

More and Socrates*

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This paper, after mentioning the long tradition linking More with Socrates (from 1535 up to our own time), tackles the problem of why, in one of the earliest documents on the death of More - the *Expositio fidelis* - there is no trace of any More-Socrates association, even in the presence of other less relevant, or in any case less meaningful connections, such as Plato, Cicero, Ovid and Seneca.

We then move on to outline a comparison between the two figures, laying emphasis on certain moments of their existence, such as their prosecution, their imprisonment, and their attitude to death. From the comparison of these aspects clearly emerges More's profound, true humanity, in contrast with the idealized and unreal figure of Socrates as drawn by Plato.

Key-words: Erasmus, Trial, Death, Plato, *Expositio fidelis*.

Après avoir mentionné la longue tradition (de 1535 à nos jours) reliant More à Socrate, l'auteur se demande pourquoi l'*Expositio fidelis de morte Thomae Mori*, diffusée dès juillet 1535, ne comporte aucune trace de ce parallèle, alors qu'on y rencontre des rapprochements moins significatifs, et en tout cas moins évidents, avec des personnages tels que Platon, Cicéron, Ovide et Sénèque.

L'auteur ensuite esquisse une comparaison entre More et Socrate; il met l'accent sur certains moments de leur existence: le procès, l'emprisonnement, l'attitude face à la mort. Cette comparaison fait émerger lumineusement la profonde et authentique humanité de More, en contraste avec la figure irréaliste, idéalisée que Platon dessine de Socrate.

Mots-clés: Erasme, procès, mort, Platon, *Expositio fidelis*.

Después de haber mencionado la tradición tan amplia que relaciona a Tomás Moro con Sócrates (desde 1535 hasta nuestros días) este ensayo presenta el problema del porqué en uno de los más antiguos documentos que tratan de la muerte de Tomás Moro - *la Expositio fidelis de morte Thomae Mori* - no existe huella alguna de la relación Moro-Sócrates, aunque aparecen otras relaciones menos pertinentes o, de todos modos, menos significativas, como considero las que mencionan a Platón, Cicerón, Ovidio, Séneca.

Así, se pasa a delinear la relación entre la dos figuras, subrayando en concreto algunos momentos importantes de su existencia, como la acusación y el proceso, el periodo transcurrido en la cárcel, la posición frente a la muerte. Comparando los citados momentos, surge con claridad la humanidad profunda y sincera de T. Moro, en relación con la figura idealizada e irreal que Platón traza de Sócrates. Con Tomás Moro tenemos ante nosotros a un hombre de carne y hueso, que ha sufrido y ha pagado con su propia vida la defensa de su fe. Con Sócrates, en cambio, tenemos la impresión de encontrarnos frente a un mito bien construido y, por eso, menos creíble.

Palabras-clave: Erasmo, proceso, muerte, Platón, *Expositio fidelis*.

1. *On the parallels between More and Socrates*

The association of More with Socrates has a long tradition, going right back to the months, if not days, which followed the great humanist's execution. Such association may be seen perhaps for the first time in a letter from Goclenius to Erasmus of the 10th of August 1535, written that is, while More's head was probably still cruelly

exhibited on London Bridge¹. Another early reference is found in a text by Reginald Pole from 1535-36², in which the author considers More, on account of his unswerving faith, to be a true witness for Christ, and on account of his nobility of mind, his doctrine and his virtue to be a "new Socrates".

Parallels between More and Socrates are to be found in the biography of More written by Harpsfield³, who refers to More as "our new Christian Socrates". Another of More's biographers, Stapleton, in his *Tres Thomae* (published in 1588), does not draw a comparison of his own between More and Socrates, but reports on that of Reginald Pole.⁴

After these early authors, others have followed, right up to our own times, stressing the analogies between More and Socrates, but their number is so great that, as Chambers has already noted,⁵ to cite them all would be rather superfluous. On the other hand I would like to mention an omission in this regard, which I find particularly striking. I refer to two earlier (anonymous) documents relating to More's trial and death: the *Paris News Letter* and the *Expositio fidelis*.⁶ In the first of these, drawn up in the period immediately following More's execution, there is absolutely no comparison between him and Socrates. All things considered however, this may not be surprising if one considers that this document merely gives a

¹ Cf. P.S. ALLEN ET AL., *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, 12 vols, Oxford-London, 1906-1958, XI, n.3037, p. 196. (Hereafter cited as Allen).

² Cf. R. POLE, *Pro unitatis ecclesiasticae defensione*, IV, ccxv-ccxvi. A good translation into French, both of the passage cited and others concerning More, edited by Soeur Noëlle-Marie Égretier, can be found in *Moreana*, n. 3, 1964, pp.23-35.

³ Cf. N. HARPSFIELD, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. by E. V. Hitchcock and R.W. Chambers, London, 1932, pp. 198-199.

⁴ Cf. T. STAPLETON, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, translated into English by P.E. Hallett, ed. by E.E. Reynolds, New York 1928 (reprint 1984), pp. 195-196.

⁵ Cf. R.W. CHAMBERS, *Thomas More*, London 1935 (reprint 1957), p.16.

⁶ *The Paris News Letter*, may be found as an appendix in N. HARPSFIELD, *The Life etc*, cit., pp. 253-256. The text of the *Expositio fidelis de morte D. Thomae Mori et quorundam aliorum insignium virorum in Anglia* (23 July 1535) is an appendix in Allen, XI, pp. 368-378.

concise report of More's trial and execution, without comment or considerations of any kind. More surprising is the absence of any More-Socrates comparison in the *Expositio fidelis* (signed on the 23rd of July 1535), which consists of a free translation into Latin of the *Paris News Letter*, with comments added. Besides the trial and death of More, this document also refers to the martyrdom of Cardinal Fisher and the Carthusian monks, and reflects on those tragic events.

In particular, it dwells on the problem of the relationship between intellectuals and political power, noting how Henry VIII was poorly advised, and thus unmerciful, in deciding the fate of More and the other victims, and how these martyrs were imprudent in defying the king's anger. Can it be possible, the author asks himself, that none of Henry VIII's advisers made him realise that when dealing with intellectuals, especially honest and illustrious ones, clemency is a far better policy than ruthlessness? History offers numerous examples of both approaches. Just think of the inhabitants of Aegina or Philip of Macedon, who are praised even today, says the author, because they spared the lives, respectively of Plato and Diogenes, for the sole reason that both were celebrated philosophers.⁷ On the other hand, who does not execrate Anthony, who had Cicero killed? Who does not detest Nero, who forced Seneca to commit suicide? Or yet, who does not revile the name of the emperor Augustus, who sent Ovid to die of "sadness" in far-off lands among unknown peoples?⁸

Now, among these negative examples, I find it strange that the author of the *Expositio*, who, if not Erasmus, is in any case an Erasmian (we are almost certainly talking here of Philippus Montanus),⁹ does not include Socrates, whose case has more in common with that of More than any of the other figures cited. Is this due to sheer forgetfulness or distraction, or is there some other reason?

⁷ The author's reference here is clearly to what is told by Diogenes Laertius, II, 20; VI, 43.

⁸ *Expositio etc.*, cit., pp. 374-375.

⁹ Cf. E.E. REYNOLDS, *Il Processo di Tommaso Moro*, Italian edition, Roma 1985, pp. 54-62.

As is well known, European humanism's admiration for Socrates was almost limitless. In particular, after the *Vita Socratis* by Giannozzo Manetti - the first biography of Socrates written in the modern epoch - the Athenian philosopher represented "emblematically the human tragedy of the just man condemned".¹⁰

2. *The absence of Socrates in the Expositio*

To make some reference to Socrates therefore, writing about the trial and death of More, for a sixteenth-century humanist was almost obligatory, as the texts by Goclenius and Pole cited earlier demonstrate. That the author did not do this, especially in a context of trial and death (like that of the *Expositio*), cannot be due to pure chance. I would like to propose here, albeit in the form of conjecture, the possible reasons for such an omission.

We have already noted how the *Expositio*, if not by Erasmus, certainly has an Erasmian background. Now, if it is accepted that Erasmus had a sincere and profound admiration for Socrates,¹¹ it is also true that Erasmus had expressed certain reservations regarding the behaviour of Socrates during his trial. In a letter to Abel van de Coulster, of 15 April 1533, he expressed his sorrow at the fate of his friend Louis de Berquin (Berquinus), first imprisoned and later burnt

¹⁰ M. MONTUORI, *Socrate. Fisiologia di un mito*, Firenze 1974, pp.25, 27. On this subject see, among others, R. MARCEL, "Saint" Socrate patron de l'Humanisme, "Revue Internationale de Philosophie", V, 1951 (vol. 2), pp. 135-143; E. GARIN, *L'umanesimo italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento*, Bari 1952.

¹¹ It is sufficient here to think of what he says in the adage, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, (now in ERASMO DA ROTTERDAM, *Adagia. Sei saggi politici in forma di proverbii*, edited by S. Seidel Menchi, Torino 1980, pp. 60-119), or of the expression, later to become famous, that he puts in the mouth of Nephalius, one of the characters of the *Convivium Religiosum*: "Vix mihi tempero quin dicam: 'Sancte Socrate ora pro nobis'", in *Colloquia Familiaria*, in DESIDERII ERASMI ROTERODAMI, *Opera omnia*, (10 voll.), Leiden 1703-1706 (reprint Hildesheim 1961), I, 683. To the "sainthood" of Socrates Erasmus returns in a letter to William, duke of Cleves, of 26.2.1531, Cf. Allen, IX, n.2431, p. 132. See also his letter to A. Turzo, of 30.4.1525, *Ivi*, VI, n.1572, p.72. On the "Socraticity" of Erasmus see G. CALOGERO, *Erasmus, Socrate e il Nuovo Testamento*, "La Cultura", XII, 1974, (vol. 1), pp. 1-22 (now also in *Scritti minori di filosofia antica*, Napoli 1984. Pp. 136-163, which I quote from).

at the stake, because of his determination to oppose the religious orders, theological faculties and court dignitaries. In vain, says Erasmus, were all my warnings not to undertake such battles, Berquin was too sure of himself and would not listen to reason. And thus he ended up like *the famous Socrates* who also, with excessive confidence, sought to defy his judges, telling them that, so far from being punished, he actually deserved the highest prize of all, that is, to be maintained at public expense in the Prytaneum. And it is clear, concludes Erasmus, that faced with such arrogance the judges could do no less than condemn him to death.¹²

Of course Erasmus, besides his sorrow, also felt a certain resentment towards Berquin because, by involving him, though indirectly, in "his war", Berquin had caused him "serious trouble". However, the comparison with Socrates assumes a still more negative significance precisely for this reason. The Athenian philosopher is presented as an example of thoughtlessness, of foolish, ruinous arrogance. An example of how not to behave in certain circumstances, all the more serious in the case of somebody who is supposed to be "wise". Life is a precious gift, Erasmus seems to be saying, and cannot be thrown away for reasons such as those of Socrates and Berquin, which, while important, are not worth sacrificing one's life for. Obviously one may (and perhaps one should) disagree with Erasmus on this point, but there can be no doubt that his verdict on Socrates' behaviour during his trial is clearly negative.

Two years later - in his letter to Jacques Masson (Latomus) of the 24th of August 1535 - referring to the atrocities then being committed in England, Erasmus wrote that More "should never have got involved in that dangerous business, but left the job of resolving

¹² Cf. Allen, X, n. 2800, p.211: "Idem accidit illi quod Socrati, de quo quum iudices essent mitiorem sententiam pronuntiaturi, ac reum ex more percontarentur qua poena sese dignum existimaret: Ut, inquit, in Prytaneo alar ex publico, qui honos apud Athenienses summus habebatur. Iudices tam arroganti voce provocati damnarunt illum capitis".

such a theological controversy to the theologians".¹³ A rather severe judgement, and certainly an oversimplification, which however does not result solely from Erasmus' state of mind regarding the death of his friend,¹⁴ but also from the fact that he was probably misinformed about More's attitude to the king's divorce. In fact More, in a letter written during his imprisonment to Doctor Nicholas Wilson, explicitly stated that he had already decided years before "no more to meddle in the matter".¹⁵ However I believe that Erasmus' judgement derived above all from his conception of human relationships in general and those between intellectuals and political power in particular. Above all this judgement reflects his character, his "animus pusillus", which made him fearful and mistrustful of everybody, and especially of that kind of "heroic" behaviour which to him appeared "excesses" and "extreme positions" to be avoided.¹⁶ This is why he could not help criticising - as he had done previously with Socrates and Berquin - Thomas More, his dearest friend, for not having been prudent enough to avoid an atrocious death. In short Erasmus, like the members of More's family, thought that he should have dropped the questions of principle and concentrated instead on looking after his own interests and saving his own life. (I would like to stress here that similar thoughts are expressed in the *Expositio*.)

I believe that these considerations may help to explain why the *Expositio* makes no reference to the case of Socrates. The fact is that the three figures that are cited - Cicero, Seneca and Ovid - had no way out: theirs was a sentence imposed without trial; they were given no chance to defend themselves, and thus to save themselves - in contrast to what happened to both Socrates and More, who, according to Erasmus, if they had so desired, could have saved their lives and their property. In other words, the author of the *Expositio* chose not to make any comparison between More and Socrates, because their

¹³ Cf. Allen, XI, n. 3048, p. 216.

¹⁴ Cf. M. BERTAGNONI, Introduzione a T. MORO, *Nell'orto degli ulivi*, Milano 1985, p. 15.

¹⁵ E.F. ROGERS, *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, Princeton 1947, p. 536.

¹⁶ Cf. J. HUIZINGA, *Erasmus*, Italian edition, Torino 1975, pp. 175-193; L.E. HALKIN, *Erasmus*, Italian edition, Bari 1989, p. 322.

deaths, although heroic - or rather, precisely *because* they were heroic - did not seem to him to constitute an example to be imitated or cited. The author's main concern was to establish a negative parallel between Henry VIII and other "tyrants" of the past. The focus then was not so much on the victims as on their persecutors. The author tells Henry VIII, who was highly sensitive to questions of fame and glory, that owing to his ferocity, he could now stand comparison with Nero. More, the innocent victim, precisely because that is what he is, is criticised, albeit with certain degree of sympathy, for not having been sufficiently prudent, that is to say wise enough, to avoid the anger of the king which, like any other tempest, sooner or later must blow itself out. In reality, More knew well, both from personal experience and from the Scriptures, that "A king's wrath is a messenger of death",¹⁷ but this did not scare him. When the Duke of Norfolk, in an attempt to persuade him not to oppose the king, quoted this passage from the bible, More replied calmly "Is that all, my Lord? Well then I assure you that between you and me there is only one difference: that I shall die today and you tomorrow".¹⁸ More had thus understood that Henry VIII's was a wrath that no wise man could appease, but between the wrath of God - the eternal damnation of the soul which he would have incurred if he had sworn - and the wrath of the king - which in the worst case would have taken just the life of his body - More chose without hesitating to take the side of God rather than that of the king. For the author of the *Expositio*, as for Erasmus, one's life is more important than questions of principle. But More and Socrates, evidently, were of a different opinion. And now we shall try to understand the reasons.

3. Socrates and More

From ancient times, Socrates has been considered a master of wisdom and a model of humanity. His fame as a learned and virtuous man was so great as to have an impact even on Christian culture,

¹⁷ The Book of *Proverbs*, 16, 14.

¹⁸ W. ROPER, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (ed. E.V. Hitchcock), London 1935 (reprint 1958), p. 72.

which, in its early period at least, was highly mistrustful of anything associated with paganism. Socrates however was generally treated with great respect, both by learned people - such as St. Justin the Martyr, who almost makes him into a precursor of Christ and on a more popular level.¹⁹ Lucian, in his "dialogue", tells us that the Christians of the second century, naively believing a cynical philosopher who claimed to have converted to Christianity, called him "the new Socrates" (*Kainos Sokrates*).²⁰

What I would like to stress here is that the early Christians, in establishing a comparison between Socrates and Christ, were practically obliged to start with their "wretched" deaths.²¹ And as it was for Christ, so it was for More. Hence tragic death, or rather "martyrdom", as a starting point for the association of More with Socrates.

I too believe that to understand what links More and Socrates it would be as well to concentrate our attention on the parallel paths that led these two great historical figures to their deaths, leaving aside other elements of their existence, including the "ever-present irony",²² while these elements may be important, without going into them in detail they might only serve to lead us astray in our present enquiry. Since this is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of the reasons

¹⁹ Cf. JUSTINUS (St.), *I Apologia*, 5, 3-4; 46, 3; *II Apologia*, 3, 6; 7, 3; 10, 5-8. Clement of Alexandria also held a positive attitude to Socrates (*Stromata*, V, XIV, 99, 3), Origen (*Contra Celsum*, III, 66-67; IV, 89; VII, 56), Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, VIII, 3; XVIII, 37). On this question see, among others, A. VON HARNACK, *Sokrates und die alte Kirche*, Berlin 1900; G. NATALI, *Socrate nel giudizio dei padri Apologisti. Contributo alla storia delle relazioni fra paganesimo e Cristianesimo nascente*, Ascoli Piceno 1912; J.A. Scott, *Socrates and Christ*, Evanston 1928; T.H. DEMAN, *Socrate et Jésus*, Paris 1944; J. BRUN, *La mort de Socrate et la mort de Jésus*, "Études de théologie et de religion", 1960, pp. 197-204.

²⁰ LUCIANUS, *Peri tes Peregrinou teleutes (De morte Peregrini)*, 12, in *Opera*, III, Oxford 1930. For the agnostic and scornful Lucian the character he describes was only an impostor: the expression "nuovo Socrate", used by Harpsfield in reference to More, seems to have an unedifying antecedent in these rather sarcastic pages of Lucian.

²¹ ORIGENES, *Contra Celsum*, VII, 56.

²² R. W. CHAMBERS, *Thomas More*, cit., p. 17.

that led Socrates and More to their deaths, I shall limit myself to an outline and comparison of the main points of the two historical events.

3.1. *The "Indictments" and the trials*

We shall begin with the "indictments". As is known, Socrates was accused 1) of not believing in the gods recognised by the polis; 2) of introducing new divinities; 3) of corrupting the young.²³ Most scholars agree that the charges were a pretext, in that their real objective differed from their apparent one. What mattered to Socrates' accusers (Anito, Meleto and Licone) was not so much whether he believed in the gods of the polis or corrupted the young; they were concerned above all that the "concord" (*homonoia*) between the warring factions that had been achieved with such great difficulty after the Peloponnesian war, should not be disturbed by the spirit of criticism that Socrates' teachings were spreading among the citizens.

Moving now to *Sir Thomas More's Indictment*, we can see that contains four charges: 1) unjustified silence regarding the king's second marriage; 2) incitement (of Fisher) to reject the Statute by which the king was constituted Supreme Head of the Church in England; 3) plotting with Fisher, again with the object of denying the validity of the Statute; 4) denying the supremacy of the king.²⁴ As we can see, the charges against More differ from those brought against Socrates. Yet, given the undeniable differences, the two indictments have something in common: they are *pretexts*. In both cases, the accusers used juridical means for political ends, or other ends not connected with justice. Closely linked to the fact that the charges were pretexts is that they are *manifestly groundless*. This has been established by historians, but it was also demonstrated in court, as may be fairly deduced from the debates of the two trials.

²³ PLATO, *Apologia Socratis*, 24bc; XENOPHON, *Memorabilia*, I, 1,1; I, 2, 9 ss.

²⁴ E.E. REYNOLDS, *Il processo.*, cit., 253-258; also N. HARPSFIELD, *The Life*, cit., pp. 269-276.

If one analyses the way in which the two trials were conducted, the first observation to make is that in so far as they were based on manifestly groundless accusations, they should never have taken place. That is to say, in a historical-political context characterised by legal guarantees protecting the liberty of the citizen, More and Socrates should never have been committed for trial. Both, therefore, were subjected to trials which, whatever their legitimacy in formal terms (in the sense that they were conducted according to the rules of procedure of the time), were in any case unjust in their substance. We should note here that on a juridical level, Socrates enjoyed better legal rights in the Athens of the early fourth century BC than did More in the England of the sixteenth century. To have an idea of the juridical barbarism into which society had fallen, it is sufficient to think of the members of the court who sat in judgement over More.

We come now to another issue, that is the way in which the two accused men behaved during the trial. The first point is that Socrates, having already been informed before the trial of the charges, had time to prepare his "apology", or speech in his defence, in the manner which seemed to him most suitable.²⁵ The fact that his defence, from a strictly juridical point of view, seems rather clumsy should not surprise us, since it reflects the most deeply-held convictions and above all, Socrates' real aim, which was, as we shall see presently, not to be acquitted, but to be condemned to death.

More on the other hand, was not allowed to know beforehand what he was accused of; following the judicial procedures of the time, the charges were read to him only during the trial; furthermore they were drawn up in such contorted and verbose Latin that he himself had cause to complain, fearing - due to his poor health resulting from his imprisonment and illness - that he would not be able to reply adequately to the accusations.²⁶ In contrast to Socrates, who not only did nothing to convince his judges of his innocence, but rather, with

²⁵ PLATO, *Apologia*, cit., 38b-39d.

²⁶ Cfr. *The Paris News Letter*, cit., pp. 258-259.

his provocative and at times arrogant speeches, actually induced them to condemn him, More tried to defend himself as best he could, using every juridical means as well as his dialectic ability, which did not fail him even in those dramatic circumstances. In his defence, More was careful not to provoke his judges; on the contrary, going straight to the heart of the matter, he scrupulously set out the facts and adduced the proof of his innocence. And More, at the end of his speech, was quite probably convinced (or so he wished his judges to believe) that they would not condemn him. Legal expert as he was, he knew that the legal conditions necessary for the imposition of the death penalty had not been satisfied: "I tell you that for my silence your Statute cannot condemn me to death: because neither your Statute nor any other law in the world can punish anybody except for having said or done something, and not for a silence like mine".²⁷ And yet they condemned him. In reality for More there was no escape, both because of the unfair composition of the court and because he had already been publicly declared a traitor before his trial - in other words he had already been condemned. Despite knowing this, however, he never ceased to hope, as his strenuous defence shows. Socrates was condemned because he claimed the right to free speech. More was not even given the right to *silence*, another element which attests to the state of juridical barbarism into which England and Christian Europe had fallen.

3.2. *Prison*

Another interesting comparison which one can make concerns their imprisonment. Here I would like to first of all draw attention to the different treatment of the two figures by the respective authorities. Whereas Socrates was imprisoned only after his trial and sentence, More was imprisoned in the Tower of London on the 17th of April 1534, that is to say more than fourteen months before his trial, which took place on the 1st of July 1535. This long period of detention before being tried, designed as it was to weaken More's resolve, is another sign of how far jurisprudence had regressed between Socrates'

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 260-261.

time and that of More. Not to mention the differing treatment that our illustrious prisoners received during their long period of detention. Whereas Socrates could without difficulty receive daily visits from relatives and friends, right up until a few minutes before drinking the hemlock, More (on the other hand) was tormented by the inconsistent behaviour of the political and prison authorities, who, in an attempt to force him to swear loyalty to the king and the Statute, went from blandishments to ill-treatment which often involved acts of real cruelty: forbidding him to see members of his family, taking away his writing things and then his books, etc.

Another difference that should be stressed here is the state of mind of the two prisoners. Both were subjected to pressures of a psychological nature. The only difference being that whereas in the case of Socrates they were applied above all, if not exclusively, by his friends, who tried in every way to persuade him to flee and thus save his life, More was subjected to numerous pressures that were also intense and frightening. The people who exerted these pressures were above all the political authorities, primarily the king himself, via his advisers and functionaries. And they were pressures of such force as to be extremely hard to resist. Consider in this regard that almost all of the nobility, bishops and lower clergy of England capitulated more or less immediately, often without putting up any resistance at all. Although More knew full well that his refusal to swear loyalty to the king and the Statute meant life imprisonment and the confiscation of his property, he would not change his position for such a motive.

But for More, the most insidious pressures were not actually these, but the ones that came from his own family. It is clear that More was deeply troubled by the suffering that his family was subjected to, in both moral and material terms, on account of his behaviour. The anxiety he felt for the sufferings of his family was terrible, or rather more – deadly.²⁸ But not even this could make him go back on his decision. He rejected with a loving firmness not only the sincere but crude arguments of his wife, Lady Alice, when she

²⁸ E.F. ROGERS, *The Correspondence cit.*, p. 509.

went to see him in prison,²⁹ but also the more subtle (and thus more insidious) ones of his daughter Margaret and stepdaughter Alice Alington, whom he compared, respectively, to Eve and the serpent: both irresistible tempters, but not for More.³⁰ It is evident that, compared to these powerful pressures to which More was subjected, those exerted on Socrates by his wife, friends and disciples seem weak and insubstantial. It is as if More had to withstand a furious cyclone, and Socrates a mere breeze. And this not because Socrates was linked to his family and associates by a less intense affection than that felt by More for his family and friends, but rather due to the differing attitudes that the two men held towards death.

3.3. *The attitude to death*

We now come to the final and most important point of comparison between the two figures. We have already mentioned how Socrates went to his trial with the certainty of being condemned. The devil himself could not have dissuaded him from going to court that morning, or from defending himself as he did. And this is a clear sign that he considered such an outcome as a good thing.³¹ And such an outcome, the death penalty, Socrates sought assiduously, defending himself in such a deliberately clumsy way as to irritate and scandalise his judges. This explains why the pressures on him to save his life left Socrates completely unmoved. For him, life by then had ceased to have any value and thus he could hardly wait to be free of it.

More's attitude regarding death was quite different. Of course, whoever reads the biographies of the two men will note the extreme serenity with which both of them accepted their sentences. Although, after the sentence was given, Socrates had harsh words for his accusers and condemners, even foreseeing "revenge" (*timoria*), he later explicitly affirmed that he felt "no rancour" towards them.³² Socrates thus died at peace not only with the laws of the polis, but also

²⁹ W. ROPER, *The Life cit.*, pp. 82-84.

³⁰ E.F. ROGERS, *The Correspondence, cit.*, 515.

³¹ PLATO, *Apologia, cit.*, 40a and following sections.

³² *Ibidem*, 39e-41d.

with the men who had unjustly condemned him. More too, after his sentence, asked to be able to reveal at last the reasons for his silence. And after having explained why the Act of Supremacy was illegal and thus his incrimination and sentence completely groundless and unjust, he concluded his speech saying that "he firmly believed" (and thus would also pray for it) that his accusers and judges would one day be able to enjoy, with him, the joy of Paradise. Just as the reformed persecutor Paul of Tarsus now enjoyed, together with his victim - Saint Stephen - the blessed vision of God³³

More haue I not to say, my Lordes, but that like as the blessed Apostle St Pawle, as we read in thactes of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to deathe, and yeat be they [nowe] both twayne holy Sainctes in heaven, and shall continue there frendes for euer, So I verily [truste], and shall therefore right hartelye pray, that thoughe your lordshippes haue nowe [here] in earthe bine Judges to my condemnnacion, we may yeat hereafter in heaven meerily all meete together, to our euerlasting saluacion.

There is certainly something in More which Socrates could never have. The latter claimed not to feel any rancour towards his accusers. And this was the furthest that a Greek sage could go. We are dealing here with the Socratic-Platonic principle of not fighting injustice with injustice, of not opposing evil with evil. But Socrates and Plato could go no further. They lacked the notion of forgiveness, which implies the capacity, or rather the willingness, to respond to evil with good and which has its basis in the God of Love, infinitely merciful. The pagan Socrates held that "the peak of happiness" after death consisted of meeting up with the great men and heroes of the past and continuing to philosophise with them, without the risk of being condemned to death, as he added ironically, like the men of this world. For the Christian More on the other hand, true happiness, that which may be achieved only after death, coincides with the blessed

³³ W. ROPER, *The Life, cit.*, p. 96.

vision of God, compared to which even the highest form of earthly happiness is but a distant prefiguration. To this may be added the fact that whereas Socrates makes a clear distinction between his fate and that of his accusers in the next world, More, "is confident" and "prays" that his accusers will also save themselves, and reach Paradise together with him.

I come now, finally, to the attitude that More and Socrates assumed in the face of death. It should be said that while Socrates, as we have seen, desired death and thus did all he could to get himself condemned, More not only did not covet death, but actually did all he could to avoid it, trying every means possible. The death of Socrates was in reality a form of suicide, not so much because he drank the poison of his own accord,³⁴ but because death was knowingly sought after. And this because Socrates believed that God himself had ordered him to die.³⁵ In contrast to Socrates, More never wanted to die. He never considered death to be an ideal to strive for, and this for two good reasons, unavailable to Socrates. The first is that God had clearly ordered man not to kill.³⁶ This commandment clearly also meant that one must not kill oneself. More had underlined the commandment not to kill in the *Utopia*, severely criticising the English tradition of hanging thieves and those who wanted to maintain the death penalty for thieves.³⁷ The other reason is that More knew well, like Saint Paul, that death is "the wages of sin",³⁸ and can never be an end to be pursued, not even when our earthly existence is severely tested. In the second book of the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More had said that when trials and tribulations come, the Christian must accept them out of love of Christ, but to presumptuously go looking for them, he says, can only be the work of the devil.³⁹ More makes analogous considerations in *De Tristitia Christi*. With his terrible

³⁴ Cf. R. GUARDINI, *Der Tod des Sokrates*, Düsseldorf und München, 1952, p.172.

³⁵ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 62c.

³⁶ Cf. *Exodus*, 20, 13; *Deuteronomy*, 5, 17.

³⁷ *Utopia*, in *The Yale Edition of The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 15 vols. New Haven and London 1963 ss., (hereinafter referred to simply as *CW*) 4, p. 73.

³⁸ *Ad Romanos*, 6, 23.

³⁹ *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulations*, *CW*, 12, pp. 78 ss.; also p. 130 ss.

anxiety about death, which makes him sweat blood, Christ teaches us that man is afraid of dying. Therefore, says More, it is senseless to go looking for martyrdom. Martyrdom is seen by More as an *extrema ratio*; that is, one may subject oneself to it only after all other ways to save one's soul have been tried without success.⁴⁰ Only then may death be seen as a liberation.⁴¹

Socrates is not afraid of dying because, for the true philosopher, life is nothing but a preparation for death.⁴² It is true that More too, in *The Last Things*,⁴³ had written that if men were wiser they would think about death more often; indeed, the wise man, whose intelligence is capable of reducing the "glories" of this world to their true nature of shadows and illusions, ends up by avoiding unbridled ambition, struggle and other evils, and thus actually lives better. Not to mention that the theme of death is also present in some of More's epigrams. In one in particular, the theme of "life as a journey towards death" comes up.⁴⁴ A theme which seems almost Socratic-Platonic. And yet, even in these lines, death, while being considered in its stark reality, is never longed for.

In contrast with Socrates, for whom life consisted of preparing oneself to die, More held that the idea of death was ultimately subordinate to life. For Socrates, who believed in the Orphic-Pythagoric doctrine of reincarnation, earthly life was just an instrument by which the soul purifies itself, to return to "live with the gods"; it was in short, a moment of penance, which the soul was forced by fate to undergo.⁴⁵ For More, the idea of death is seen as a

⁴⁰ *De Tristitia Christi*, *CW*, 14, 227 ss.

⁴¹ W. ROPER, *The Life*. cit., p. 100.

⁴² PLATO, *Phaedo*, 66d-68c.

⁴³ *The Last Things*, *CW*, 1, passim.

⁴⁴ *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. By L. Bradner, C.A. Lynch, Chicago 1953, 75: "Vita ipsa cursus ad mortem est".

⁴⁵ PLATO, *Phaedo*, 70cd, 81de ss., 107c ss. As to the reincarnation of the soul, one should note that if Socrates had not believed in it or had raised strong doubts regarding such "ancient doctrine" (*palaios logos*), *Ibidem*, 70cd, it would be hard to see how Plato was able to attribute such a belief to him, as he does repeatedly in the *Phaedo*. On Socrates' belief in reincarnation, as well as the passages cited from

remedy to render human life more bearable, more worthy of man, this creature made in God's image. Human life is a gift of God and as such should be accepted and lived to the full, and, as far as possible, joyfully. As a Christian, although More longed to be with God, he never despised life on earth, even when the world had become for him "a large prison".⁴⁶

In conclusion, we may say that More's attitude towards death - like his behaviour during his trial and imprisonment - was more human and thus more truly exemplary than that of Socrates, whose image, having been highly idealized by Plato, has become, in historical and human terms, less credible. More, with his worries and hopes, with his joys and his sorrows, with his fears and his extreme courage, constitutes a model of humanity which people, above all in our own times, can identify with more easily. Of course Socrates remains the great master of philosophical thought, whose authority comes to us undiminished through the centuries and millenia. And More himself - like Erasmus and the other humanists - greatly admired Socrates, as we have seen. This is shown by the fact that he calls him "the wise Socrates",⁴⁷ while in *The Last Things*, clearly alluding to Plato's *Phaedo*, includes him among "the best philosophers".⁴⁸ There is no doubt that More himself would have appreciated being compared to Socrates - indeed, he would have been proud of it. However, without taking anything away from Socrates' greatness, I hold that as an example, that is, in virtue of his attitude in the face of death, More is far more human, closer to ordinary people, and thus more credible, without that unreal rigidity and impassibility which the devout Plato attributed, post mortem, to his great teacher.

Cosimo Quarta

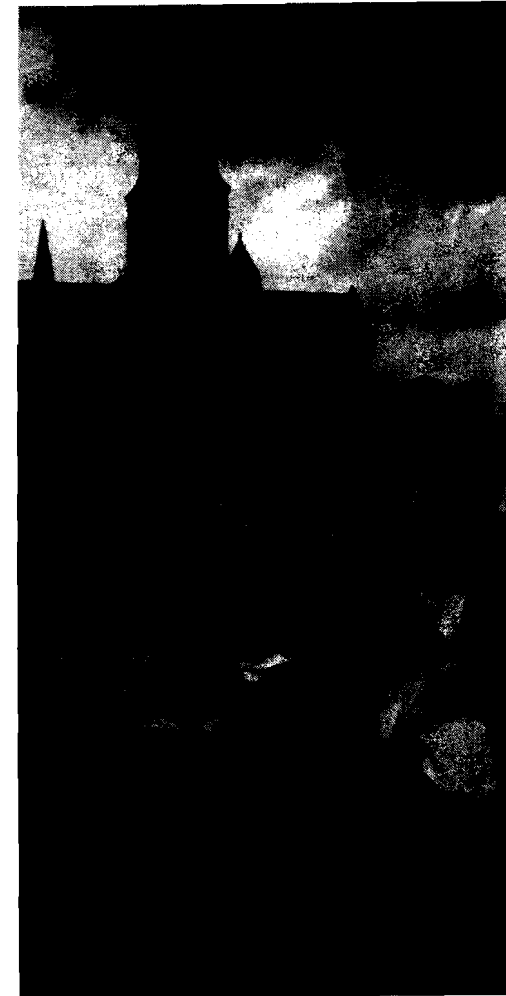
*"More and Socrates" translated by George Metcalf.

the *Phaedo*, see E. ROHDE, *Psiche*, Italian edition, Bari 1982, II, p. 594 ss.; R. GUARDINI, *Der Tod etc.*, pp. 189 ss., 297 ss.

⁴⁶ *A Dialogue of Comfort* cit., CW, 12, p. 271.

⁴⁷ CW, 1, p. 38.

⁴⁸ CW, 1, p. 139.



The September 2004 Fontevraud colloquium: In the background is the Rector of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, György Fodor, with his family and Anne-Sophie Ascher, médiateur culturel. In the foreground from left to right: Mary Le Rumeur, Kevin Eastell, Germain Marc'hadour and Clare M. Murphy.