

**« THE APPLE OF MY EYE » :**  
**THOMAS MORE TO ANTONIO BONVISI**  
**A READING AND A TRANSLATION.**

In or around June 1535, shortly before he was arraigned and put to death, More wrote to an old and dear friend, Antonio Bonvisi, thanking him for his many kindnesses and saying goodbye. <sup>1</sup> This impassioned and « very beautiful Latin letter » <sup>2</sup> soon became indispensable in the formulation of More's posthumous image and reputation. Of his extant correspondence, only the 5 July farewell to his family is later, and most of his sixteenth-century biographers made much of his letter to Bonvisi for this and other reasons, citing it or otherwise extracting from it a pattern of sanctity and faithful friendship. <sup>3</sup> *Thomae Mori Angli ... Omnia ... Latina Opera*, issued four times between 1565 and 1566 in Louvain, <sup>4</sup> also singled it out, leading Stapleton to describe it as « placed at the head of More's Latin Works. » <sup>5</sup> In fact, *Utopia* is the first full-scale work included in the volume, but the various preliminary materials which normally make up the *parerga* to it were disturbed. Erasmus's prefatory letter was deleted, to be replaced by the inscription More wrote for his tomb in Chelsea Old Church and the witty epitaph on his beloved wives and himself which accompanied it. And the letter to Bonvisi was inserted between the prefatory letter More wrote in 1516 to Peter Giles (« *Pudet me propemodum* ») and the hexastichon in praise of Utopia, purportedly written by Anemolius, poet laureate and the fictional Hythlodæus' equally fictional nephew. In these ways More's character and person were celebrated and given a special focus. The letter, in particular, encouraged comparisons and contrasts between the younger, witty humanist of 1516 and the older, still witty More of 1535 and allowed him to present himself, as it were, to the educated Catholic reading public of the Louvain edition. In Latin and in various Italian translations, this letter also contributed to the Italian image of More as martyr, climactically so when it became the most moving moment in a seventeenth-century *opera scenica*, written by Jacopo Rossi to commemorate More and Bonvisi as complementary heroes of the Church they served so well. <sup>6</sup>

There are more intrinsic and personal reasons for this letter's ongoing importance. It speaks with special authority not only to More's values and ideals but to his sense of self at a time when, imprisoned in

the Tower of London, anticipating his arraignment and execution, his only freedom was the freedom within, to think, to feel, to remember, to pray and in these ways transcend the walls of his earthly prison.<sup>7</sup> Through the contours of his Latin prose and the language of his international humanist self, with its urbane conceits and formulas of polite and elegant conversation, More asserted his own personality and consciousness even as he acknowledged their imminent annihilation from the point of view of this world. Thus the letter is a crucial document of his interior life at a time of extreme pressure; it witnesses, just this side of the grave, to his identity as he himself defined it. There is, then, a special appropriateness to the emphasis More's early biographers gave this letter, although for reasons which go beyond their own encomiastic ones; it is an essential part of the larger body of literature we call More's Tower writings.

This letter is less well known today than it deserves to be, however. To some extent it has been overshadowed by More's letters to his daughter Margaret. That More wrote in Latin is probably also a factor, ironically. In the language used by the educated elite of his time, he could say certain things which he would have to say differently, or could not say at all, in Tudor English, a language that was just finding itself. For whatever reason, the letter has been little discussed, except as biography,<sup>8</sup> and, so far as I can determine, the only translation to appear in print in English remains that published by Rastell in 1557, in the first English edition of More's *Works*.<sup>9</sup>

With its Tudor cadences and idioms, this translation is still appealing. Unfortunately it also obscures the fuller import of More's letter. The case against it was made with particular vehemence by Christopher Wordsworth, who dismissed the letter altogether when he came to edit Ro:Ba's life of More, which included it. It was, he claimed, « somewhat long, unimportant, and very badly translated. »<sup>10</sup> I disagree with his second point, though the 1557 Englishing does mistranslate a crucial phrase, unintentionally misleading readers about the length and nature of More's friendship with Bonvisi; it also buries More's word play and garbles some part of his admittedly convoluted syntax, blurring the dynamic and dramatic movement of his mind and affecting our perception of his consciousness of self-defining self, a crucial aspect of the Latin text. In any case, given the more than four hundred years between Rastell and ourselves, part of the language is inevitably obsolete. In retranslating the letter (see Part III, below), I have used a more modern but somewhat formal English, then, trying to keep More's wit

and as many of his syntactical strategies, the hoverings, suspensions, and rebalancings of his thought and feeling, as I could.

### Part I : More and Bonvisi.

Like More, Antonio Bonvisi (or Buonvisi) was a man of many parts: merchant, banker, humanist, patron of the arts and sciences, generous benefactor of the Church, and member of an important and extremely wealthy Italian family.<sup>11</sup> Lucca was the family seat, but in the first decade of the sixteenth century the Bonvisi family, under Antonio's father, Benedetto, controlled a great financial empire, with offices in Rome, Lyons, Louvain, Bruges, Antwerp, and London, and connections with rulers throughout Europe. Antonio was born in Lucca on the 26th of December, 1487. By 1502, aged 14, he was involved with the family bank in Rome, and in 1505 he came to London, where he joined his uncle and two cousins in a branch established by his father by 1474.

These dates, the product of archival research recently made accessible in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, are important in themselves and for the new light they shed upon the chronological relationship between More and Bonvisi. It has traditionally been thought that the Italian was the older of the two men, that he was probably born and raised in England, and that More and Bonvisi knew each other for some forty years. Actually, Bonvisi was the younger by a good ten years, and it seems unlikely that More would have known him before 1505, when he came to London to live, although he could well have known the family earlier.<sup>12</sup> A fundamental source of confusion here -- in the absence of hard archival evidence -- was More's statement that « annos iam prope quadraginta perpetuum Bonvisae domus, non hospitem, sed alumnum fuisse me » (p. 560, 11. 7-8).<sup>13</sup> The 1557 Englishing made this very personal indeed: « I haue been now almost this fourtie yeares, not a geaste, but a continuall nurslynge in maister Bonuice house » (p. 562, 11. 8-9; italics mine). But More is speaking in more general and honorific terms about himself as a « *nurseling* » of the house of Bonvisi, stressing a relationship with the whole household, not just Antonio, and exalting the name of Bonvisi, as well. He is also, I think, using a characteristically Morean hyperbole which readers of both the Latin text and the English translation have tended to take literally.<sup>14</sup> « Almost this fourtie yeares, » in other words, is a generous and affectionate way to describe a relationship which probably did last for more than thirty years, but fell some short of forty. I myself would guess that More's initial contacts with the Bonvisis occurred sometime

between 1500 and 1505, when he was beginning his legal career, and that he knew Antonio for no more than thirty years, perhaps less.

These changes in chronology require us to ask what first brought More and the Bonvisi family together and how to interpret the friendship between him and Antonio. We cannot read his letter at face-value, as two of his early biographers did, claiming that there was « none so deere and so entier to him as was the good and gracious right worshopfull merchaunt *Master* Antonie Bonuice » (Harfsfield, p. 138 ; cf. Ro:Ba., p. 100) <sup>15</sup>. In the light of his situation in 1535, More could say little less. But his hyperboles, the deference he pays throughout the letter (traditionally viewed as the respect due age, but surely the respect due social status), and the basic controlling conceit of a debt which he cannot possibly repay, alike point to a relationship which began between protégé and patron and metamorphosed into a multi-faceted friendship in the course of the years.

It is difficult to be too specific about all that patronage involved. As Beatrice Corrigan has suggested, the word *alumnus* « may imply that they [the Bonvisis] had made loans to finance his early career. » <sup>16</sup> Similar loans or other forms of financial support could well have been made later, and almost surely were after More was imprisoned. <sup>17</sup> And there were other ways, too, in which the family, to begin with, and then Antonio, could have assisted an aspiring lawyer and the King's « good servant. » In the Renaissance world of grace and favor, where whom one knew and how quickly one assessed human motives and volatile shifts in power were so important, the Bonvisi family was extraordinarily well placed and well informed. By 1513 King Henry VIII was already considerably in Antonio's debt, for example, in that year granting him « a remission of customs for five years. » <sup>18</sup> We know, too, that Cardinal Wolsey was one of the « principal customers » of the jewels that Antonio imported, while Thomas Cromwell was an acquaintance of long standing, to whom Antonio in later years supplied news from abroad. And these are just three examples of the spheres of influence this merchant-prince enjoyed -- as banker, merchant, and purveyor of information, often obtained in advance of official government channels. Antonio's position allowed him to walk the corridors of the court with impunity (he continued to enjoy the protection of Henry VIII « even when England became a dangerous place for Catholics and foreigners ») ; to have easy access to those in power ; and to make informed assessments about changes in political relationships in England and the Continent before they were public knowledge. Such influence and knowledge must

have been helpful to More throughout his own professional and political career, although precise documentation is difficult, perhaps impossible. <sup>19</sup> It is possible, however, that the very detailed political allusions to contemporary events in Book I of the *Utopia* owe something to Bonvisi.

Fortunately we can document still other aspects of the relationship between the two men through letters and the anecdotal bits and pieces preserved by More's early biographers. <sup>20</sup> More's life (or part of it) thereby emerges in microcosm, for he and Bonvisi shared intellectual interests and religious attitudes at critical points in his life. This part of the story begins in 1515, with More's letter to Martin Dorp, defending Erasmus's *Moria*. I once dined, he writes, with an Italian merchant « non minus doctum, quam diuitem (erat autem ditissimus) », (p. 46 / 632), no less learned than rich (and he was *very* rich). Though not otherwise identified, this must be Antonio Bonvisi : More's emphatic adjectives almost speak for themselves. A religious who was a theologian and had come from the Continent to discuss certain controversial problems -- and, not incidentally, promote his reputation -- was also present, and More recreates the table conversation for us with great panache. The theologian, who was more anxious to make points than to pursue the truth, and would defend either side of a question, debated a series of issues brought up by the merchant. They discussed usury, tithing, conditions affecting the confessional. Then, « as a joke, the merchant brought up the topic of mistresses ; he maintained that it was less sinful to have one woman at home than to be running around town after many » (p. 30). A lively debate between the theologian and the merchant followed, the former invoking the authority of a « singularissimum librum » by a « limpidissimi Doctoris » (p. 46 / 661) to prove that it was more sinful to have one concubine at home than ten whores abroad. Discovering that the theologian « was not as well versed in the Scriptures as in petty quibbles (*questiunculis*) » (p. 31), the merchant made up a number of « biblical » quotations, all duly cited by chapter and verse. If there were sixteen chapters in a gospel or epistle, he quoted from the twentieth, for example. The theologian never once questioned their authenticity -- indeed More mischievously has him say « Bene citas ... domine » (p. 47 / 687). He tried to reinterpret the texts, instead, turning to Nicholas of Lyra's commentaries when all else failed.

More develops this passage at such length to attack the pseudo-learning, the stupidity, and the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of this so-called theologian, of course. But it is also a vivid thumb-nail sketch

of a humanist's idea of entertainment, with its « wise, pleasaunt, wittie talke » (Harpsfield, p. 137). It is, significantly, just this aspect of the relationship between More and Antonio that Harpsfield, who knew Bonvisi, emphasizes. By inference, too, the passage says a great deal about both men -- the qualities of mind and manner they shared and admired in each other -- in the years of *Utopia*. They had flexible, sharp, and lively intelligences, and were brilliant players of whatever social role they assumed, able to improvise at will, and attracted to, yet disengaged from, a world they viewed in some part ironically.<sup>21</sup> They were interested in the social, moral, and religious problems of the time, but detested the sterile argumentation of some professional divines, whose humbug and hypocrisy amused them, nevertheless. As debaters, then, they were willing to give someone like this Continental friar enough rope to hang himself by, loving a joke, especially a learned one at the expense of a pretentious fool. But, as artful practitioners of the put-down which was all the more devastating because it was so very clever and funny as well as so very learned, and grew out of the situation at hand, they were not without a sense of their own intellectual superiority, only partially concealed by their charm and love of play.

There must have been many more such table conversations, for Bonvisi was a generous host and interested in all aspects of the intellectual life of the time, both in England and on the Continent. Interestingly, there is a complementary but more sober passage (told many years after the fact) about a dinner and a foreign theologian, perhaps the very dinner and the very theologian of More's letter to Dorp. This time the point of view is Bonvisi's, and More becomes the center of the story. Harpsfield is speaking :

I haue heard him [Bonvisi] report that he [More] would at table and otherwhere wonderfull deepely and clarkely talke with learned men, as well englishe as of other countries ; and that he once knewe when a very excellent learned man (as he was taken), a straunger, being in this Realme, chaunced to be at the table with Sir Thomas More, whom he knewe not. At which table there was great reasoning betweene the saide straunger and others of many great pointes of learning. At length Sir Thomas More sett in a foote, and coped with the saide straunger, and demained himselfe so cunningly and so learnedlye that the saide straunger, which was a religious man, was muche astonied and abashed to heare such profounde reasons at a laye mans hande. And therevpon inquired of suche as were neerest at hande to him what his name was : which when he once vnderstoode, he had no great pleasure afterwarde to encounter any more with him. (Harpsfield, pp. 138-39).

At this point Harpsfield steps in, assuring us that More's « good blessed disposition and wise behaiour in such kinde of disputations is woorth the noting » (p. 139). But his assertion is both prompted and belied by the text he has just cited. In this case, at least, the theologian knew that he had been put down, and though we cannot shed any tears for him -- he invited it -- we must note that More's « wise, pleasaunt, wittie talke » could sting.

Rounding out this early part of More's life is a short letter « to a certain Antony », which Stapleton saw in the (probably autograph) manuscript. The surname of the correspondent is not indicated, and Stapleton refrains from hazarding a guess, « although perhaps I could » he says (ch. 7 of his *Vita Mori*, p. 32 of the 1689 edition). This *Antonius quidam*, probably Bonvisi, had shown himself delighted with *Utopia*. At first reading the letter is little more than a grace-note, urbane, witty, self-deprecatory, as More protests that Antony's affection, rather than his judgement, is behind the praise : the book « clearly deserves to hide itself away forever in its own island » (p. 90). But he protests too much. And in playing as he does with kinds of being More makes a profound ontological point of a sort which he could make only to someone with a mind like Bonvisi's : *Utopia* as book and *Utopia* as place are inextricably one, since it is a verbal construct, existing as idea, argument, and fiction.

In the next stage of More's life, which was increasingly given over to public affairs and controversies affecting Church and state, the contacts between them continued. In 1524 More sold to Antonio the lease of Crosby Place, which he had purchased six months earlier.<sup>22</sup> And once again we can eavesdrop on the two men, who were discussing « the growth of heresy »<sup>23</sup> sometime in the early 1520's. Bonvisi's memories of two conversations, retold by Cardinal Pole, seem to isolate a crucial turning point in More's development. According to Bonvisi, More's « chief anxiety was over 'perverse opinion touching the sacrament of the altar,' » and he was less worried about attacks on Papal supremacy, viewing the latter as « a mere human ordinance, 'for the more quietness of the ecclesiastical body. This was his sudden and first answer.' » But More had second thoughts and asked Bonvisi to return « within ten or twelve days. » When he did so, More « brake out into a great reproach of his own self. 'Alas, Mr. Bonvisi ! whither was I falling, when I made you that answer of the primacy of the Church ? I assure you, that opinion alone was enough to make me fall from the rest, for that holdeth up all.' » Biographers have cited this passage

out of their interest in the growth and changes in More's attitude towards the primacy of the Pope.<sup>24</sup> But it is the movement of his mind and his initial priorities which interest me here. His first concern, we notice, was for the « sacrament of the altar, » for the worship and devotion of the visible Church, for the salvation and spiritual health of the people constituting it. Only then did he go one step further, realizing that the sacraments, as channels of grace ordained by Christ, depend in turn upon the authority of the Church which celebrates them. The governance of the Church cannot be separated from its sacramental life. Or, as he came to put it in 1528 : « This is the very church, & thys hath begon at christ, & hath had hym for theyr hed & saint Peter his vicar after him *the* hed vnder him, & alway since, the successours of him continually & haue had hys holy faith & his blessed sacramentes & his holy scripture deliuered, kept, & conserued therein by god & his holy spirite. »<sup>25</sup> Nothing less than salvation, his own and others', was at stake, then.

Finally we come to the very end of More's life, and the later years of Bonvisi's. More's letter of thanks outweighs all other evidence, but there is the occasional detail which illuminates one or another of the many strands of a relationship — some part patronage, some part friendship — of many years' standing. In 1533 Antonio was godfather to More's grandchild, John More's second son, Austin. In 1534-35, while More and John Fisher were imprisoned, Antonio sent them meat and wine, and gave More a fine camlet gown (of angora wool). More « as one that had been invited to some solemn feast, changed himself into his best apparel, » intended to wear this gown on the day he was executed, but was advised to put it off by the Lieutenant of the Tower, « saying that he who should have it was but a javel. »<sup>26</sup>

Nor did the friendship end with More's death. Bonvisi maintained his connections with More's family — indeed, the letter from More may in some sense have been an indirect (albeit surely unnecessary) request to him to do so. In 1547 he made over the lease of Crosby Place to William Roper and William Rastell as tenants for 99 years, and conveyed the property to Richard Heywood and John Webbe, other members of More's circle, in trust for himself for life.<sup>27</sup> Two years later Antonio left England for Louvain, where he continued his involvement in his family's financial empire and was a special benefactor and generous host to the English and other Catholics in exile until his death on December 7, 1558.<sup>28</sup>

## Part II : Themes and Strategies.

Fortune versus providentiality, material well-being and the illusive and slippery pleasures of the temporal world versus goodness, virtue, and the joy of eternal life, and confinement in and of this life versus the true freedom of the soul are among the most pervasive and resonant themes in sixteenth century literature in England. With good reason. Many stood to lose their property, if not their lives, at a time when « indignatio principis mors est, » the indignation of the prince is death, a biblical adage More echoes in his farewell to Bonvisi.<sup>29</sup> The adage had cropped up in an earlier conversation between More and the Duke of Norfolk. To his (unnecessary) reminder that « it is perilous striving with princes, » More replied, with a mixture of grim irony and bold defiance : « Is that all, my lord ? Then in good faith is there no more difference between your grace and me, but that I shall die today and you tomorrow. »<sup>30</sup> Preoccupation with fortune's wheel was another, gentler, way to attempt to come to terms with this reality. So Tudor writers explored fortune, good and bad, and the remedies for its gifts and hazards, in diverse guises — allegorical and satiric, as in Skelton's *Bowge of Courte* ; allegorical and didactic, as in the *Mirror for Magistrates* ; epigrammatic, as in Wyatt's ironic lyrics ; elegiac, as in Surrey's lament from Windsor Castle, where he was imprisoned ; philosophical and psychological, as in various translations of and variations upon a long and eloquent tradition (Platonic, Stoic, and Christian) in which Seneca, Boethius, and Petrarch remained seminal and central figures.<sup>31</sup>

More was attracted to this network of topics very early in his life ; besides the Poet's reminder that nothing lasts except God's love, from the Pageant Verses he wrote for the wall-hangings in his father's house, there are his verses on fortune, and a rueful lamentation for Queen Elizabeth, the mother of Henry VIII, who died in 1503. It is not surprising, then, that similar themes reappear in some of his writings from prison after his own fall from high estate, taking one form in his *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, another in his two little English epigrams, and yet a third in his letter to Bonvisi. Like his beloved Boethius, whose « beautiful and holy poem » teaches « you to raise your mind also to heaven, lest the soul look downwards to the earth, after the manner of beasts, » as he told his « school » in a letter written from court in 1521 (pp. 146-147), More insistently counterpoises and exploits the dialectical tension between those things which prove false and cannot be trusted and those which will endure : the gifts of God, his world of eternal love.

And, again and again, he probes the ironic gap between apparent freedom (in fact, confinement) and the genuine liberation of mind and soul.<sup>32</sup>

But More is writing a personal letter, not an extended dialogue; he faces more intense and immediate pressure than Boethius probably did,<sup>33</sup> or than he himself did a year earlier. And so he focuses almost immediately upon Bonvisi's friendship as tangible evidence of all he believes about true pleasures and the love of an all-foreseeing God. In this stormy world, with all its brittle and specious gifts, one thing (at least) has remained constant, and More can draw peace and strength from true friendship as he has found it in Antonio. Hence the pivotal sentence, placing their friendship on one side of the polar opposites More moves between: « But if I were to count the possession of such a constant friendship -- which such an unfavorable fall of fortune has not snatched away, but rather cemented more strongly -- among the fleeting goods of fortune, truly I should be out of my mind (*amens*). »<sup>34</sup> Hence, too, the extreme praise of Bonvisi, « most faithful of all friends, and most beloved by me, and (as I am now long accustomed to call you) the apple of my eye : *oculi mei pupilla* » (p. 561/56). But the real feeling behind the hyperbole is sustained by a relationship which has more than met the test of time and fortune. As Boethius had long ago observed, true friends are discovered only in misfortune.<sup>35</sup>

We also have to consider all that friendship meant to the sixteenth-century humanists in general, and to More, in particular. Erasmus summed this up for all time when he wrote that More « seems to be born and made for friendship, of which he is the sincerest and most persistent devotee. »<sup>36</sup> More characteristically portrays the joys of heaven itself in terms of love, communion, and community between and among good friends, who « maie merily meete in heauen » (p. 564/26). So, now, one of the most moving parts of the letter occurs as More negates his present situation to imagine the meeting between Bonvisi and himself in heaven, « where no wall will separate us, no porter prevent us from talking together. »

Although we can never hope to recover all that these themes meant to More as he wrote to Bonvisi, the language he uses and the movement of his thoughts and feelings signal how fully engaged he was. More's mind and imagination work continuously as he develops variations of the conceit he bases the letter upon: the debt owed a friend who has given him so much, and which he can never repay. Even before he

was imprisoned he was only a « barren lover, » *sterilem amatorem*, he claims. And now that his resources are exhausted, he will never be able to discharge his debt. This conceit gains new energy from Bonvisi's occupations as banker and merchant. And More's Latin makes the conceit more pointed still. He describes himself as *addictum*, a word used of one who was sentenced to prison for unpaid debts. And, repeatedly, he plays upon the multiple meanings of *fortuna* and *prosperitas*, counterpoising his *fortuna*, or rather misfortune, with Bonvisi's *fortuna*, a word which includes his fortune or wealth (as it was Englished in 1557, obscuring the play on words); his *improspero naufragio* with the *prosperitas* of Bonvisi's faithful friendship.

Yet More's dilemma has its answers, too. Bonvisi's gifts are so many and so great that the friendship between them transcends this illusive temporal world and is clearly providential; More prays, then, that God, who gave Antonio such a debtor, may also requite him. In this and other ways, More himself pays his debt (or some part of it) even while he claims he cannot ever pay it. Both More and Bonvisi knew what Milton later articulated (through the same conceit, ironically placed in the mouth of an altogether ungrateful recipient of God's blessings): « a grateful mind / By owing owes not, but still pays, at once / Indebted and discharg'd. »<sup>37</sup> Love and friendship, the debts owed by friends, the exchanges in which they participate, are not quantitative, but experiential: « *Amicorum communia omnia.* »

So this letter, which says thank you again and again, is itself at least a partial discharge of More's debt, to sustain the Renaissance conceit he plays with and upon so lovingly. His hyperboles and constant weighings of polar opposites justify themselves as dramatic reenactments of Bonvisi's inexhaustible generosity. And the letter overflows with such words as *iucunditate*, *delectatus sum*, *deglutiebam*, *consolor*, *suauitas*, as More renders his praise in terms which almost let us taste his pleasure. But few lines are more powerful than this one as his debt and its discharge meet and More weighs word against word, doubling, tripling, quadrupling the kindnesses Bonvisi has shown: « Few thus court their fortunate friends as you esteem, love, cherish, and regard your More, overthrown, cast aside, struck down, and sentenced to prison... » The language is the language of love, the values, classical and Christian. Cicero and many others had affirmed that friendship can only exist between good persons,<sup>38</sup> and More's language, assuming this, also has biblical undertones, with its portrayal of Antonio as someone who, in Pauline terms, has run the race unwearied in his eagerness to

serve his friend. And what is implied here becomes overtly scriptural later in the letter, with More's prayer.<sup>39</sup>

These same lines are a beautiful instance of another dimension to More's letter. As he evokes Bonvisi's kindness to him, More steps back to describe himself in the third person, seeing himself as subject and object at the same time.<sup>40</sup> In this and other ways More portrays a mind which triumphs over the confinement of its outer self by its consciousness of its own mental and emotional processes; a mind which thinks, interprets, feels: *presagit, decreui, recordanti, cogitatione, conscius, conspiciam, accipio, interpretor, deprecor*, etc. And as he balances word against word, phrase against phrase, or clause against clause, we become extremely aware of a weighing process, of the action of his mind.<sup>41</sup> More begins his letter, for example, by a series of counterpoised movements which juxtapose loss and gain, and we sense the rise and fall of feeling as he writes: « I have decided, while I may, to show by this little letter, at least, how much I am restored by the pleasantness of your friendship in this loss of my fortune. » Self-depreciation is checked by his comfort in Bonvisi's friendship, weighed against the loss of his fortune (as More understates his own immurement and imminent execution).

A longer curve of consciousness and feeling shapes the letter as a whole. More begins by portraying a mind which feels time and space beginning to shrink; his verb (*presagit*) dramatizes the urgency with which he writes, for all his understatement: « Since my mind has a presentiment ... that the opportunity for me to write you will by no means be long ... » From this « now » he moves back in time, to the memory of the « almost forty » years he has been supported by the house of Bonvisi (and we can see yet another reason for his hyperbolic expression), and forward, to a future which transcends time altogether, finding freedom and total release in the reunion he hopes for in heaven. But there is no false comfort, no facile simplification. Even as he ascends in hope, he continues to weigh and reweigh the claims of the world upon him and all mortal beings. Longing for heaven, on the one hand, he acknowledges the glory of this world, on the other, confessing, too — the words are all-compelling in their honest recognition — that life itself is sweet: « Meanwhile may Almighty God bring it about that you, my dear Antonio, and I, and would that all mortals, and everyone everywhere, may hold cheap all the riches of this world, all the glories of the whole universe, and even the sweetness of life itself, for the ardent desire of that joy. » And this movement, signalled by *utinam*, which almost rises from the page, is both the culmination and the termination of his emotional and spiritual release. Now he returns to his situation,

the prison cell from which he says farewell to his friend.

All these aspects of the letter — its overt themes of thank you and farewell, its psychological self-reflexiveness,<sup>42</sup> and its search for freedom — meet in More's postscript, with its several messages, all paradoxical. To begin with, More signs his name for what may have been the last time (his last letter is unfinished): he is *T. More*.<sup>43</sup> But then he turns to Bonvisi and writes, « If I put down 'yours,' I'll have done so in vain. For you cannot not know this now, when you have bought it by so many acts of kindness, » playing one final time on his conceit of indebtedness. He had already called himself « your More »; now all is apparently resolved. But then he adds, « Nor am I now such, that it matters whose I am. » From one perspective he seems to acknowledge the reality of his present state, his powerlessness and nothingness. « Socially, » as Germain Marc'hadour reminds us, « he was approaching zero: the brilliant discoverer of Nowhere had become almost Nobody. His judges were soon to refer to him as 'a certain Thomas, lately of Chelsea.' »<sup>44</sup> And death is at hand. And yet, his statement generates its own complicated countermovement: ironic (it clearly does matter), defiant (what part of himself can even Henry VIII claim?), freeing (as he steps back in detachment from his imprisoned self to say that it doesn't matter « whose » he is).

At this point, then, we can step back from the letter to view it as a whole. Throughout his life More was preoccupied with the idea that we are all in prison.<sup>45</sup> This was often accompanied by the perception that, ironically, we do not know it, instead blindly congratulating ourselves in our pride of self and situation. Now, however, More is physically in prison, and looks from the inside out. In the course of this letter he sought and found a temporary release through communion with a dear friend and with God, through memory of sweet charity and hope of heaven, and through his awareness and reintegration of his inner self: Thomas More. But the only way out of this prison, literally, is through death, the king and executioner becoming, unwittingly, the agents of More's immortality, as More was wont to observe, sometimes half-ironically.<sup>46</sup> And as he finishes this letter, inscribing his name and double postscript, he waits for that other, final release, the death which brings with it eternal life. Just over four hundred years later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another prisoner of conscience in a totalitarian regime, will write a friend that « Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; ... the door is shut, and can only be opened from the outside. »<sup>47</sup> On July 6, 1535, that door was opened for Thomas More.

## NOTES

1. Dating, which is approximate, is suggested both by the way More begins the letter and by the sixteenth-century headnote to it, usually printed with the text. In his *L'Univers de Thomas More : Chronologie critique de More, Erasme, et leur époque* (Paris : Vrin, 1963), Germain Marc'hadour dates it around June 18, but he tells me Marialisa Bertagnoni inclines to an earlier date.

2. From Thomas Stapleton's *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip E. Hallett, ed. E.E. Reynolds (London : Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 57.

3. Besides Stapleton, see Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight, Sometimes Lord High Chancellor of England*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock and R.W. Chambers (London : EETS, 1932), p. 138 ; and Ro:Ba., *The Lyfe of Syr Thomas More, Sometyms Lord Chancellor of England*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, P.E. Hallett, and A.W. Reed (London : EETS, 1950), pp. 100-104. Because Harpsfield heard Bonvisi « ofte talk » of More, his biography is particularly useful ; citations from it will be included in the text.

4. As J.B. Trapp and Hubertus Schulte-Herbrüggen note in '*The King's Good Servant*' : *Sir Thomas More* (London : National Portrait Gallery, 1977), item 262, p. 133, these issues are « an index of the demand for More's writings. » R.W. Gibson, *St. Thomas More : A Preliminary Bibliography of his Works and of Moreana to the Year 1750* (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1961), supplies basic bibliographical information. I am grateful to my colleague, Valerie Callies, who so meticulously checked the early pages of each copy of the Louvain edition in the British Library for me, and arranged for an electrostatic enlargement of the letter to Bonvisi from the Louvain edition of 1565 (Zangrius), and to the Abbé Germain Marc'hadour, whose epistolary assistance included a xerox of the letter from the Louvain edition of 1566 (Bogard) and much else.

5. Stapleton, p. 57.

6. Thomas Wheeler, « Thomas More in Italy : 1535 - 1700 », *Moreana*, No. 27-28 (1970), comments on translations of the letter and on the Rossi play, pp. 20-22 ; the play is discussed in more detail by Beatrice Corrigan, « Sir Thomas More : Personage and Symbol on the Italian Stage, » in *Studies in the Continental Background of Renaissance English Literature : Essays Presented to John L. Lievsay*, ed. Dale B.J. Randall and George Walton Williams (Durham, N.C. : Duke Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 91-108.

7. In thinking about More's letter as prison literature, I am indebted to the fine discussion of prison *topoi* in Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison : The French Tradition* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton Univ. Press, 1978).

8. See C. Desmond Ford, S.J., « 'Good Master Bonvisi,' » *The Clergy Review*, n.s. 27 (1947), 228-35 ; and Piero Rebora, « San Tommaso Moro e l'Italia, » in *Civiltà italiana e civiltà inglese, studi e ricerche* (Florence : Felice le Monnier, 1936), pp. 49-82. There is a brief but more literary assessment in Trapp and Schulte-Herbrüggen, '*The King's Good Servant*,' item 241, p. 124.

9. It is the version used by Agnes M. Stewart in *The Life and Letters of Sir Thomas More* (London : Burns & Oates, 1876), and also, with modernized spelling, in *The Last Letters of Blessed Thomas More*, ed. W.E. Campbell (London : The Catholic Library, 1924). The letter has appeared in various anthologies of More in German, French and at least four times in the Italian of Bonvisi's compatriots : Domenico Regi, *Vita di Tomaso Moro* (many editions from 1675 : Milan to 1753 : Venice) ; Tommaso Moro, *Lettere della prigionia*, ed. Maria Pintacuda Pieracini (Torino : Boringhieri, 1961) ; Tommaso Moro, *Venti Lettere*, ed. Alberto Castelli (Roma : Editrice Studium, 1966) ; *Idea di Thomas More*, ed. Angelo Paredi, Marialisa Bertagnoni (who is the translator) and Cesare Grampa (Vicenza : Neri Pozza, 1978).

10. *From Ecclesiastical Biography ; or Lives of Eminent Men Connected with the History of Religion in England*, sel. and illus. Christopher Wordsworth, II (London : Rivington, 1810), 119.

11. The entries for Antonio Buonvisi and Benedetto Buonvisi by Michele Luzzati in the *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, XIV (Rome : Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1972), supply essential biographical details ; some of this material is summarized in Corrigan, p. 99. The article on Bonvisi in the *DNB* is particularly informative on his life in England. Other biographical discussions, including those by Ford, Rebora, and Wheeler, must be used with care, since they are based on older assumptions about Bonvisi's birth and early life.

12. We could, of course, save some part of the tradition by imagining that Antonio visited England before 1505 and met More then. This seems unnecessary, however, in view of what More himself actually says.

13. The original texts of this and More's other letters and the 1557 Englishing of the letter to Bonvisi are cited from *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton Univ. Press, 1947). Except as otherwise noted, English translations of the Latin letters are cited from *St. Thomas More : Selected Letters*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1961). All citations will be included in the text, quotations from *The Correspondence* being distinguished by line numbers.

14. More's letter to Bonvisi is, itself, evidence of just how habitual his use of overstatement was. I shall illustrate his delight in hyperbole in « My Dear Peter, » a monographic study of his letter to Peter Giles, publication forthcoming. In both letters « almost » (whatever its Latin form) is a peculiarly sensitive word.

15. That Harpsfield was himself befriended by Bonvisi is doubtlessly a factor here.

16. Corrigan, p. 99.

17. Rebora, p. 70, cites the following manuscript from the archives of Lucca : « Antonio Bonvisi con le sue facultà sostiene Tommaso Moro. »

18. This and subsequent citations on his English contacts are from the *DNB*, II, 827-28, and Corrigan, p. 99 ; cf. Ford.

19. The fullest account of this aspect of More, J.A. Guy's *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (Brighton : Harvester Press, 1980), makes no mention of Bonvisi.

20. Some of this material has been discussed, from a different perspective, by Ford and Rebora. The identification of « the merchaunt » and « Antonio » as Bonvisi is supported by E.F. Rogers in her edition of More's letters and by More's biographers.

21. Some of these elements are discussed more fully for More himself in Richard S. Sylvester, « *A Part of His Own* : Thomas More's Literary Personality in his Early Works, » *Moreana*, No. 15-16 (1967), pp. 29-42, and in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning : From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London : Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980).

22. The text of the « indenture made » between the « Vnder Treasurer of England ... and Antony Bonuixi, merchaunt of Luke », is reproduced in *Moreana*, No. 12 (1966), pp. 108-109, with the two signatures.

23. Citations in this paragraph are from Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, III (1822), Pt. ii, 491-93, as quoted in R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (1935 ; rpt. Ann Arbor : Univ. of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 196.

24. Chambers, pp. 193-97 ; cf. E.E. Reynolds, *The Field is Won : The Life and Death of Saint Thomas More* (London : Burns & Oates, 1968), pp. 307-14.

25. From *A Dialogue concernynge Heresyas* in *The Workes of Sir Thomas More* (1557), facsimile edition, intro. K.J. Wilson (London : Scolar Press, 1978), I, 185 ; cf. Reynolds, p. 312.

26. William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More, in Two Early Tudor Lives*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1962), p. 253 ; cf. Ro:Ba., p. 258.

27. On the connections between More and these men see R.J. Schoeck, « Anthony Bonvisi, the Heywoods and the Ropers, » *NQ*, 197 (1952), 178-79.

28. The *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (XIV, 297-98) cites Giovan Michele Bruto's letter to Giovan Battista Minutoli, observing that in Louvain the name of Bonvisi was « celebre ... atque illustre » for its generous hospitality. For Sander, Bonvisi went to Louvain, « not indeed to carry on his business as a merchant of this world, but to attend to the business of the next » ; see his *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*, trans. David Lewis (London : Burns & Oates, 1877), p. 201.

29. The proverb was a familiar one, both in Latin and in English ; see Bartlett Jere Whiting and Helen Wescott Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases : From English Writings Mainly before 1500* (Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press, 1968), 139. It stems from Proverbs 16:14 according to the Latin Vulgate ; how topical the sentence was in 1529-1535 England can be seen in G. Marc'hadour, *The Bible in the Works of St. Thomas More*, Pt I (Nieuwkoop : B. de Graaf, 1969), p. 183.

30. Roper, p. 237.

31. The traditions of *fortune* are traced in Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 1927) ; p. 67 notes the particular connection between Fortune and the prison theme, associated with Boethius. Walter John Sedgfield's introduction to his modernized form of *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius* (London : the Clarendon Press, 1900), surveys Elizabethan versions of the work. See too Howard Rollin Patch, *The Tradition of Boethius* (1935 ; rpt. N.Y. : Russell & Russell, 1970), and C.S. Lewis's discussion of Boethius in *The Discarded Image : An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, Eng. : The Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 75-91. Pierre Courcelle's *La Consolation de philosophie dans la tradition littéraire : Antécédents et postérité de Boèce* (Paris : Etudes Augustiniennes, 1967), is particularly valuable for the long section on iconography, with its many illustrations of such emblems as the wheel of Forture and the wings of the soul. Conrad H. Rawski's edition and translation of *Four Dialogues for Scholars*, from Petrarch's *De remediis utriusque fortune* (Cleveland : the Press of Western Reserve Univ., 1967), surveys the popularity of the work, pp. 1-15.

32. In his « Boethius and Thomas More's Dialogue of Comfort, » *ELN*, 3 (1965), 97-101, Leland Miles skilfully rehearses the evidence for More's intimate familiarity with Boethius, correcting and supplementing Patch's *Tradition of Boethius*.

33. C.S. Lewis, p. 77, points out that Boethius seeks a consolation for his ruin, not his death.

34. These and subsequent translations from the letter are mine ; see Part III, below.

35. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book II, Prose 8. Patch traces this, as a commonplace of the literature of Fortune, in his study of *Fortuna*, pp. 74-75. All of Book II of Boethius seems especially important as a background to the letter to Bonvisi.

36. From his 1519 letter to Ulrich von Hutten, as translated by Francis Morgan Nichols, adapted by John C. Olin, *Thomas More* (Fordham University Press, 1977), p. 4. See Barbara Flower's version in Johan Hutzinger, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (1924 ; Harper Torchbook ed., N.Y. : Harper and Row, 1957), p. 234. See too Erasmus's first adage, *Amicorum communia omnia*, with its elaborate network of christianized classical motifs : *Opera Omnia*, II (1703) ; rpt. Hildesheim : Georg Olms, (1961), columns 13-14. Friendship is Margaret Mann Phillips' major theme in « The Correspondence of Erasmus and Thomas More, » in *Thomas More : 1477-1977* (Brussels : Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1980), pp. 27-37 ; the greetings she lists on p. 28 include « dearest of all mortals, » which More will reuse in his letter to Bonvisi.

37. *Paradise Lost*, IV, 55-57 ; the speaker here is Satan.

38. In *De Amicitia*, vi, 20-22 ; cf. Erasmus's first adage.

39. See G. Marc'hadour, *The Bible in the Works of Thomas More*, Part V (Nieuwkoop : B. de Graaf, 1972), p. 140.

40. The 1557 Englishing obliterated this distinction, turning « *Morum tuum* » into a simple « *me.* »

41. This characterizes More's Latin style throughout his life. « *My Dear Peter* » will discuss it as it appears in *Utopia*; Clarence Miller magisterially analyzes it in his edition and translation of More's *De Tristitia*, *CW 14* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 754-76.

42. Self-reflexiveness figures prominently in Stephen Greenblatt's fascinating interpretation of More in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.

43. While the Rastell edition (1557) did not distinguish this part of the letter typographically, it did indent the signature and the beginning of the postscript. I have not seen the *Lucubrationes* (Basle, 1563). In the Louvain editions the postscript is set off by italic type, and *Opera Omnia Latina* (Frankfurt, 1689) effectively uses bold capital letters for THOMAS MORUS and TUUS.

44. In his « Introduction » to *Conscience Decides: Letters and Prayers from Prison Written by Sir Thomas More between April 1534 and July 1535*, sel. and arranged by Dame Bede Foord of Stanbrook Abbey (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), pp. 15-16.

45. This is a topic early biographers seized upon; Sander writes that he « used to say that the world at large, into which man was driven when banished out of Paradise because of sin, was nothing else but a prison, out of which men are called every day to answer for themselves, » p. 111. As I am working on a second study, exploring the theme in more detail, I shall simply point to a few instances here: his Latin epigram, « *In Hvivs Vitae Vanitatem*, » his development of this in his devotional work on « the four last things », and the long section on the world as prison in his *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*.

46. See the ending pages of Roper's *Life*, e.g., where he narrates More's last conversation with Master Pope.

47. From *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller and rev. Frank Clarke and others (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 96.

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There are many variations, both in accidentals and in substantives, among the early editions of this letter. In retranslating it, however, I have followed the Latin text as it is printed in E.R. Rogers' *Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* with three major exceptions. The reading *augustus*, line 33, is confirmed by the 1557 Englishing (« noble », 1.41), by a Vatican manuscript (see Clarence Miller in *Moreana*, No. 26, p. 41), and by at least two early editions: Basle, 1563, p. 495 (kindly checked for me by Valerie Callies), and *Opera Omnia Latina* (Frankfurt, 1689), p. 330. In indenting the signature and the first part of the postscript and making a full stop between « *tuus* » and « *nam* », I have been influenced by Rastell's text, which seems to do fuller justice to the emphasis I believe More intended here.

### Part III : A Translation.

To Antonio Bonvisi.

To the most friendly of friends, and deservedly dearest to me, greetings.

Since my mind has a presentiment (perhaps a false one, but still a presentiment) that before very long I will be unable to write to you, I have decided, while I may, to show by this little letter, at least, how much I am refreshed by the pleasantness of your friendship now that fortune has abandoned me.

To be sure, most excellent sir, in the past I have always been wonderfully delighted by this love of yours for me, but when I remembered that for almost forty years now I have been, not a guest, but a continual habitué of the Bonvisi household, and that in all this time I have not proven to be a friend in repaying my debt to you, but only a barren lover, my sense of shame truly made that genuine sweetness, which I otherwise enjoyed in thinking about the friendship of the Bonvisis, turn a little bit sour because I felt somehow awkward and ashamed, as if I had neglected to do my part. But certainly I now console myself with the thought that there never arose any opportunity for me to pay you back, since your fortune was so large that there was no way left for me to do anything for you. And so I am aware that I did not fail to pay you back through any neglect of my duty towards you, but because there was no opportunity. But now that even the hope of recompense is taken away, when I see you persist in loving and obliging me, nay rather, when I see you push on in your friendship and run the race unwearied, so that few men court their fortunate friends as much as you favor, love, cherish, and regard your More -- overthrown as he is, cast aside, struck down, and sentenced to prison -- then I not only absolve myself from whatever bitter shame I felt before but also find peace in the sweetness of this wonderful friendship of yours. And my good fortune in having such a faithful friend as you seems somehow -- I don't know how -- almost to counterbalance this unfortunate shipwreck of my fleet. Certainly, apart from the indignation of the Prince, whom I love no less than I ought to fear him, for the rest, your friendship almost outweighs my losses, since they, after all, are to be counted among the evils of fortune.

But if I were to count the possession of such a constant friendship -- which such an unfavorable fall of fortune has not snatched away, but rather cemented more strongly -- among the fleeting goods

38 of fortune, truly I should be out of my mind. For the happiness of a  
 39 friendship so faithful, and so constant against the contrary blast of  
 40 fortune, is a rare favor, and without a doubt is a higher good, and a  
 41 more exalted one, arising from a certain special loving-kindness of God.  
 42 Certainly I do not otherwise accept or understand it than as something  
 43 arranged by the unparalleled mercy of God, that among my poor little  
 44 friends, a person such as you, so great a friend, was prepared so long  
 45 beforehand, who might assuage and lighten by your consolation a great  
 46 part of that distress which the weight of fortune rushing headlong  
 47 against me has brought upon me. Therefore, my dear Antonio, dearest  
 48 of all mortals to me, with all my strength I pray (the only thing I can do)  
 49 to Almighty God, who provided you for me, that, since he gave you  
 50 such a debtor, who will never be able to discharge his debt, he himself  
 51 for his loving-kindness vouchsafe to requite you for those deeds of kind-  
 52 ness of yours which you daily expend so profusely upon me ; then that  
 53 he bring us, for his great mercy, from this wretched and stormy world  
 54 to his peace, where there will be no need for letters, where no wall will  
 55 separate us, where no porter will prevent us from talking together, but  
 56 with God the Father unbegotten, and his only-begotten Son, our Lord  
 57 and Redeemer Jesus-Christ, and the Holy Spirit of them both, the  
 58 Comforter proceeding from them both, we shall fully enjoy eternal joy.  
 59 Meanwhile may Almighty God bring it about that you, my dear  
 60 Antonio, and I, and would that all mortals, and everyone everywhere,  
 61 may hold cheap all the riches of this world, all the glory of the whole  
 62 universe, and even the sweetness of life itself, for the ardent desire of  
 63 that joy. Most trusty of all friends, and most beloved by me, and (as I  
 64 am now long accustomed to call you) the apple of my eye : goodbye.  
 65 May Christ keep unharmed your whole household, so very like the head  
 66 of the family in their affection for me.

67 T. More : if I put down « yours, »  
 68 I'll have done so in vain. For  
 69 you cannot now not know this, when you have bought it by so many  
 70 deeds of kindness. Nor am I now such, that it matters whose I am.

I am grateful to a colleague, Rob Wilson, who saw an early draft of the translation, and to Clarence Miller and Germain Marc'hadour, who generously shared their expert knowledge of More's Latin.

In making this translation I was particularly concerned with the movement of More's mind and with the ways he suspended and repeated his thoughts. But no one translation can do more than approximate part of a literary text. I offer this version with the hope that there will be others, for only so can we begin to catch the richness of More's Latin text in another language.