

## Thomas More

Thomas More, Erasmus's closest friend in England, has remained a focus of interest for many who will never follow his intellectual or spiritual path; his life and manner of dying fascinate many who will never read anything he wrote except *Utopia*. The play and film *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt (1960) offer a picture of More's life that has touched many.

Thomas More was born in London in 1478, the son of a lawyer; as a boy he served for several years in the household of John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor, who figures in the discussions of Book I of *Utopia* as the model of a man of power who listens to others' opinions

### *Utopia*

In 1515 More was sent as a royal ambassador to Flanders (the Netherlands), where he met Peter Gilles, a humanist who was town clerk of Antwerp and a friend of Erasmus. During the months there, he composed the main part of *Utopia*, the description in Latin of an imaginary land of Nowhere (in Latin *nusquam*, in Greek *utopia*) which is now Part II of the completed work. On his return to England he added Part I, a Platonic dialogue introducing some of the work's main themes. The whole work was published in Louvain in 1516, thanks to Erasmus, and although More had been eager to have it published he expressed great regret a few months later. He perhaps realized that most readers would not be aware of the work's origins in his own private life, and read it in too simple a way.

"U-topia" means "no-place" and More was conscious of the pun with "eu-topia" meaning "good-place". Utopia is nowhere, because it is fictional, but also because it is applicable in every place as a challenge to the way life is being lived there; at the same time, it is nowhere, because no one would ever want or be able to live as the Utopians do. More's Utopia is a good place, but it is not without its limits and problems.

The way the word "Utopianism" is used today might seem to imply that More's work is of the idealizing kind, proposing a model of an alternative, perfect society; this is not correct. In many ways, More's Utopia is a terribly inhuman society. In literary history More's work has inspired such famous social satires as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Orwell's *1984*. Much modern science fiction is either eu-topian or "dystopian" (from "dys-topia" meaning a bad place) but no writer has offered so deeply challenging a text as More.

## Book 1

The first half of Book I consists of Raphael Hythloday's account of a discussion he was involved in one day during a visit to Cardinal Morton when he was Lord Chancellor. A lawyer commends the English habit of hanging thieves, sometimes 20 at a time. Raphael ventures the opinion that such punishment is unjust since many are forced to steal in order to feed themselves and their families. When the lawyer claims that they could earn money by working, Raphael points out that many crippled soldiers cannot work. The debate extends to the recent spread of enclosures, which has deprived many farm-workers of a job, while those who used to be fed by rich land-owners have been dismissed on account of high grain-prices:

"To make this hideous poverty worse, it exists side by side with wanton luxury. Not only the servants of noblemen, but tradespeople, farmers, and people of every social rank are given to ostentatious extravagance of dress and too much wasteful indulgence in eating. Look at the restaurants, the brothels, and those other places just as bad, the inns, wine-shops and beer-houses. Look at all the crooked games of chance like dice, cards, backgammon, tennis, bowling, and quoits, in which money slips away so fast. Don't all these lead straight to robbery.... "If you do not find a cure for these evils, it is futile to boast of your severity in punishing theft. Your policy may look superficially like justice, but in reality it is neither just nor practical. If you allow young people to be badly brought up, their characters will be gradually corrupted from childhood; and if then you punish them as grown-ups for committing crimes to which their early training has inclined them, what else is this, I ask, but first making them thieves and then punishing them for it?"

Cardinal Morton asks Raphael to suggest an alternative. Again he condemns the death penalty, then reminds the Cardinal that the Romans used to send criminals to work camps; he goes on to suggest that thieves might become slaves not allowed to possess money. The audience is ready to laugh at this foreigner's odd ideas, until the Cardinal expresses his general agreement, when suddenly everyone is full of praise.

For Raphael, this story is the proof that he has no future as a courtier; for the reader, it is a preparation for the skills needed to read Book 2 correctly. In both books the text claims to record things said by Hythloday; in both he is arguing an extreme, idealistic opinion, and in both the figure of More opposes a differing, more pragmatic opinion.

It would be wrong, though, to assume that the More who speaks in the text of *Utopia* always expresses the opinions of Thomas More the author. Hythloday himself has two sides: he is a fanatical idealist, using the example of Utopia to support his demands for radical social change, and he is also bitterly disillusioned with European society, so that in his fury against the folly of the courtiers at Cardinal Morton's table, he does not even notice the positive example of the uncorrupted statesman offered in Cardinal Morton himself. While Hythloday is a purist, putting his finger on many examples of political immorality in the second half of Book I, More argues in favour of compromise. Hythloday says there is no place for honest men in politics (in court), to which More replies:

"That's how things go in society, and in the councils of princes. If you cannot pluck

up bad ideas by the root, if you cannot cure long-standing evils as completely as you would like, you must not therefore abandon society. Don't give up the ship in a storm because you cannot direct the winds. And don't arrogantly force strange ideas on people who you know have set their minds on a different course from yours. You must strive to influence policy indirectly, handle the situation tactfully, and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make less bad. For it is impossible to make all institutions good unless you make all men good, and that I don't expect to see for a long time yet."

## **Book 2**

Book II is the description of the communistic way of life on the island of Utopia that Raphael hopes will support his radical social opinions expressed at the end of Book I:

"As long as you have private property, and as long as money is the measure of all things, it is really not possible for a nation to be governed justly or happily. For justice cannot exist where all the best things in life are held by the worst citizens; nor can anyone be happy where property is limited to a few, since those few are always uneasy and the many are utterly wretched.... Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely done away with, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can mankind be happily governed."

This is one of the main starting-points for the fantasy of Utopia. Writing at the time when modern capitalism was just beginning to take shape in Europe, Thomas More tried to imagine a society in which all the mechanisms of capital were abolished. At the beginning of the century in which people began actively to move off the land and into the cities, he imagined a society in which no such choice was possible, since in Utopia all are obliged to take their turn in the fields. Just as conspicuous consumption and luxurious life-styles were spreading, he made Utopia a country in which all people live at an equal level of austerity.

There is no place for individual desires or private will in Utopia, since the private good is completely subject to the common good. In many ways, as critics have often remarked, Utopia is an extension into society of some of the ideals that existed in the monasteries, and it is no coincidence that Hythloday ends his story with a speech denouncing pride. Only in Utopia, every form of individuality is seen as pride.

Book II, much more widely read than Book I, begins with a description of Utopia that makes it clear how similar it is in many ways to England in its size and disposition. Amaurot, the capital, is set on a river similar to the Thames, for example. Book II begins with general descriptions of Utopian society, the social hierarchy, the relationship between town and country, and the daily timetable. It is very easy to pick holes in the details of the descriptions. We are told, for example, that when the founder of Utopia, Utopus, first conquered it, it was not an island until he caused a channel fifteen miles wide to be dug to separate it from the continent. We may wonder what was done with the huge quantities of earth and rock removed! There is competition between the householders living in different streets, to produce the best gardens, yet the gardens are always open to anyone who cares to go in and take anything. More (or Hythloday) is clearly not painting a very precise picture but it is striking to note how many aspects of life in Utopia resemble More's own family life.

The main difficulty in reading *Utopia* today comes from the way in which Utopian society is so similar to some of the most repressive and totalitarian systems that recent history has produced. There may be readers who do not care that everyone must wear identical clothing, and must move houses every ten years, or that intimate family meals are strongly discouraged, meals being taken by 30 families together in neighborhood dining halls. More difficult to accept are customs such as the internal passport system:

"Anyone who wants to visit friends in another city, or simply to see the country, can easily obtain permission from his superiors, unless for some special occasion he is needed at home. They travel together in groups, taking a letter from the prince granting leave to travel and fixing a day of return... Anyone who takes upon himself to leave his district without permission, and is caught without the prince's letter, is treated with contempt, brought back as a runaway, and severely punished. If he is bold enough to try it a second time, he is made a slave."

It is the Utopians' attitude towards these slaves that arouses most critics' anger:

"Slaves do the slaughtering and cleaning in the slaughter-houses: citizens are not allowed to do such work. The Utopians feel that slaughtering our fellow-creatures gradually destroys the sense of compassion, which is the finest sentiment of which our human nature is capable... In the dining-halls, slaves do all the particularly dirty and heavy work."

Utopia is in the fortunate position of producing far more food than it needs; it keeps two years' supply in stock, and sells the rest abroad. In exchange Utopia purchases iron ore, gold and silver. It never experiences a foreign-exchange deficit, and has accumulated vast quantities of gold. This is used to hire mercenary soldiers from abroad when Utopia is at war, or to buy off the invading army, or to bribe parts of it to attack the rest. Only how to store their fortune? Gold is employed to make fetters for criminals, turning it into a sign of disgrace instead of dignity, for the worst criminals wear crowns and chains of gold, the signs of the highest power and honor in Europe. Jewels and precious stones are the playthings of children, who naturally give them up on becoming adult.

Added vividness comes from a description of the visit to Utopia of foreign envoys, who arrive dressed in gold chains and are naturally taken for the slaves of their servants. Cultural values and conventional attitudes are thus challenged by difference.

In the sections on the care of the sick, and on marriage customs, there are ideas which show clearly that More is not simply describing a perfect model for his own human society. People in Utopia who are incurably sick and in great pain are encouraged by the state to put an end to their lives by a form of sanctioned suicide (euthanasia). This is contrary to Catholic teaching, in More's time as now. If two people, after marriage, find that they have made a mistake and want to marry other partners, divorce and remarriage is permitted. Divorce is also permitted in the case of adultery by one of the parties. This too is not allowed by the Church.

"Women do not marry till they are eighteen, nor men till they are twenty-two. Premarital sex by either men or women, if discovered and proved, is severely punished and

those guilty are forbidden to marry during their whole lives, unless the Prince by his pardon lightens the sentence... the reason is that they suppose few people would join in married love, with confinement to a single partner and all the petty annoyances that married life involves, unless they were strictly restrained from a life of promiscuity.

"In choosing marriage partners, they solemnly and seriously follow a custom which seemed to us foolish and absurd in the extreme. Whether she is a widow or a virgin, the bride-to-be is shown naked to the groom by a responsible and respectable matron; and similarly some respectable man presents the groom naked to his future bride. We laughed at this custom and called it absurd; but they were just as amazed at the folly of other nations.... They leave all the rest of her body covered with clothes and estimate the attractiveness of a woman from a mere handbreadth of her person, the face, which is all they can see."

Finally, Hythloday notes that adultery (sexual relations between a married person and some other partner) is punished by the strictest form of slavery, while a second conviction is punished by death. Death is also the punishment for rebellion by slaves.

Turning to international relations, Hythloday tells that Utopia never makes any treaties with other lands:

"In that part of the world, treaties and alliances between kings are not generally observed with much good faith. In Europe, of course, the dignity of treaties is everywhere kept sacred and inviolable, especially in these regions where the Christian religion prevails. This is partly because the kings are all so just and virtuous, partly also because of the reverence and fear that everyone feels towards the ruling Popes. Just as the Popes themselves never promise anything which they do not most conscientiously perform, so they command all other chiefs of state to abide by their promises in every way. If someone quibbles over it, they compel him to obey by means of pastoral censure and sharp reproof. The Popes rightly declare that it would be particularly disgraceful if people who are specifically called 'the faithful' did not adhere faithfully to their solemn word. "But in that New World nobody trusts treaties. The greater the formalities, the more numerous and solemn the oaths, the sooner the treaty will be broken...."

The irony of this passage is particularly interesting; is Hythloday being sarcastic? Or is he being particularly unrealistic? Is he saying what he thinks, or is his author manipulating his words? In the next chapter, about the Utopians' strategies in warfare, we find the same Machiavellian spirit at work: "If they overcome the enemy by skill and cunning, they rejoice mightily." The Utopians offer high rewards for the killing of their enemies' king, or his capture. This sows discord and distrust. Yet if they have to fight, they are very brave.

The section on religion has interested many critics, since More imagines a non-Christian civic religion of great nobility and purity:

"Most believe in a single power, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable, far beyond the grasp of the human mind, and diffused throughout the universe, not physically, but in

influence. Him they call 'Father' and to him alone they attribute the origin, increase, change, and end of all visible things.' The name given to this supreme being is Mithra, a name taken from Persian religion."

From Hythloday and his companions, the Utopians heard about Christ for the first time, and were deeply impressed, especially by the community of goods practiced in the monasteries. Some of them were baptized, but there was no priest to give the other sacraments. Tolerance is important; a Utopian who began to preach that non-Christians would go to hell was quickly imprisoned and exiled.

Individual freedom of religion was first established by Utopus himself, but within limits: "The only exception he made was a positive and strict law he made against any person who should sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to think that the soul perishes with the body, or that the universe is ruled by mere chance, rather than divine providence." In More's Europe, these two ideas were subjects of intense debate; they were considered to be revealed truths that had to be believed by all Christians, yet thinkers could offer no convincing rational proof of them.

In conclusion, Hythloday compares the equality found in Utopia with the gross inequalities of European society, in a particularly powerful speech:

"What kind of justice is it when a nobleman or a goldsmith or moneylender, or someone else who earns his living by doing either nothing at all or something completely useless to society, gets to live a life of luxury and grandeur? While a laborer, a carter, a carpenter, or a farmer works so hard and so constantly that even a beast of burden would perish under the load; yet this work of theirs is so necessary that no country could survive a year without it. But they earn so meager a living and lead such miserable lives that a beast of burden would really be better off. Beasts do not have to work every minute, and their food is not much worse; in fact they like it better. Besides, they do not have to worry about their future. Working men not only have to sweat and suffer without present reward, but agonize over the prospect of a penniless old age. Their daily wage is inadequate even for their present needs, so there is no possible chance of their saving toward the future."

Hythloday explains the general refusal of people to share what they have with others as a result of Pride. The figure of More concludes with some comments on the tale he has just heard:

It seemed to me that not a few of the customs and laws he had described were quite absurd... but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy. This one thing alone takes away all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which (in the popular view) are considered the true ornaments of any nation....

I cannot agree with everything he said. Yet I confess there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia which I wish our own country would imitate, though I don't really expect it will.