



Walter Gordon and his family at Fontevraud.

POSTMODERN MORE

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Thomas More is often called a "humanist," and rightly so if the word has its usual meaning in scholarship on the Renaissance. "Humanist" has by now acquired so many different and contradictory meanings, however, that it needs to be applied carefully to the likes of More. Many postmodernists tend to use the word, pejoratively, to mean someone who believes in an autonomous self, the stability of words, reason, and the possibility of determinable meanings. Without quite arguing that More was a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, this essay suggests that he was not a "humanist" who stalks the pages of much recent postmodernist theory and that in fact even while remaining a devout Catholic and sensible lawyer he was quite as aware as any recent critic of the slipperiness of human selves and human language. It is time that literary critics tightened up their definition of "humanist," especially when writing about the Renaissance.

Key-words: humanism, Renaissance, paradox, irony, the self.

On qualifie souvent Thomas More d'"humaniste", ce qui n'est pas faux si le terme est employé dans le sens qui lui donnent les spécialistes de la Renaissance. Toutefois, ce terme « humaniste » revêt de nos jours tant de sens différents et contradictoires qu'il convient de l'appliquer avec prudence à quelqu'un comme More. Beaucoup de postmodernistes tendent à l'utiliser de façon péjorative pour décrire ceux qui croient en le soi autonome, en la stabilité des mots, en la raison, et en la possibilité d'établir des sens déterminables. Sans tout à fait prétendre que More était postmoderne avant la lettre, cet article suggère qu'il n'était pas « l'humaniste » qui règne en maître sur les pages de beaucoup d'ouvrages de théorie postmoderne. En fait, More, tout en demeurant un catholique pieux et un avocat raisonnable, était aussi sensible que n'importe quel critique d'aujourd'hui à l'instabilité de l'individu et du langage. Il est temps que les critiques littéraires ajustent leur définition du mot « humaniste », surtout lorsqu'il traitent de questions de la Renaissance.

Mots-clés : humanisme, Renaissance, paradoxe, ironie, le soi.

A menudo se califica a Tomás Moro como un « humanista » y con razón si el término se emplea en el sentido que le dan los estudiosos del Renacimiento. Hoy en día, el término « humanista » ha adquirido significados tan diferentes y contradictorios que es necesario ser prudentes a la hora de aplicarlo a alguien como Moro. Muchos posmodernistas tienden a usar este término de manera peyorativa para calificar a quienes creen en el yo autónomo, la estabilidad de las palabras, la razón y la posibilidad de los sentidos determinables. Sin afirmar del todo que Moro fue un posmodernista *avant le lettre*, este artículo sugiere que no era el « humanista » presente en las páginas de obras de teoría posmodernista mucho más recientes. De hecho, Moro, a pesar de ser un católico devoto y un abogado sensato, tenía la misma sensibilidad que cualquier crítico de hoy con respecto a la inestabilidad del individuo y del lenguaje. Ya es hora de que los críticos literarios ajusten su definición de « humanista », sobre todo cuando se refieren al Renacimiento.

Palabras clave : humanismo, Renacimiento, paradoja, ironía, el yo.

Several years ago, when conducting a graduate seminar on Renaissance satire, I looked up after reading a few preliminary words on the paradoxes and ironies that shimmer throughout More's *Utopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* only to see a number of baffled faces. Wait, several students asked: These men were *humanists*? I knew it was time for definitions. Definitions were in order because the word "humanism," poor tattered thing, now has so many meanings that in my own *Utopia* it would be sent to an old-word home, taken off life support, and allowed to die. Those who keep up with current literary criticism know what I mean. Others could try looking up "humanism" on the Internet. It can mean a soft version of man-centered atheism, a humanitarian concern for others, or a focus on literature or the arts—the "humanities." However, in advanced academic circles (New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, queer theory, French poststructuralism, and so forth), "humanism" too often can mean a self-deluding and ideologically suspect belief in a universal, inborn, and "essential" human nature. Such "humanism" posits a stable self and prefers stable language. It half-blindly values the autonomous rights-endowed individual and thinks there is such a thing as literature (not just "texts"), authors (rather than "signatures"),

transcendent values, and determinable meanings referring to a reality out there beyond human culture. In some universities, "humanist" is almost as bad an insult as "essentialist" or "liberal," at least when this last word is used in the European sense of a believer in free markets and free selves.¹

Yes, there is also something called "Renaissance humanism," and some of my postmodern friends, especially when tugged on the sleeve and reminded, do know that More and Erasmus, like their Italian predecessors, bore only slight resemblance to the "humanist" enemy of fashionable academic thinking. To be sure, More and his friends were "humanist" in the sense of believing that God was wise to put Adam, not pigs or peacocks, in charge of the other animals. And they were "humanists" in the sense of wishing humanity (or some of it) well. They also believed in the value of what the English-speaking world calls the "humanities" and, although not "secular humanists" of the sort who publish atheist manifestos, they did value reason and learning over obscurantism and bigotry. But despite a concession here and there, even some Renaissance scholars can forget just how far Thomas More was from being the strawperson who distracted my students.

¹ See, e.g., Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 1997). In an appendix Davies (a Marxist who shows both anger at his prey and pleasure in dancing on its grave) takes on the question of vocabulary. He suggests that "the meaning of 'humanism' is the semantic tangle, or grapple, that makes its meanings so difficult to grasp" (128). This is clever, but it does not answer the objection that without further untangling it is too easy to make "humanism" guilty of whatever one wants, from (according to Davies) supporting an array of tyrants from the Borgias to Bonaparte or (others might say) promoting cultural sentimentality or pride. In her Introduction to the invaluable *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) Jill Kraye says that she hopes "to counter the view that Renaissance humanism was a narrowly philological enterprise," for it was in fact "a broad intellectual and cultural movement." Fair enough, but on why Renaissance humanism need not entail a *particular* ideology, also see Jacques Chomarat, "Faut-il donner un sens philosophique au mot humanisme?", *Renaissance and Reformation* 21 (1997), 49-64. On what most specialists would call Renaissance humanism I have been influenced by Paul Kristeller but also by, e.g., Charles G. Nauert, Jr., *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

It might, then, be entertaining to look not at More's "humanism"—his approach to classical texts, his philology, his support of "the new learning," even his hopes for a more reasonable Europe—but rather at aspects of his writing that seem unhumanist in the current (and frequently ignorant) sense, indeed that seem almost postmodern. No, More was not really "postmodern." But he was more postmodern than many of the truly postmodern think. I suggest, and of course I am hardly alone among More's readers, that for those who like flux and slipperiness, who prefer the marginal to the canonical or central, and who disbelieve in settled or essential identities, transparent words and meanings, or capital A Authorship, More offers a wealth of ammunition, questions, and examples. What follows is a meditation on Thomas More and topics of postmodern interest.

The Self in Flux

The sense that the ground under our feet, although more solid than Gnostics would have it, is no firm basis for a City of Man, let alone a City of God, was not foreign to Renaissance humanists. After all, one name for the turret-crowned Magna Mater, mother of the Olympians and goddess of all that the Earth's surface bears, is Rhea: "Flowing." A much-translated Neolatin epigram, often ascribed to the humanist poet Janus Vitalis, plays with the paradox that ancient Rome's pillared and urban solidity has largely disappeared down Time's slipstream, whereas the nearby Tiber, always flowing, is still present to modern eyes. I quote du Bellay's version (*Antiquitez de Rome* 3) by way of Spenser:

Thou stranger, which for Rome in Rome here seekest,
And nought of Rome in Rome perceiv'st at all,
These same old walls, olde arches, which thou seest,
Olde Palaces, is that which Rome men call . . .
Ne ought save Tyber hastning to his fall
Remaines of all: O worlds inconstancie.

That which is firme doth flit and fall away,
And what is flitting, doth abide and stay.²

Flitting and fluidity figure in Renaissance humanism's thirst for locating origins; when scholars and antiquaries say to pursue knowledge and texts *ad fontes*, to move upcurrent to culture's and books' sources in some hidden spring, they adopt an ambiguous metaphor. We are to work or imagine our way against the flow of time but to do so within a temporal, textual, and philological stream that is still present even as it flits. The metaphor is not unhelpful, but it also shows the value of exploring what flows, if by working backwards. No wonder that More's Raphael Hythloday discovered Utopia by crossing water, not by trekking into the African or Asian landmass.

Few Renaissance humanists would be taken aback by postmodern assertions that people, like the Rome of Vitalis and du Bellay, lack a stable self. This is not just because they were bright enough to recognize divisions and changes in the psyche. They were also aware, as humanist readers of classical texts, that ancient writers had already investigated the issue. Take Plutarch's dialogue "On the delays of divine justice."³ That the gods can take their own sweet time in punishing human misbehavior is certainly disturbing. Does Zeus not notice? Does he not care? The dialogue will eventually justify the ways of gods to man, but not before raising awkward questions about identity and time: if human beings continually change their "bent," or *tropos*, and character, or *ethos*, then how can it be just for the gods to punish a person or city for something done earlier? The flux of identity as well as of Time is a problem for justice. Plutarch's sense that one's *ethos* or *tropos* evolves, that even if our souls are what Shakespeare's Isabel in *Measure for Measure* was to call a "glassy essence," our personalities are built on Time's sands,

² Edmund Spenser, *Poetical Works*, eds. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952), 3.

³ In his *Moralia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP) VII, 180-299; because this is a dialogue, no one participant must speak for Plutarch.

lies behind Hythloday's radical "environmentalism" in *Utopia*. A harshly unjust system such as that in More's England, Hythloday argues, must affect our *tropos* and can even criminalize it. You cannot turn people into paupers and then be surprised when they start stealing.

That is why Utopia is not designed for perfect people but for redirecting the "bent" of ordinary ones, for strengthening citizens' eutropism, if I may be permitted the neologism, and hindering humanity's instinctive dystropism. Any system that relies on changing a bent must assume a shifty self. This does not mean—and here More would depart from extreme postmodernism—that the self does not exist. Probably he would agree with one of Plutarch's speakers in this same dialogue who concedes that although a city evolves over time it does remain that city (perhaps a little like the Tin Woodman of Oz, whose human bits have been replaced one by one with metal but whose gestalt, so to speak, has largely remained the same). "To create a multiplicity, or rather an infinity, of cities by chronological distinctions," Plutarch writes, "is like creating many men out of one because the man is now old, but was in his prime before, and yet earlier was a lad." This, moreover, would be like two Sophist fallacies (fallacies that must have enchanted More): in one of these, a man who has borrowed money need not pay it back because he is now a different man; in the other, somebody invited to dinner yesterday may, on the same grounds, be refused today. Unless we can imagine a person or city keeping some identity through time, then, "we shall find that we have unawares cast the whole of existence into the river of Heraclitus, into which he asserts no man can step twice."⁴ Plutarch refused to wade into that flitting river, but he did put a toe in it. So would More.

⁴ *Moralia* VII 245-47; this passage on justice, time, and identity in change may have contributed to the claim by Spenser's goddess Nature in his "Mutabilitie Cantos" that earthly things do not so much change their being (and hence lose their identity) as "dilate" it through time. The "I" you have at this instant is a cross-section of the you that lives through spacetime from birth to death. A Roman cannot step in the same Tiber twice, but that same Roman dilates himself through time as his own mini-Tiber: flitting but the same.

Such views, if not precisely postmodern in themselves, preclude the "essentialist" thinking about the self that provokes postmodern contempt. Utopian social engineering would not work for those Victorian—and "humanist"—selves who boast that they are masters of their fate and captains of their souls because masters and captains, hard nuggets of selfhood, would not be fluid enough, not enough subject to the bent-changing that Hythloday sees both as a cause of crime and an opportunity for human betterment. Indeed, to believe in an individual free will, rather than to share Luther's insistence on a bound one, is paradoxically to permit interior flux. When Pico argues, in his oration on human dignity, that we can choose our place on the chain of being, become animal or god, he is hardly affirming a stable human essence unless, of course, flux is our "essence." Perhaps, even more than the tricky fox or subtle serpent, we are the species that is polytropic.

Names and Words

Like the remaining deconstructionists or the now more numerous cultural materialists, More was fascinated by names' relation to things. The thoughtful have always been. What's in a name? What's in the name of a rose? Why do many of us change our names when we change our identities, when we marry, take the veil, assume the throne, join an Internet chat group, establish the USSR, whatever? Was the world ours before Adam named its parts? In Virgil's *Georgics*, the golden age ended at about the same time we learned to name the stars (I.137: "navita tum stellis numeros et nomina fecit"). Names are intimately related to identity. When my son David was three, the boy next door, likewise David and likewise three, was so upset by the notion of two Davids that he took to calling my David "Mr. Prescott" just to keep his sense of self intact. *Does* a rose by any other name smell as sweet? Probably, although had we called them "bloodprickles," say, they might figure in fewer poems. And Christians can console themselves for our names' ambiguities and duplications by remembering the white stone that God will give us inscribed with a new name (Rev. 2:17). Nevertheless, much

interesting postmodern thought grows out of linguistic theories that unlink words and inherent or stable meanings. Such skepticism about signs and signifieds is very ancient, of course (as witness Plato's *Cratylus*), but speculations on the topic increased in the late Middle Ages and are there in More. He might have thought the Derridean claim that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" either foolish or too true to matter, but he would have taken in stride what a scholar at Yale once called "an incorrigible fugacity of verbal plenitude."⁵ Words do not merely flow like the Tiber; they fly and flee like deer or birds. *Verbum fugit*.

The names in *Utopia* help More set up his paradoxes: what are we to make of a place named Nowhere (geopolitical equivalent of the folklore Nobody on whom we can blame mishaps or misdoings), a river named Waterless, and a king named "No people"? Such play recalls a story in *A Hundred Merry Tales*, published in 1526 by More's brother-in-law John Rastell. A man buys a knife and promises to pay many shillings or nothing. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he tries he cannot get hold of some nothing: in a sentence More must have relished, the narrator says "nothing could he devise but that it was somewhat." His wife has the solution: having sent her husband away, she hangs up a pot with no bottom. When the knife-seller comes to ask for his payment she tells him it's in the pot. He puts in his hand. What does he find there, the wife asks. "Marry, . . . right naught," the dolt replies.⁶ He has been paid in full—a full nothing. Can "nothing" be "something"? Can Utopia be somewhere? Well, yes, if we live in a world of words.

⁵ Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982), 115. On what he reads as Renaissance humanists' proto-poststructuralist view of language, see Richard Waswo, *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987). Waswo may be too cheerfully confident that there is no reality "out there" outside words, but he makes a case that Erasmus, Valla, and the others were more keenly aware than many in the next several generations that language is arbitrary and words are perform unstable.

⁶ *A Hundred Merry Tales*, ed. P.M. Zall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 109-10.

Words can exfoliate into complex puns, too. "Utopia" is itself a good pun, if a discouraging one: "Eutopia," the good place, is also "Outopia," a No-place. So too, More's name unfolds into more than one meaning; it is, to quote Germain Marc'hadour's witty exegesis of its various significances, "a name for all seasons."⁷ More's Protestant enemies sometimes noted that it can signify "black," like an African "Moor." But "Morus," his Latinized name, recalls the Greek for "fool," "moron." More, famously, enjoyed foolery. At one point, like other important statesmen, he even employed a fool; Morus had a moron. "Morus" is also, of course, one of the interlocutors in *Utopia*. Like many writers who walk into their own fictions More thus offers the reader a little epistemological tangle that makes his text what the postmodernist Roland Barthes would call "scriptible." If we cannot entirely trust Hythloday, speaker of nonsense, can we trust Master Moron? A Moron who is as impressed by mere magnificence and glory as are the worldly fools in the work of his friend Erasmus? In the Latin *Utopia*, that is, the name of the author sets up the same liar paradox that we find in *The Praise of Folly*, that *Encomion Moriae* that may also pun on "More." Such tangles are not new, but they worry the author of a sermon posted on the Web. Bad though "humanism" is, laments the writer (who takes "humanism" as "godlessness"), postmodernism is worse. Consider the American television hit show "Seinfeld," he continues: because this popular comedy stars a real man named Jerry Seinfeld who plays a comedian named Jerry Seinfeld, the "line between fiction and truth is completely obliterated."⁸ (And both Seinfelds, real and fictional, liked to say that the show was about "nothing." More would like that joke.)

The words with which we chase things, postmodern philosophers keep reminding us, are social constructs with no inherent connection to the things at which we hope they point. The name of the rose cannot generate roses, only other names of roses. More must

⁷ In *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1977), 539-62.

⁸ David McClister, "Postmodernism: An Old Enemy in a New Suit," <http://home1.gte.net/david1mc/Postmod1.htm>.

have thought that names and words can be “images” of something out there in the real world, for the extremes of postmodern solipsism were alien to him. His sense of the world’s reality, a reality made by God and pronounced good, was robust. More was clear, though, that words themselves have no inherent meaning. God is the Word, but the human words with which we commune with each other can mean only what we agree that they mean, or at least what the culturally powerful agree that they mean. Furthermore, since there can be no one-to-one relation between words in different languages, More argues in his *Letter to a monk* (CW15, 239),⁹ it is quite permissible to translate the Greek “Logos” in a variety of ways so as to bring out its full lexical range. In *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (CW6, Part 1, 39/25-40/5), he marshals this understanding of words against what he saw as the Reformers’ bibliolatry. The earliest Christians managed without a written Gospel, he points out, but even with one we must remember its literal words are created by mere people and have no meaning other than what consensus demands and creates. Words are not things, merely the images of things; even the “name of Iesus is nothyng els but a worde,” and hence a representation, an image. More then asks mischievously why, if Lutherans oppose reverencing painted images of God, they insist on reverencing a verbal one. Words and names, he says, “be no naturall synges” but “onely made by consent and agreement of men /to betoken and sygnifye suche thynges” (46/27-29). More was by no means alone in arguing this way, even if some thought Hebrew an exception and a few said the same of Dutch, although John Eliot, who noted this in 1593, dismissed the latter claim as “Flemish flamflues.”¹⁰

What also struck More was the moral danger in which we find ourselves when the selfish or foolish exploit words’ inherent indeterminacy by seeming to change things by changing names. I offer two examples. The first is a little anti-clerical joke illustrating how the self-indulgent can exploit language’s problematic relation to

⁹ The abbreviation *CW* used here and through this essay refers to *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 15 vols (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963-97).

¹⁰ John Eliot, *Ortho-epia Gallica* (1593), sig. F2v.

reality. One of the jests collected by the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini applies it to a Spanish bishop, but in his *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* More tells it about some gluttonous Lollards – proto-Lutherans, from More’s point of view. Unwilling to wait for the end of Lent, they “put a pygge in to the water, on good frydaye/ and sayd go in pygge and come oute pyke/ and so when they had chaunged the name, they toke yt for fyshe and ate it”. (CW8, Part 1, 122/4-6; Poggio’s bishop notes that after all he can also turn bread into flesh).¹¹

My second example shows the dangers of slippery language (and language is inevitably slippery) in the hands of power. Words are how you turn the king’s good servant into a traitor. It is good to be the king: you get to say what words mean. If you are head of both church and state, moreover, there will be no appeal from your univocal control of definition. Perhaps the most resonant example of the linguistic fluidity that More exploited when writing *Utopia* but feared in despots such as Henry VIII is a passage in his *History of King Richard III*. Bishop John Morton, it will be recalled, refuses to express his political discontent to the Duke of Buckingham, at this point still more or less loyal to Richard and holding the duke in preventative detention. No, says Morton, he’s going to leave politics alone—he’s better off with his beads and books. Oh come, says Buckingham, it’s just us. What are you afraid of? Well, replies Morton, of the way kings can interpret words: “though the word be without fault forasmuch as it shal not be taken as the party ment it, but as it pleaseth the prince to conster it.” And then he recounts a fable about the time that the lion ordered all horned animals, upon pain of death, to leave the forest. When a fox sees an animal with a “bunch”—a bump—on its head racing to get out of the woods he reminds the terrified beast that the lion’s decree forbids horns, not bumps. “No mary,” says the bumpy-headed animal, “that wote I wel ynough. But what & he cal it an horn, wher am I then?” (CW2, 92-93). A sophisticated politician with a large bump of ambition on his own

¹¹ Charles Clay Doyle gives both More’s and Poggio’s versions in his “Lenten Fare and the Language of Falsehood: Pig and Pike, Fish and Fowl,” in Michael J. Moore, ed., *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More* (Boone, North Carolina: Albion, 1978), 27-34.

forehead, Buckingham laughs. In a short while, though, Richard was to “construe” this ducal bump as a horn and have his former ally beheaded. No wonder that the English version of More’s unfinished history now breaks off. This chilling reminder of our subjection to power’s “construing” us and our words may tell us why.

Margins and Authorship

Related to postmodern doubts about identity and words has been a fruitful concern with how margins relate to centers: the margins and centers of societies and literary traditions, of course, but also the margins and centers of books. Looking at scribbles by early book owners is a growth industry in English departments. True, our discussions of the marginal can become intellectually incoherent: to boast (and one does boast) of refocusing on the “marginalized”—the illiterate, women, the racially or sexually “other,” Catholics in Elizabethan England, writers not found on older reading lists—all this assumes that there is a center. A more radical move might be to relocate the center or even abolish the very notion. Christians like More could, after all, point to God’s birth in a stable on the edges of the Roman Empire, not in a palace on one of the great city’s seven hills. More’s own interest in the socially marginal shows in the anger with which his Hythloday condemns England’s treatment of its paupers and criminals—indeed England’s *creation* of paupers and criminals. It shows as well in More’s efforts, some years later, to study and help solve the problem of England’s many vagabonds, although needless to say he was unable to do much.

The margins of *Utopia* are nearly as disorienting as the dialogue on which they comment. A recent essay by a follower of Derrida claims that our culture mystifies the margins of books by making them inviolate and sacred white space, a halo surrounding and protecting the text.¹² He may be right in our own time: nice people do not scribble in other people’s books and the financial value of a first

¹² François Martin, introduction to *La Marge* (Clermont Ferrand: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l’Université Blaise-Pascal 27, 1988), xiv.

edition plummets if annotated by the uncelebrated. Until very recently, moreover, modern editions of older texts often omitted liminary poems, running commentary, printers’ prefaces, and so forth. But what Derrida’s follower says would certainly not apply to Renaissance readers or printers, who viewed empty margins much as Holbein might have viewed blank canvas: an invitation to come right in, not otherworldly space saying “Abandon all print and pencils ye who enter here.”

The little notes in *Utopia*’s margins serve at least two functions. First, they offer additional ironies or remarks along with some identifications and allusions. Sometimes they are straightforward (locating a source in Livy, for example). Some exclaim at Utopia’s superiority to Europe. When Hythloday reports that Utopians start their meals with some reading, the margin says that “Today Scarcely the Monks Observe this Custom” (*CW4*, 145). Another note condemns European countries’ desire for expansion. Sometimes, though, it is hard to gauge the tone: when the main text says that Utopia has nowhere in which to waste time, no wine shops, alehouses, brothels, no “lurking holes or secret places,” the margin exclaims, “O Holy Commonwealth—and Worthy of Imitation Even by Christians” (147). Well, maybe. Since Utopia is indeed “Nowhere” it is possible that Utopian lurking houses and alehouses that are nowhere to be found can therefore, logically, be in fact found there. In any case, however, More was no Puritan. Could he have wanted an England without any place in which to bend an elbow with a friend? With nowhere in which to discuss some private doubt or desire? And Christians have sometimes needed secret places—catacombs, or, more recently, confessionals. True, in Utopia one might not need lurking-holes, although after the island becomes Christian it might need confessionals, or at least some corners for quiet pastoral counseling. So is this marginal note to be read straight? Ironically? Or is the shudder it gives modern readers merely the result of our own increased stress on privacy?

The notes do something else, too: they add another voice to the dialogue. More, Hythloday, and Peter Giles are sitting in a garden talking, and talking in ways that leave us uncertain as to who, if

anybody, speaks for the author. That is, to use a favorite postmodern word, *Utopia* is “dialogic” as well as a dialogue. In the margins, however, yet another voice joins the dialogue, increasing its polyvocality. The speakers there in the Antwerp garden cannot hear it, or so one may assume, but we can. Where does it come from? Some Renaissance equivalent of cyberspace? The voice’s ontological status is deliciously hard to determine.

In fact the voice may be that of Erasmus, who some think wrote the notes. This raises yet another issue. A major impulse of postmodern thinking, most notably that by Foucault and Derrida, has been to undercut the notion that “authorship” is a historically stable concept. Such reconsideration of authorship, however seldom scholars like to apply it to themselves, has had a largely salutary effect on Renaissance scholarship. We are now less taken aback, for example, by Shakespeare’s collaboration with other dramatists. Similarly, more scholars are aware that the full effect of *Utopia* includes the marginal notes, letters to More by various humanists, More’s own paradox-filled letter to Peter Giles, maps, even the Utopian alphabet and some lines of Utopian verse. The title “Utopia,” one could argue, should refer to this entire collaborative performance, one that is arguably more premodern and postmodern than plain modern. Modernist literature is not free of collaboration—as witness what Ezra Pound did for T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*—but it is still hard to imagine the quasi-modernist H.G. Wells, say, publishing *The Time Machine* with letters from the Time Traveler’s Victorian dinner companions, snatches of worried verse in the Eloi language, Morlock recipes for Eloi stew, and impish marginal notes by Bernard Shaw.¹³

Is Anything Real? Is This a Real Question?

A favorite satirist among Renaissance humanists was the late second-century Syrian Lucian, author of clever and sometimes

¹³ In Wells’ dystopic *Time Machine*, the time traveler goes far into the future and meets first the pretty childlike Eloi, who he thinks at first lives in a utopia, and then the underground Morlocks, pallid cannibals with a little technology, who feed on the Eloi.

disconcerting dialogues; More translated a few of them. More’s Lucianic side often shows in his writing, although more than Lucian he had convictions and, in his polemics, a definable agenda. Although some of his contemporaries found Lucianic skeptical irreverence worrisome, More took it in his stride, arguing that Christians should rather welcome Lucian as an antidote to superstition (*CW*3/1,5). Lucian’s unwillingness to believe in much of anything is in fact hardly postmodern in tone, for although he might have enjoyed French deconstruction’s playfulness, his skepticism seems to serve no such larger purpose as class struggle or anti-imperialism. He does not demystify oppression, religion, or money; he demystifies everything. What must have particularly struck More, though, was the paradoxical and self-mocking way in which he also demystifies demystification. The most famous dialogue that performs this double and recursive demystification (philosophy’s equivalent of litotes, one might call it, or a sort of *mise* in the *abîme* of Plutarch’s Heraclitian river) is “Philosophies for Sale.”¹⁴

In this dialogue, philosophers are up for sale in an upscale thought-bazaar. You can buy yourself a Stoic, an Epicurean, a Pythagorean, Platonist, a Cynic, or—and going cheap—a Skeptic so extreme that he would be quite willing to toss everything not just into Heraclitus’ river of change but into a whole sea of unknowability. The would-be buyer interrogates this last: What do you know? “Nothing.” “What do you mean by that?” “That in my opinion nothing at all exists.” “Then we do not exist?” “I don’t even know that.” “Not even that you yourself exist?” “I’m far more uncertain about that.” What can he *do*, asks the buyer. Everything, the man replies, except apprehend a runaway slave. And why can’t he do that? “Because, sir, I am unable to apprehend *anything*.” Bought for a “mina” (call it a dime or franc), the philosopher accompanies his new master home. “So,” asks the buyer, “have I bought you?” “Doubtful.” “But I paid for you, and in cash.” “I’m suspending judgment concerning that . . . who knows if what you say is true?”

¹⁴ Lucian, *Works*, vol. 2, trans. A.M. Harmon (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1968) II, 450-511; I adapt various translations.

“Well, the salesman, the *mina*, and those present.” “Is there anybody present here?” When the angry master threatens to prove his power by sending his recent purchase to the mills (a common punishment for uppity slaves), the Skeptic asks his new owner to suspend judgment on that point too. If he has any free time in the mill he can read the philosopher Gorgias (483-378), who claimed that nothing exists, that if it did exist we could not apprehend it, and that if we could apprehend it we could not describe it.¹⁵ Evidently Lucian cannot take nihilism more seriously than he takes belief. Where this leaves us is hard to say. Nowhere, probably—in Nusquama, or Outopia—which is just where, some of its critics complain, extreme versions of postmodernism leave all of us.

More would not go so far as Lucian’s know-nothing slave, but his own Nowhere (Utopia, “Nusquama”) flirts with similar notions and forms of self-abolition.¹⁶ Such skeptical laughter at skepticism, moreover, suggests the final paradox of *Utopia*: to take it straight is to misread More’s play and irony and make it safe for historians of political thought, but to take it only as play and paradox, the play and paradox that give it its philosophical radicalism, risks making it politically harmless. It is only when we take it seriously with one part of our brain and playfully with another that the effect is both destabilizing and provocative.¹⁷ One famous Utopian practice, for example, suggests both the “humanism” that imagines a more humane world and another sort of “humanism” that revives the classical ironies of Lucian and Platonic dreams of a well-ordered soul or society. But it also leaves us disoriented, our judgment suspended in ways hard to define and with implications that may or may not encourage us to social action. The practice in question is the way

¹⁵ Much quoted on the Web; see, e.g., The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

¹⁶ The self-abolition occurs even at the lexical level in the Latin; see Elizabeth McCutcheon, “Denying the Contrary: More’s Use of Litotes in *Utopia*,” in *Essential Articles*, 263-74.

¹⁷ George M. Logan, for one, in *The Meaning of More’s Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) argues against an exclusively ludic or serious reading.

Utopians use gold for chamber pots and for the chains that fetter slaves, those legally condemned to involuntary servitude, Utopia’s humane alternative to England’s capital punishment.

What is More up to? Social engineering, to be sure: children will associate gold with excrement and loss of freedom and this association will in turn promote the Utopian aim of preventing pride and the greed that sustains it. But in real life, slaves’ work would be slowed down by golden chains thick enough to restrain them and the chamber pots would be easier to empty if made of something else. Gold is heavy. More offers this detail in part as an example of Utopian “environmentalism,” the belief that value is created by social consensus and that moral attitudes are culturally produced or at least culturally inflected. He is also giving Utopia, in the moral if not geographical Antipodes, a behavior that simply reverses European gold-worship. There is more than a touch of parodic Carnival in this island. If that were all, though, More would not be so disconcerting and his Utopia so much harder to make stand still than are later imaginary societies.¹⁸ When he wrote this part of *Utopia*, it seems very likely, More was himself serving a group of London merchants who wanted more gold, and not for chamber pots. And one day he would himself wear a gold chain.¹⁹ Even in 1515, when he was probably writing this section of his book, More would have known great men who wore such chains. Are they sometimes chains of office? Certainly. And whom do the chain-wearers serve? The king? They are therefore at the opposite end of the social and legal scale from slaves. Such gold-bearing “estates,” as the sixteenth century called political alpha males, both have and are, in the words of

¹⁸ True, William Morris’ futuristic *News from Nowhere* has a carnival moment when we learn that the Houses of Parliament are now used to store manure, which may imply that in Morris’ own day the building had housed the political and verbal equivalent.

¹⁹ The chain of double “SS”s in the great portrait by Holbein is not, however, a chain of office, although it certainly signals dignity and accomplishment; Germain Marc’hadour reminds me that More, who wore it until his imprisonment, may have thought it primarily a chivalric symbol.

“Morus” at the end of Utopia, the “ornaments” of the commonwealth. But the sensible Utopians scoff at ornaments. Should we?

More has done what postmodern cultural materialism advises us to do: he has “demystified” (favorite word) gold; but what we are to *do* with his demystification remains ... well, mysterious. That those who knew More picked up this particular tangle of implications is shown by a story in his servant Walter Smith’s collection of poems about a con artist named Edith who eventually is caught and jailed. There in prison, says Smith, just as great men “wear chains about their necks, / She had dis[d]ain to wear them on her legs.” And by whom and to what are those great men in turn chained?²⁰

Living in a theocentric universe, sympathetic to the humanist search for original texts or intentions by authors with agency as well as cultural contexts, and a fine patriarch, More cannot be fully postmodern the way cultural materialists are postmodern (deconstruction is more hospitable, after a little tweaking and massaging, to religious faith). But More makes a poor ancestor of the “liberal humanist” so scorned in many English departments, the one so risibly confident of a universal and essential human nature; confident that whatever the complexities of good poetry words can be made to behave if force-marched into meaning; confident that the self has an inborn character; and confident that what seems reasonable and clear to the particular humanist and his friends is not only true for everybody, at least everybody who counts, but *good* for everybody, even those who do not count.

This poor fellow may be a scarecrow, but a scarecrow that haunts the pages of too many books and essays. Even when their authors stop from time to time to acknowledge that the scarecrow got his stuffing in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, not in the sixteenth, they can forget. One recent astute and witty study of “humanism” notes that to derive later agnostic, rationalist, universalism, post-Enlightenment “humanism” from the likes of Pico,

²⁰ Quoted in my “Crime and Carnival at Chelsea” in *Miscellanea Moreana: Essays for Germaine Marc’hadour* (Binghamton: MRTS, 1989), 259.

Valla, Erasmus and More is wrong; but then, in his peroration, this same clever writer says that “humanists” have a lot to answer for, including, for example, their support of Tudor tyranny.²¹ But even Sidney and Spenser, if indeed they count as humanists in the strictest historical sense, were hardly so abjectly loyal. And More?

Ah yes, one might say: More was indeed skeptical and ironic, given to self-mockery and self-concealment to the point where a speaker in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* can say that “But ye vse my mayster sayth to loke so sadly whan ye mene merely / yt many tymes men doubte whyther ye speke in sporte / whan ye mene good earnest.” (*CW6*, 68/35-69/2). Although putting to brilliant use his lawyer’s talent for argument, and not one to get lost in a mystic cloud of unknowing, More was as taken as any Sophist by paradoxes that explode a simple view of, or reliance on, reason. He knew that the name of the rose, assuming for the moment that the name of the rose is indeed “rose,” is not the same as the rose itself and never will be. He could also exploit the old logical paradoxes. When Protestants argued for predestination, More grasped the implications for the ancient “reversible” paradox: in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* he imagines a courtroom in which a Lutheran thief tells the judges that he is innocent because predestined to steal but is told that the same power that forced him to be a thief now forces the court to order him hanged (*CW6*, 404).

But did More not die for his faith, his God, his church? How could he do that without a strong sense of self and a belief that the meaning of the oath he would not take was too stable to allow him to rescue himself by clever deconstruction of its words? In 1535 More knew who he was, what he would not say, and what he had to do. And yet. . . one could make a case that the cause he died for did indeed allow for instability, multiple identities, divisions, paradox, for what I have half-seriously suggested is a sort of anticipatory postmodern – if also very ancient – sense of the world’s and our languages’ variety and flux. In that year More had the *name* of a traitor. We may doubt that he thought himself to be one, except in

²¹ Davies, *Humanism*, 131.

some limited legal sense. But in that crucial sense, a traitor is precisely what he was. If the lion calls a "bunch" a "horn," and if the lion effectively makes the rules, then a bunch becomes a horn. More can only trust (and in this I confess he was not very postmodern) that he had done the right thing in the eyes of God, his own conscience, and the rest of Europe. They would call him something other than "traitor." So he *renames* himself: "I die the king's good servant but [or, as in the French and Latin reports, "and"] God's first."²²

Those words are well attested, but others that sound apocryphal yet typical of More are also intriguing. According to one tale, More asked the headsman to let him put his beard on the safe side of the block. It had grown since his indictment, he said, had thus done nothing to offend the king or deserve punishment.²³ What have we here? A treasonous man with a loyal beard? The story gets more interestingly incoherent the more one considers it. After all, More doubtless thought that a wiser king would have found the whole More loyal, if the long beard—perhaps patriarchal, like that of Hythloday in *Utopia*—a bit unfashionable. More had a body severed by royal definitions and time as well as by the headsman: guilty person, blameless beard; past offense, new guiltless hair. At the very least, to imagine condemned follicles pushing out innocent strands is to complicate our sense of a unified person and Time's role in the workings of justice. Plutarch could have used this story.

What we know of More's beliefs, moreover, suggests that he died for a (pre-Tridentine) single faith and truth but a faith and truth with multiple authorities: not just the Pope as opposed to the king, but Pope *and* councils *and* the Bible *and* the church fathers *and* centuries

²² On differences in the various accounts, see Henry de Vocht, *Acta Thomae Mori: History of the Reports of his Trial and Death with an Unedited Contemporary Narrative* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1947). The French "Paris Letter" says More died "protestant qu'il mouroit son bon serviteur et de Dieu premierement" (Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock, intro. R.W. Chambers Oxford, 1932; EETS 186, 266.

²³ For more on the beard, see Charles Clay Doyle, "The Hair and Beard of Thomas More: With Special Reference to the Play *Sir Thomas More* and an Epigram by John Owen," *Moreana* 18 (1981): 5-14.

of God's continuing revelation *and* human spiritual intuition *and* conscience *and* a body of believers that included, as More insisted against Tyndale's and Luther's concept of a pure "invisible church," a mixed body of sinners and saved.²⁴ To More, and in this he was unjust to Luther's and Tyndale's own subtlety, a belief in "sola Scriptura" is, like Henry VIII's assumption of secular and religious leadership, as dangerous in its theoretical univocality as it is in its practical effect of multiplying heresies. More denied that God's truth changes with time, but he did insist that it unfolds over time.

No, More was not truly postmodern, but his work anticipates many postmodern concerns and he shared with many of us at the start of a new century the sense that if we are to find our way in this world, and make it more humane, we will need collaboration more than self-esteem or pride of authorship; a multiplicity of voices more than closed ears; paradox more than single-minded smugness; attention to the margins, not just to the centers of wealth or power; and wariness of the words by which we can slither into lies and self-delusion. What More would also offer the postmodern, or indeed the merely modern, is something that for the sake of his thought-experiment he denied his Utopians but knew he could find in his friend Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: the foolishness of joy and faith. To show that joy and faith can live with irony, paradox, and contingency is one of the greatest gifts that Renaissance humanism can still give us.

²⁴ In *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* More calls the church "the comen knowen multytude of crysten men good and bad togyther / whyle the chyrche is here in erth. For this nette of Cryste hath for the while good fysshes and bad" (*CW*6, 205).