

**HYTHLODAY'S QUESTIONS :  
CLUES TO HIS CHARACTER ?  
OR PROVOKERS OF THOUGHT ?**

The Utopian pursuit of pleasure has made many critics and readers uneasy. Interpreters, especially those who stress More's orthodox Christianity, often claim that More regarded the pursuit of pleasure not as reasonable, but as absurd. Edward L. Surtz, on the other hand, has argued that More, in inventing the Utopian pleasure philosophy, « wished to provoke Christians to some serious thought about the nature and the object of human happiness. »<sup>1</sup> I would like to further substantiate Father Surtz's position by discussing briefly More's strategy in having Hythloday question the Utopians' attitudes toward pleasure.

The pursuit of pleasure, in the Utopian view, is sanctioned by nature and reason, their persistent norms : « The senses (*sensus*) as well as right reason (*recta ratio*) aim at whatever is pleasant by nature. »<sup>2</sup> « Nature herself, they maintain, prescribes to us a joyous life or, in other words, pleasure, as the end of our operations » (*Utopia*, p. 165).<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis's response, though dated, is instructive. He does not want us to take this Utopian interest very seriously : « It is very strange, » he says, that More « should make Hedonism the philosophy of the Utopians. Epicurus was not regarded by most Christians as the highest example of the natural light. »<sup>4</sup> R.W. Chambers<sup>5</sup> first offered what might be called the « natural light » view -- that whatever faults we might find in the Utopians could be attributed to More's conscious portrayal of them as heathen, but at the same time (in Lewis's words), as « the highest example of the natural light. » By distinguishing the Utopians as heathen, Chambers (along with Lewis and others) is able to absolve More of responsibility for any opinion held by the Utopians which may not accord with beliefs More expresses in his other writings.

A second and more recent method of achieving the same end is to dissociate More from his narrator Hythloday, and to judge Hythloday's whole-hearted enthusiasm for Utopian practices as a naive idealism not sanctioned by More.

Hythloday, though, is not whole-hearted in his praise of hedonism, and this should make us pause. Three times in Book Two he expresses some reservation about Utopian practices. He is dubious about their custom of premarital inspection. And twice he indicates concern about

the Utopian philosophy of pleasure : 1) « They seem to lean more than they should to the school that espouses pleasure » (*Utopia*, p. 161) ; <sup>6</sup> and 2) « We have taken upon ourselves only to describe their principles, and not also to defend them » (*Utopia*, p. 179). <sup>7</sup>

What rhetorical purpose do these expressions of reservation serve ? Do they reveal, since they all deal with matters of pleasure, something of Hythloday's character, perhaps that Hythloday is notably ascetic ? This is possible, but if it is true, Hythloday's asceticism is gratuitous, for it does not cast light on our reading of any other aspect of the work. The first book of *Utopia* raises numerous questions about justice and about civic responsibility, but none about pleasure or asceticism.

Do Hythloday's reservations, then, indicate that the practices to which they are directed are the most suspect of all ? Are they so outrageous that even the naive Hythloday is not fooled ? This is unlikely, for the Utopian practices which are most bold and innovative are their military and religious practices ; and Hythloday embraces these without reserve.

There is a third possibility. When a narrator expresses his ideas self-righteously, his very assurance arouses skepticism in the reader. But when a narrator expresses doubt, we tend to read more carefully, and at the same time more sympathetically, because we share that doubt, and trust a narrator who shares ours. In this case, the distrust of pleasure to which Hythloday's disclaimers point is, I believe, the reader's. Simply because, as Lewis says, Epicurus was *not* regarded as « the highest example of the natural light, » a Christian reader would be skeptical of any practice which seemed to follow the Epicurean ideal. Hythloday's disclaimer prevents such a reader from putting the book down in disgust ; it invites him to read the passage on hedonism carefully and to determine where he and Hythloday agree. When the reader does read carefully, he discovers that there is nothing to justify Hythloday's reservations. The pursuit of pleasure is one of the most admirable and effective of the Utopian ideas.

Like many other aspects of *Utopia*, the pursuit of pleasure effectively precludes vices which threaten justice. The Utopians carefully distinguish between those actions which are pleasant by nature, and those which have been deemed pleasant by a « judgment, depraved either by disease or habit » (*Utopia*, p. 173) <sup>8</sup>. All pleasures which threaten justice or natural fellowship are therefore forbidden. Hunting is forbidden because its pleasure is derived from a cruelty which might be transferred to other men ; « there is nothing sweet » in it « by nature » (*Utopia*, p. 171). <sup>9</sup> Likewise, the pleasure of exalting oneself above others (e.g.,

pride) has no justification in nature, for nature « equally favors all whom she endows with the same form » (*Utopia*, p. 165). <sup>10</sup> The pleasure of pride is teasingly ridiculed by questioning pride's capacity for giving physical pleasure. Hythloday asks : « What natural and true pleasure can another's bared head or bent knees afford you ? Will this behavior cure the pain in your own knees or relieve the lunacy in your own head ? » (*Utopia*, p. 169). <sup>11</sup> The fact that the Utopian pursuit of pleasure excludes pride as an unnatural and thus illegitimate pleasure, makes that pursuit of pleasure indeed a useful ideal.

More has given us several examples in Book I of the way people resist new ideas. Here he has tried to outwit that habitual resistance. He uses Hythloday's seeming reticence about the Utopian pursuit of pleasure to break down a Christian reader's resistance to a pleasure philosophy just long enough to make the reader question the much more serious causes of injustice, especially pride.

University of Maryland

Eugene R. Hammond

1. *The Praise of Pleasure* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 14.

2. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J., and J.H. Hexter (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1965), p. 167.

3. « Vitam ergo iucundam inquit, id est uoluptatem tanquam operationum omnium finem, ipsa nobis natura praescribit » (*Utopia*, p. 164/10-12).

4. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 168.

5. *Thomas More* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1935), pp. 125-31.

6. « At hac in re propensiores aequo uidentur in factionem uoluptatis assertricem » (*Utopia*, p. 160/20-22).

7. « quippe qui narranda eorum instituta, non etiam tuenda suscepimus » (*Utopia*, p. 178/14-15).

8. « aut morbo, aut consuetudine deprauatum iudicium » (*Utopia*, p. 172/5-6).

9. « natura nihil insit suaue » (*Utopia*, p. 170/30).

10. « uniuersos ex aequo fouet, quos eiusdem formae communione complectitur » (*Utopia*, p. 164/16-17).

11. « Nam quid naturalis & uerae uoluptatis affert nudatus alterius uertex, aut curuati poplites, hocce tuorum poplitum dolori medebitur ? aut tui capitis phrenesim leuabit ? » (*Utopia*, p. 168/2-5).