

Literary Designs: Thomas More's *Utopia* as Literature

Stephen W. Smith

I. More's *Utopia*: *Difficult to Describe*

The Tudor historian Edward Hall famously remarked of Thomas More, "I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wise man, or a wise foolish man."¹ Perhaps it is not surprising that the ironic man whose life and death continue to inspire great interest, debate, and perplexity should have written one of the most perplexing and disputed of great works, the *Utopia*, a tale in two books describing, as the title page puts it, "the best state of a commonwealth and the new island of Utopia."² One contemporary humanist, de Busleyden, thought the work "a mimetic exercise in moral philosophy" comparable to Plato's dialogues; another fellow humanist, Bude, asked perhaps with irony if the book should be taken literally or allegorically.³ In the twentieth century, the eminent C. S. Lewis judged the work a "spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits" written in holiday spirits, and as such a paradoxical and comical "revel" not to be taken too seriously. The communists, on the other hand, thought the work a prophecy of the blessed social order to come, so much so that one may find a memorial to More in Moscow's Alexandrovsky Gardens, and critical praise that "his socialism made him immortal" (Kautsky). And yet still other readers in the past century have considered the work variously as:

- "a pattern of the good life," an image of a "holy city," a "nursery of correct and useful institutions" (Bude)
- "a call to action to fellow humanists" (Guy)
- "a most radical critique of humanism" (Skinner)
- a portrait of "radical idealism" (Berger, Jr.)
- "a Statesman's dialectical puzzle" (Wegemer)
- "an attempt to reconcile rival philosophies of Plato and Cicero" (Guy)

- a "paper state" that could never become practical (Lewis)
- a "pitiable" book figuring forth the tensions between humanism and "brute fact" (Allen)
- "a demonstration that any interpretation depends upon the reader's position" (Greenblatt)
- "a dialogue with an indeterminate close" (Surtz)
- an "open-ended book," a "kaleidoscope" (McCutcheon)
- a satire or burlesque of "absolutist" speech (Miller)
- a "rather melancholy book" . . . sharing Augustine's conviction "that no human society could be wholly attractive" (Logan)
- an "equivocal masterpiece" . . . "imbued with paradox and ambiguity, which leaves all possibilities open" (Fox)
- "an expression of More's inner life and drama" (Greenblatt)

Contemplating this "cloud of contradictory eulogies,"⁴ we should return to Hall's puzzlement over the author of *Utopia* and ask: What is it about the *Utopia*, "that truly Golden Handbook," as the title page proclaims, that accounts for such a profusion of readings? Is it impossible to interpret the book accurately because of the conflicting points of view expressed in the work, and because of the irony everywhere apparent? Is there any *truth* in *Utopia*, or does "total irony" reign by book's end? In short, was it foolish or wise to write the book as More did, and how ought we approach it and read it?

In this talk, I would like to explore More's general understanding of literature first, based on his writings prior to *Utopia*, and then turn to an opening consideration of the *Utopia*'s literary character, specifically its rhetorical and poetical features, in the hope of determining whether More the author provides us with any guidance in interpreting his masterpiece.

II. *Thomas More on Literature, Pre-Utopia*

Before the publication of the masterful *Utopia* in 1516, More had been exercising his literary powers in several other notable works. First (c.1492-94), he exercises his native tongue through a number of intriguing English poems that explore both the serious and comic dimensions of human life. One poem explores the ages of man—youth, prime, old age—and the wobbly workings of Fortune; in another, he writes a humorous "merry jest" about a Friar and a Sargeant.⁶ Even in these early poems, More's seriocomic genius may be glimpsed in its earliest phase, though one must note these works lack More's mature irony and power.

Second (1505-1506), and perhaps most important for this essay and More's own career as a writer, More and Erasmus try their hands at translating into Latin some works of the great Greek wit, Lucian, an ancient satirist of the first rank. To get a

⁴ Lewis, in *Essential Articles* 389.

⁵ This expression is taken from C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen" in *Selected Literary Essays*, 185.

⁶ We know from contemporary testimony that he had also tried his hand at comic playwriting; alas, but these do not survive. One can only imagine Lucian's take on Tudor England: *Lover of Wives? The Story of Henry VIII*.

¹ Cited in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 793.

² *Utopia*, trans. George Logan (Cambridge UP, 2004), 1.

³ See 108-29 of Logan's edition for the contemporary humanist response to More's *Utopia*.

taste of Lucian's strange genius, simply consider the strange title of one of his comic dialogues, *Zeus—the Opera Star*. Or how about *Alexander...the Quack*? Or *Philosophies...for Sale*? Or the aptly titled *A True Story*, which begins with the narrator confessing that everything we are about to read is...a patent lie. Surely this is "silly stuff," not as serious as tragedy or history or other forms of writing, or is it?

In any event, of particular interest for readers of *Utopia* is More's dedicatory letter to Ruthall, a preface to the translations, and one translation in particular, entitled *Philopseudes*, or *Lover of Lies*. The importance of this artistic and intellectual encounter with Lucian should not be overlooked by students of More; as has been pointed out rightly, the largely didactic quality of More's earlier writing is transformed from this point on—a powerfully dialectical style emerges, and a more playful and profound irony colors his writings, and perhaps his life, after these translations of Lucian.⁷ So what did More discover in Lucian? Let's briefly consider this.

In the dedicatory letter, More explains his love of Lucian to Ruthall. This short description of Lucian's virtues acts like a shaft of light onto More's later writings and his artistic temperament in general:

If, most learned Sir, there was ever anyone who fulfilled the Horatian maxim and combined delight with instruction, I think Lucian certainly ranked among the foremost in this respect. *Refraining from the arrogant pronouncements of the philosophers as well as from the wanton wiles of the poets, he everywhere reprimands and censures, with very honest and at the same time very entertaining wit, our human frailties. And this he does so cleverly and effectively that although no one pricks more deeply, nobody resents his stinging words.* He is always first-rate at this.⁸

More goes on significantly to state that the dialogues he has chosen to translate "have particularly struck my fancy."⁹ As we will see, the connections between *Lover of Lies* and *Utopia* are provocative and illuminating, especially in regards to merry More's love of Socratic irony and comic art.

In the letter to Ruthall, More observes that *Lover of Lies* is shot through with "Socratic irony," which both makes it difficult to judge the work aright, and thus tickles the reader's judgment to precisely such an act, awakening or fanning the desire for truth. Irony may be understood generally in its "root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case," or broadly as a classical figure of speech in which "the speaker's implicit meaning differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed."¹⁰ In any event, irony will become one of the mature More's most beloved figures of speech, perhaps especially because its power to prick and challenge the idle reader; to dispel the dull fog of comfort; to awaken slumbering desire; and to draw the murmuring soul into dialectical inquiry, an act requiring the reader's active participation—and vulnerability—as he carefully weighs and sifts opposing views in the arduous pursuit of truth.¹¹ Moreover, the mature More will

also remark that failure to note the presence of such figures and their function leads to misinterpretation and error, to "missing of the real sense" of what we read and accidentally increasing our ignorance, rather than moving toward truth, through the act of reading.¹² But back to Lucian.

In More's judgment, Lucian's ironic dialogue on *The Lover of Lies* is both "instructive" and "amusing" insofar as it delightfully reveals the *ridiculousness* of man when he indulges the "inordinate passion for lying," so opposed to the desire for truth roused by ironic writing. As Sir Philip Sidney will later remark in his *Defense of Poesy* (1579/1595), comic art is principally concerned with making the ridiculous visible, such that the reader would never want to be seen as so ridiculous himself. Harkening back to the classical tradition, Plato and Aristotle also make revealing comments on the ridiculous—for Plato, the ridiculous man is the man who lacks self-knowledge (think of the vainly cross-gartered Malvolio from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*—or perhaps certain characters from the *Utopia*), and for Aristotle the ridiculous is the proper subject matter of the comic artist. Thus in More's early translations of Lucian we see the provocative fusion of Socratic irony and dialectics with the revealing power of classical comic art—and we glimpse the mature More, artist of the *Utopia*, coming into view. As Henry Fielding astutely observed in the eighteenth century, "Life everywhere furnishes us with examples of the ridiculous," but *why* we are so prone to this comical (and potentially tragical) consternation and condition, and what *hope* there may be of escaping it, is More's seriocomic meditation in many of his later writings. The one side of More's mature genius, then, will delight in *revealing* the ridiculous, the other in *understanding* it to its roots—but to what end? Perhaps in the hope of plucking them out, or at least helping persons and things such that they prove "as little bad as possible." In other words, one side of merry More delights in and laughs at *lies*, the other instructs in the arduous business of *truth*.

III. More's *Utopia* and the "Prefatory Letter to Peter Giles"

When we turn from the Lucian translations to the *Utopia*, "that truly Golden handbook" on the Best State of a Commonwealth, we should not rush past More's ironic prefatory letter to Peter Giles, since like the letter to Ruthall it is similarly helpful in teaching us to approach the work aright, if we can manage to read it well.¹³

Though it is undoubtedly true that "almost nothing in this [ironic] letter can be taken at face value,"¹⁴ let me suggest that it nevertheless provides us with some provocative pointers. First, we should note the terribly ironic, and difficult to judge, statement from More that "truth in fact is the only thing at which I should aim and do aim in writing this work."¹⁵ Now one may object that this claim is, of course, ironic in the Lucianic vein, that the book is a "self-mocking" fiction purporting to be true,¹⁶ and that More is simply playing with the tension and calling attention to it

⁷ Wegemer, 84.

⁸ CW 3.1.3

⁹ CW 3.1.3

¹⁰ Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms* 91. See also Quintillian, *Institutes* 9.2.44.

¹¹ Wegemer, 77-78.

¹² CW 14.297.

¹³ As Logan notes in *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, "the letter tells us...the kind of reader for whom *Utopia* was designed" (23).

¹⁴ Miller, *Utopia*, 142-43n9.

¹⁵ Logan, *Utopia*, 3. Miller and Hackett translate this as "accuracy," but the word is *veritati* (CW4.38).

¹⁶ Logan, *Meaning of More's Utopia*, 30.

mischievously. On one level, this certainly seems true, but what rules out a second reading, doubly ironic if you will, in which the line *at once* wittily winks at the fiction, at the evident poetic lie that mocks our eyes with its airs, *and yet nevertheless* suggests that truth may seriously be the end, that More actually does care about truth, even if it's not exactly clear how to answer the question, What is Truth in More's *Utopia*? Indeed, why couldn't the *Utopia* be a lie deliberately ordered to truth? Or, to stick closely to the language of the prefatory letter, why couldn't the *Utopia* be a lie "aimed" at the truth like some strange arrow?¹⁷

Though many commentators conclude that the book has no conclusion, or that no resolution is reached by the end of Book 2, I would suggest that we consider again the relation of this fiction to the truth, especially since elsewhere, in one of his humanist letters, More remarks that good writers, "those that treat human concerns seriously or divine concerns reverently, always [use] a modest approach which will show that their goal is the truth and not winning a quarrel... [S]uch inquiries do have their use as a method of intellectual exercise."¹⁸ If *Utopia* is similarly an intellectual exercise aiming at truth, we find our way blocked by the simple question, what truth is aimed at? Does the work aim at disclosing the truth of reality, the truth of nature? Or does it in its very art aim at representing the likeness of life somehow? What of the work's aim with readers? Does it aim at moving one toward the virtue of truth, under the rule of which our words and deeds are one, and we show ourselves as we are, precisely the opposite of lying or dissimulation? Or does the work explore truth in the sense that man fulfills his vocation, what he is called upon to do or perform by providence?

Assuming then, even at our own peril, that truth in some form is the end of this fiction, we turn to the rest of the letter, in particular to the portraits More offers of himself first, and then various readers of the book. The self-portrait More offers is quite strikingly realistic—it could be a description of any of our lives, thick spun as they are in the midst of things—diapers, bills, freshmen essays.

Most of my day is given to the law—pleading some cases, hearing others, arbitrating others, and deciding still others [sounds like life with small children]... [S]o almost all day I'm out dealing with other people, and the rest of my day I give over to my family and household; and then for myself—that is, my studies—there's nothing left. For when I get home, I have to talk with my wife, chatter with my children, and consult with the servants. All these matters I consider part of my business, since they have to be done unless a man wants to be a stranger in his own house. Besides, you are bound to bear yourself as agreeably as you can towards those whom nature or chance or your own choice has made the companions of your life.¹⁹

Well, there it is. As one critic of More has rightly pointed out, "rarely before had a work created so successfully an illusion of reality,"²⁰ and we recognize instantly the fittingness of this artistic choice, especially if the work is precisely interested in truth in its many forms, and in teasing out what is and is not "realistic" in human life. The

work both invokes "realism" and seems to ridicule or unsettle our sense of reality, to demonstrate our "blind spots," but why or to what end?²¹

After offering this self-portrait, More turns significantly to the subject of potential readers of his book, and again the question of the end or intention of the book moves to the fore. The first reader, "my servant John Clement," who has made good progress in the humanistic study of Latin and Greek, raises prudent doubts in More's mind about some details in Raphael's account of Utopia, specifically the length of the bridge over the River Anyder, or Waterless. For any of us who have raised questions about Utopia, and it's almost impossible not to do so, the perspicacious John Clement is our boon companion and friend—he resembles, of course, "that very sharp fellow" whose judgment is praised by More in the second letter to Giles that followed the text of Book 2 in the 1517 edition.²² What is perhaps as interesting as this portrait of a good reader, however, is the portrait of the anonymous churchman, who upon hearing of the Utopian order, longs instantly to travel there and assume the miter as first bishop of the Utopians, perhaps strangely anticipating the socialist love affair with Utopia centuries later. In any event, the sharp-sighted John, who modestly doubts, and the zealous Bishop, who believes readily, seem to represent two kinds of critical responses to the book, and yet it is More's third portrait of readers, bound up with a discussion of whether to publish the book at all, that is the most provocative section of the letter.

Although likely conventional, More's main reservation about publishing *Utopia* involves his sober sense of the human nature normally exhibited in readers:

[M]en's tastes are so various, the tempers of some are so severe, their minds so ungrateful, their judgments so foolish, that there seems no point in publishing a book that others will receive only with contempt and ingratitude. Better simply to follow one's own natural inclinations, lead a merry life, and avoid the harrowing task of publishing something either useful or pleasant.

Thankfully, More did not take his own advice! Still, his prudent sense of an author's difficulties in both "aiming at truth" and moving such readers, is noteworthy, and the hope of success seems to dwindle further when he turns to discuss his own mode of writing, "satire," and the many flat-nosed readers who lack the nose for it, preferring their own limited judgment to the promise of learning through laughter and dialectical inquiry.

There follows next perhaps the most provocative image of a reader—I would like to conclude with a consideration of this reader in particular, since this type provokes More's especial dislike. "These people," More laments,

lounge around the taverns, and over their cups they pass judgment on the intelligence of writers. With complete assurance they condemn every author by his writings, just as the whim takes them, plucking each one, as it were, by the beard. [How rude!] *But they themselves remain safe—'out of range,' so to speak.* No use trying to lay hold of them;

¹⁷ Miller and Logan both translate "aim."

¹⁸ CW 15.75

¹⁹ *Utopia* 4.

²⁰ Greenblatt 33.

²¹ Greenblatt 24, 34. This is Greenblatt's insightful observation: "In almost all his writings, More returns again and again to the unsettling of man's sense of reality, the questioning of his instruments of measurement and representation, the demonstration of blind spots in his field of vision."

²² In our edition, this letter is printed on 108-110.

these good men are shaved so close, there's not so much as a hair of their heads to catch them by.

More seems to particular dislike this type of "safe reader," who loves to render judgment on books and authors while keeping the book at arm's length, so to speak—such "safe reading," is, I think, a perpetual possibility, and perhaps the great enemy of More's aim in the work, truth.

Through its masterful irony, challenging dialectical structure, and richly rendered characters, More's *Utopia* precisely refuses to be read in such "safe fashion." In fact, like anything truly poetical and philosophical, this great book is among the most dangerous things in the world. As Jeff Lehman will suggest in his essay, More's art in effect "forces" the reader, even the safe-reader, to put down his tankard of ale for a moment and enter the daunting dialogue himself, to participate in the fiction and perhaps experience some form of startling "self-revelation" through More's "satiric glass," the mirroring of his art.²³ Indeed, perhaps Raphael himself is a kind of safe-reader, content to live as he pleases until pressed to make an account of Utopia, and perhaps of himself, by More and Giles in Book 1. In any case, More's satire pinches at the posture of safe-reading—his art rouses the will, engages the intellect and the imagination, challenges the judgment, and clarifies what the real questions are, a most challenging, yet perhaps most fruitful, experience that begins when the sharp sighted reader confronts the word 'Utopia' for the first time in the title, and "aims at" determining the truth of the word—and of course later the truth of the image of Utopia that Raphael presents to us in Book 2. Is there any hope that More's work will satisfy such readerly desire? Is there any hope that the arduous business of "aiming at the truth" and writing in such a way that the reader is pricked and prodded in that direction will come to anything? Time to put down the tankard, good and gentle readers, and open to Book 1 of "that truly Golden handbook," *Utopia*.

Thank you.

²³ See Wegemer 222, on Socrates' method of inducing an interlocutor's participation in "self-revelation." Perhaps Raphael himself is a kind of safe-reader, till pressed to make an account of himself and his desires and choices.