councilor, but also that he could benefit himself, his friends and relatives, as well as the king he serves. Hythlodæus answers all their arguments with the significant exception of their appeal to his moral duty. He has already given away his material possessions to friends and relatives, he has no hope that any king would listen to him, and he sees no point in following a way of life his soul abhors.

Although Hythlodæus does not answer the most compelling argument urged upon him, he assails the corrupt ruling class as being responsible for the injustice in Europe. Taking his cue from More's remark that "from the monarch, as from a never-failing spring, flows a stream of all that is good or evil over the whole nation" (57/16-18), he retorts that the duty of a king should be to promote peace and prosperity, but "almost all monarchs prefer to occupy themselves in the pursuits of war... rather than in the honorable activities of peace, and they care much more how, by hook or by crook, they may win fresh kingdoms than how they may administer well what they have got" (57/26-30). Councilors also, because they lack wisdom, the primary virtue of the ruling class, refuse to accept new ideas. Because of Hythlodæus' impassioned attack on the perpetrators of injustice in Europe, it is not immediately apparent that he argues spuriously against being a king's councilor himself. First, he does not say "all monarchs" foment war. He says "almost all." Why, then, does he not offer his services to a peace-loving monarch, however rare such a one may be? Second, and more important, his statement begs the question. Presumably, Giles and More know already that most kings and their councilors prefer war to peace. For this reason, they urge Hythlodæus to attempt to change the habitual behavior of such war lords. Hythlodæus, however, not only fails to show why he could not influence the opinions of kings and councilors, but he also proceeds, ironically, to relate a story that proves just the opposite, i.e., he recounts his discussion at the home of Cardinal Morton.

If councilorship is the theme of Book I, Hythlodæus' narration of his dialogue at Morton's table then must be considered a long digression.

He tells the story ostensibly to show that his sage advice could not sway king's councilors, but if the anecdote supports his contention that councilors are corrupt, it shows more significantly that at least one high-ranking councilor readily accepts good advice. The Cardinal, Lord Chancellor of England, displays wisdom and an open-minded attitude in reacting to his guest's arguments about penal justice. He alone, of those present, recognizes the sanity of Hythlodæus' remarks; he agrees that the philosopher's penal theories should be tried in practice. The Morton episode, then, is largely inappropriate as a rebuttal to *persona* More's argument on counseling. By telling the anecdote, Hythlodæus avoids the point that More makes about his duty to be a councilor and proves, if anything, that some king's councilors do not prefer war and money to peace and justice. In addition, he demonstrates that a convincing argument can sway Cardinal Morton, a royal councilor.

The episode at Lambeth Palace, though it provides no reason for staying out of politics, does portray graphically a picture of injustice in England which has the essential lineaments of Plato's description of an oligarchy (*Republic*, VII 550 C): a ruling class based on property qualifications, a perversion of laws with enforcement by terror, and a pauper class that begs and steals to maintain itself. These conditions prevail in England, where the unjust class structure has produced a society overrun with thieves. As a result, the rich and powerful have enacted a "strict justice" to terrorize the malefactors into conformity. In defense of the system, Morton's lawyer guest describes how the thieves are everywhere executed, "as many as twenty at a time being hanged on one gallows" (61/11). The ominous image of the gallows, blithely described by the lawyer, epitomizes the reign of terror and injustice that oppresses the poor in England.

In rebutting the lawyer, Hythlodæus charges the rich with being responsible for injustice. Because of pride and greed they foment war and enclose large tracts of land for sheep grazing, a cause of friction between classes. The practice of enclosure has made England a wilderness where a few greedy gluttons control vast areas of land and poverty haunts the common people. In explaining why enclosure causes thieving, he evokes an image of sheep "so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns" (65/38-67/2). This image of inverted order, like that of the gallows, symbolizes the theme of injustice in the first book.

Calling for an end to evil and corruption, Hythlodæus tells the lawyer that "it is useless for you to boast of the justice you execute in punishment of theft. Such justice is more showy than really just or beneficial" (71/9-11). As an alternative to this harsh system, he tells of the Polylerites, a people from whom the English could learn to improve their own institutions and laws. Polylerite justice does not favor the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Seeking justice, not revenge, they attempt to rehabilitate a thief by working him on public projects. The humorous

argument between a hanger-on and a friar then related by Hythlodæus also shows the absurdity of their understanding of justice. Insisting on the strict interpretation of the law despite the injustice in it, they engage in a shouting match in which each quotes Scripture to revile the other.

His account of the dialogue at Cardinal Morton's reveals a great deal about the concerns and character of Hythlodæus. He is a man with a message; whatever the question put before him he cleverly turns the conversation around to his favorite topic – injustice. This habit of mind is even more evident as the dialogue continues. Indicating that the story about Morton does not answer the question of duty, More resumes the debate on councilorship (85/38-87/25) with an appeal to the authority of Plato: "Your favorite author, Plato, is of the opinion that commonwealths will finally be happy only if either philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy. What a distant prospect of happiness there will be if philosophers will not condescend even to impart their counsel to kings" (87/11-15)! Hythlodæus, however, repeats his previous assertion that kings cannot be changed, again invoking his favorite author: "But, doubtless, Plato was right in foreseeing that if kings themselves did not turn to philosophy, they would never approve of the advice of real philosophers because they have been from their youth saturated and infected with wrong ideas. This truth he found from his own experience with Dionysius" (87/18-23). Instead of defending the philosopher's right not to serve the king, Hythlodæus maintains simply that kings must change themselves if they are to change at all. Whereas More alludes to the fifth book of the *Republic* in his call for philosopher-kings, Hythlodæus refers to Plato's experience with Dionysius. In the *Republic* Socrates never suggests that kings will turn to philosophy of their own accord. He makes it clear that one does not embrace philosophy without rigorous intellectual training, which the founders of the state have the responsibility to provide.

In retreating from the real issue, Hythlodæus imagines two hypothetical kings' council meetings, which he supposedly relates to show that kings and councilors are corrupt by nature. Though unconvincing as proofs of the ineffectiveness of a philosopher as a royal councilor, the anecdotes illustrate the injustice prevalent in Europe. Hythlodæus' kings display the vices which Plato identifies as characteristic of a tyrant. According to Socrates, the tyrant "is always stirring up some war so that the people may be in need of a leader" (*Republic*, VII 566 F), and he has an insatiable lust for gold. This lust drives him to waste his resources and to enslave his subjects. In his picture of a French king scheming nefariously with a "circle of his most astute councilors," Hythlodæus characterizes the warlike nature of a tyrant. That the king has "already conceived the idea of usurping" other states insures approval for his evil desires from his councilors (87/27-36). The councilors' recommendations to spread a net of alliances, treaties, and agreements for the purpose of bringing Italy under French control, suggest the cancerous nature of the corruption in Europe.

Judged as a defense of Hythlodæus' argument, the episode like the dialogue at Morton's table, must be considered a digression. Hythlodæus begs the question before him by assuming a prior acquiescence in the main point he tries to establish – namely, that kings and councilors are corrupt by nature and cannot be changed. It would be folly, no doubt, to attempt to dissuade such men from going to war when they have specifically assembled to plan strategy. But the situation described would not convince an unbiased listener that a wise councilor who had been urging peace over a period of years could not have prevented the king and his councilors from meeting in the first place.

Though the account of the French council meeting does not advance Hythlodæus' argument, it is an ironic device whereby Thomas More, the incipient king's councilor, can offer some advice to Henry VIII. By having Hythlodæus show that the French "agree that negotiations for peace should be undertaken, that an alliance always weak at best should be strengthened with the strongest bonds, and the English should be called friends but suspected as enemies" (89/13-16), the author suggests to his own monarch that England stay clear of entangling alliances. By having Hythlodæus castigate the injustice of war and the disastrous consequences of an imperialistic foreign policy, More hopes to impress on Henry the necessity for unity. The example of the Achorian people, who learned to their regret that the acquisition of another kingdom brings misery and slavery, points out that even victorious wars disrupt society. The Achorians lost lives and money, their country became a breeding ground for thieves, and a general condition of injustice resulted, reflected particularly by the fact that "laws were held in contempt" (91/9). Fortunately, however, they saw the error of their ways and made their king choose one or the other of his two kingdoms.

Though the story of the Achorian people is a good lesson for Henry VIII, it exemplifies again the inconsistency of Hythlodæus' position in the debate on councilorship. Indeed, his evidence diametrically opposes the point he purportedly wishes to make. The account of the French council meeting supposedly shows that kings cannot be swayed from an evil course of action, yet the Achorians prove just the opposite by persuading their king to relinquish one of his kingdoms. Rather than advancing his argument, Hythlodæus with this anecdote condemns the acquisitive nature of tyrants and demonstrates the cancerous nature of evil in European society.

Whereas the picture of the French king emphasizes the warlike nature of a tyrant, the portrait of the anonymous king stresses greed. Each of his councilors proposes a scheme to fill the king's coffers at the expense of the people. They make the perversion of law particularly obnoxious because they attempt to appear just. One councilor, for example, recommends exacting fines for the violation of "certain old and moth-eaten laws" (93/5-5) : such a scheme would be desirable because of its "outward mask of justice" (93/10).

The image here of sinister councilors shrewdly manipulating laws behind an outward mask of justice evokes the injustice at the heart of the whole legal system. But, as an argument against entering royal service, the story, like that of the French council, begs the question. The king and his councilors have met in secret session to extort money from the people. One cannot help wondering why a wise councilor would wait until the decision to pervert the laws already has been made before urging a just fiscal policy. The two hypothetical council meetings, then, show merely that one should not try to change kings and councilors who have already formed opinions, not that a wise man cannot influence kings under any circumstances.

Significantly, these spurious arguments again fail to convince *persona* More. Insisting upon the point made previously, that Hythlodæus misunderstands the councilor's role, he argues that Hythlodæus should eschew academic philosophy and adopt another kind, more practical for statesmen ; for, if the philosopher cannot completely effect good, he can at least abate evil. More, aware of the philosopher's blunt manner, recommends an indirect approach. Considering such an approach as not only wrong but also ineffective, Hythlodæus rejects the suggestion. He characteristically supports his argument by placing himself, with the Utopians and Plato, on one side, in contrast to the councilors : "What if I told them the kind of things which Plato creates in his republic or which the Utopians actually put in practice in theirs ? Though such institutions were superior (as, to be sure, they are), yet they might appear odd because here individuals have the right of private property, there all things are common" (101/12-18). Although Hythlodæus has not, up to this point in the dialogue, mentioned private property as such, he here identifies it as a cause of injustice. In Book II he reveals the way in which the Utopians achieve justice by eliminating private ownership.

In the final segment of Book I (103/24-109/36), Hythlodæus continues to emphasize the contrast between Utopian justice and European injustice. Summarizing the wretched conditions of life in Europe, he explains that "wherever you have private property and all men measure all things by cash values, there it is scarcely possible for a commonwealth to have *justice* or prosperity – unless you think *justice* exists where all the best things flow into the hands of the worst citizens or prosperity prevails where all is divided among very few – and even they are not altogether well off, while the rest are downright wretched" (*italics added*) (103/25-31). He then praises the good order in Utopia, where "with very few laws, affairs are ordered so aptly that virtue has its reward, and yet, with equality of distribution, all men have abundance of all things..." (103/33-35). Thus by this contrast More links the themes of his two books.

To see how the debate on councilorship relates to the theme of justice, we might use Plato's *Republic* as a gloss. Concluding his rebuttal with an image drawn directly from the *Republic*, Hythlodæus justifies his decision to remain apart from the political affairs of Europe with

to the authority of Plato: "For this reason, Plato by a very fine comparison shows why philosophers are right in abstaining from administration of the commonwealth. They observe the people rushing out into the streets and being soaked by constant showers and cannot induce them to go indoors and escape the rain. 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" (103/16-23). This alludes to the sixth book of the *Republic*, where Socrates explains to Adeimantus that the philosopher, because the multitude has no regard for him, "remains quiet, minds his own affair, and, as it were, standing aside under shelter of a wall in a storm and blast of dust and sleet and seeing others filled full of lawlessness, is content if in any way he may keep himself free from iniquity and unholy deeds through this life and take his departure with fair hope, serene and well content when the end comes" (*Republic*, VI 496 D-E). Hythlodæus, then, in refusing to espouse the indirect approach, follows the natural inclination of a philosopher. That both Hythlodæus and *persona* More can quote Plato to support opposing arguments shows how artfully both men debate. Both characters quote Socrates out of context and attribute the opinions to Plato. In his allusion to the philosopher's retreating from the storm, Hythlodæus recalls Socrates' explanation of the natural inclination of the philosopher. More, however, refers to Socrates' famous dictum in Book V that for justice to be attained in the state philosophers must be allowed to rule.

Although Hythlodæus offers several compelling reasons for remaining out of politics, in the final analysis his argument is unconvincing. Only after repeated prodding by *persona* More does he confront the question of the moral duty of a philosopher. He points out that his own moral well-being would be put in jeopardy by association with evil kings and councilors. This danger, he explains, results from the incorrigible nature of councilors: "Moreover, there is no chance for you to do any good because you are brought among colleagues who would easily corrupt even the best of men before being reformed themselves" (103/9-11). This fallacious reasoning forces a conclusion which undermines Hythlodæus' general position. If evil councilors can corrupt philosophers, change of character is in fact possible. But Hythlodæus has insisted that he could not effect change in evil kings and councilors. To reconcile these two positions, he must presume that evil can corrupt good but that good cannot correct evil. The Utopians, however, belie this: their dealings with other people obviously have not corrupted them. Conversely, their example has persuaded the Anemolian ambassadors to see the truth about gold and finery.

The debate on councilorship at the end of the first book remains unresolved. This unresolved issue, as Bevington suggests, probably reflects More's state of mind at the time he wrote Book I. But More has a larger purpose than simply depicting his own personal dilemma in a dramatic

dialogue: he depicts tyranny and corruption in a realistic setting that contrasts sharply with the ideal justice portrayed in Book II.

Although the question of whether a philosopher should enter politics remains unresolved, we can perhaps surmise how More resolved the problem in his own life by reading the whole of the *Utopia* as an analogue of Socrates' parable of the cave. Socrates recognizes the inevitable problem which will arise whenever a philosopher reaches the stage where he can apprehend the form of the good. The parable graphically portrays the conflict between the duty and the desire of a good man in an unjust society. A man fortunate enough to be released from his shackles in the cave so that he may ascend to the outside world will be dazzled by the light. Then, if the man goes back into the cave, he will be an object of ridicule. Once out of the cave, any man will naturally be reluctant to return. If one who has seen the sun cannot be induced back into the cave, however, the state will not be ruled justly, since those with the desire to lead have not the wisdom, and those with the wisdom have not the desire. Socrates concludes that the dilemma can be solved only if the one who has seen the light, namely, the philosopher, is forced back into the cave. There he must take his rightful position as ruler, however distasteful it may be. Basing his whole argument for the possibility of the ideal state on this premise, Socrates states in Book V that such a condition can come about only when philosophers become kings.

In the *Utopia* Hythlodæus' situation parallels that of the philosopher who leaves the cave of Europe and catches a glimpse of the sun in Utopia. He balks at entering into European politics because he fears his inability to convince those who, like the lawyer at Cardinal Morton's, have seen only the shadows of justice. Even the good Peter Giles and *persona* More react to the philosopher as cavedwellers. At the close of Book II, after Hythlodæus' peroration on the contrast between the injustice in Europe and the justice in Utopia, More responds in perhaps the only way possible for a man who must go on living in the unjust condition of European affairs: "I cannot agree with all that he said. But I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized" (245/39-247/3).

Although, as *persona* More is a denizen of the cave, Thomas More, the man, knows better. When he returned to England after completing the second book of the *Utopia*, he was confronted with the dilemma of whether to remain aloft in the airy regions of the Utopian light, or to return to the cave of European politics. Although his personal inclinations as a philosophic spirit were to follow that way of life which would allow him more time to dwell in the light of the sun, he chose to return to the cave, because he could not, as does Hythlodæus, dodge the call of duty. Thomas More, the man, knew well how Socrates resolves the dilemma in the *Republic*: "It is the duty of us, the founders, then, . . . to compel the best natures to attain the knowledge which we pronounced the greatest, and

to win to the vision of the good, to scale that ascent, and when they have reached the heights and taken an adequate view, we must not allow what is now permitted... That they should linger there,... and refuse to go down again among those bondsmen and share their labours and honours, whether they are of less or greater worth" (*Republic*, VII 520 B).

Athens, Ohio.

Ed QUATTROCKI



19 January 1971

Reverend and dear Abbé Marc'hadour :

As a former student of Father Surtz, I was delighted to learn recently that he is being honored by a Festschrift. May your endeavor prosper !

My work under his direction dealt with the Latin poems of George Herbert. Although I hope eventually to see them published, I cannot be certain of the date. Since the only other work in which I have been engaged, besides my classes at Mary College, have involved work as a cataloguer in the library named above, I believe I am correct in assuming that I would not be able to make a contribution to the Surtz volume : nevertheless, I wish to assure you of my interest.

Respectfully,

Mary College
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Mary Elizabeth Mason, o.s.b.

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TOTA INSULA UELLIT UNA FAMILIA EST. (148/3)

"THE WHOLE ISLAND IS LIKE A SINGLE FAMILY." (149/3-4)

L'ILE TOUTE ENTIERE EST COMME UNE SEULE FAMILLE.

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