LITERATURE AND BEYOND: CONTEXTUALISING MORE'S *UTOPIA*

EDEBİYAT VE ÖTESİ: MORE'UN *ÜTOPYA*SINI BAĞLAMSALLAŞTIRMAK

രു

Prof. Sarbani CHAUDHURY

University of Kalyani Department of English

Abstract: This article attempts to foreground More's *Utopia* against the Renaissance backdrop of complex and unprecedented transformations both on the individual and the collective plain. It investigates the text as a literary artefact produced as much by its author as by the age imbibing the multifarious ambiguities and uncertainties of a transitional era. Located within the tradition of humanist social criticism, it posits an ideal state that is simultaneously absolutist and radically progressive, inclusive in format yet elitist in dissemination. A vehicle for self-cancellation and self-transference for More, *Utopia* thrives on the paradox and ambivalence resulting from an uneasy miscegenation of practical humanism and nascent bourgeois ideology. The contradictory strains of empirical objectivity and empire building; playful intellectual exercise and serious intent make More's 'no-place happyland' a site of ideological contestation which effectively establishes the linkages between a literary artefact and extra-literary considerations. The article focuses on the text's structural format, the genetics of composition, the extensive use of parerga, its secular yet hegemonic orientation, its insistence on *common*wealth, abolition of money economy, and the continuous process of self-cancellation and self-assertion to suggest that despite radical ambivalence, More's *Utopia*, signals a transition of the English literary apparatus for critiquing social systems from adolescence to adulthood.

Key Words: More, Utopia, Social Critic, Literary Context.

Özet: Bu makale Rönesans'ın hem kişisel hem de toplumsal planda benzeri görülmemiş ve karmaşık arka planında More'un Ütopyasını ele almaktadır. Makale edebi metni en azından yazarı kadar çağı tarafından da üretilen, muhtelif belirsizliklerle dolu bir çağı içine çeken, bir araç olarak ele almaktadır. Hümanist bir sosyal eleştirinin içerisinde konumlanan Ütopya aynı zamanda mutlakçı ve radikal olarak ilerlemeci, formatı itibariyle seçkinci ideal bir durum varsayar. More için bir kendini geçersizleştirme ve ifade etme aracı olarak *Ütopya*, pratik hümanizm ve olgunlaşmamış burjuva ideolojisinin sıkıntılı karışımından kaynaklanan belirsizlik ve karmaşa üzerinde gelişmektedir. Ampirik nesnelliğin ve imparatorluk inşa etmenin çelişkili yapısı eğlenceli entelektüel alıştırmalar ve ciddi amaç More'un 'ütopik mutlu ülkesini' edebi artalan ile edebiyat ötesi itibarlar arasında ilişkiler kuran ideolojik mücadelenin mahalli yapar. Makale; metnin yapısal biçimine, terkibinin kökenine, ikincil anlamların geniş kullanımına, hegemonik seküler yönelimine, cumhuriyet vurgusuna, para ekonomisinin kaldırılmasına ve radikal duygu karmaşalarına rağmen kendini geçersizleştirme ile kendini zorla kabul ettirmenin sürekliliğine odaklanmaktadır. More'un *Ütopyası* İngiliz edebî aygıtının sosyal sistemlerin eleştirisinde kullanımının ergenlikten yetişkinliğe geçişini simgeler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: More, Ütopya, Sosyal Eleştiri, Edebi Bağlam.

Utopia, or as its original title amplifies – *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia, A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining by the Distinguished and Eloquent Author, Thomas More, Citizen and Sheriff of the Famous City of London*,[1] – has been a site of critical contention from an early date. The initial ambivalent response to the text is registered by More himself who, years after writing the book expressed his desire of burning it, "yf any man wolde now translate Moria in to Englyshe, or some workes eyther that I haue my selfe wryten ere this ... I wolde not onely my derlynges bokes but myne owne also, helpe to burne them both with myne owne handes, rather than folke sholde ... take any harme of them!"[2] Similar ambivalence in noted in the twentieth century critical responses which, despite wide divergence, reveal an increasing propensity towards de-politicising

---

[1]   Translation by R. J. Schoeck from the 1516 Latin title in his " 'A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions': On Reading More's *Utopia* as Dialogue", in R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour (eds.), *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977, 81-90, 285.

[2]   Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (Book 2) in Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusadi and Richard J. Schoeck (eds.), *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 8, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, p. 179.

Utopia.[3] In this medley of critical confusion, Richard Marius perceptively foregrounds Thomas More and his creation in their material context to provide a possible interpretative approach for the understanding of this controversial text:

It has usually gone unnoticed that More's embassy, on which he began writing *Utopia*, was intended to *increase commerce, especially in wool,* and that while he penned these immortal lines, he was working hard to add to the wealth of those classes in English society whom Raphael castigates for their heartless greed. Commentators on *Utopia* have also passed over in silence More's dear friend Antonio Bonvisi, who accumulated a fortune in the wool trade and apparently lived a luxurious life, though without the vices that Raphael here condemns. Whether More recognised these ironies himself is an unanswerable question, but at least they reveal what we learn from a study of his other works, that when he wrote he built a world he could control and that, like most writers, *he did not always take care to make that created world correspond entirely with the world where he had to make his way.*[4]

Marius's astute distinction between More's authorial and professional engagement, between fiction and reality enables us to sidestep as superficial and unnecessary, the polarities of what Bradshaw designates as the "idyll/ideal"

---

[3] The major advocates of the orthodox Catholic analysis are R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, 1935; London: Penguin, 1963; Edward Surtz S. J., "Introduction", in Surtz (ed.) *Utopia*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1964, pp. vii-xxx; and Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982. Radical socialist readings were prompted by Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and His Utopia*, 1927; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979; Russel Ames, *Citizen Thomas More and His Utopia*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1949; and A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, 1952; Berlin: Seven Seas, 1968. A median position veering towards the latter is held by J. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978; and more recently by David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984; and Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. For a slightly different alignment of critical reference consult Skinner, *Foundation of Modern Political Thought*, vol.1, p. 257, note 1.
The conservative tendency of de-radicalising *Utopia* is represented in the articles of Dermot Fenlon, "England and Europe: *Utopia* and its Aftermath", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25, (1975), pp. 115-35; and Brendan Bradshaw, "More on *Utopia*", *The Historical Journal*, 24.1, (1981), pp. 1-27. Most breathtakingly brilliant yet perversely ingenious is the post-structuralist analysis of John M. Perlette, " 'Of Sites and Parasites': The Centrality of the Marginal Anecdote in Book I of More's *Utopia*", *English Literary History* 54.2, (1987), pp. 231-52 which denounces Hythlodaeus as the spokesman of authoritarian absolutism. John Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*: Alibi/Pretext/Postscript", *English Literary History* 59, (1992), pp. 289-311; and David Weil Baker, "Topical Utopias: Radicalizing Humanism in Sixteenth Century England", *Studies in English Literature* 36.1, (1996), pp. 1-30, however, serve as examples of a counter trend.
[4] Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography*, London: J. M. Dent and Son, 1984, pp. 156-57; emphasis added.

debate over the essential nature of *Utopia* and opt for a less ambitious yet more comprehensive grasp of this complex, ambivalent yet purposeful work.[5] Thus Budé's definition of the "golden handbook", i.e. *Utopia*, as a *seminarium* – translated by Schoeck as a "seed bed" or by Yale editors as a "nursery" from which "every man will introduce and *adapt transplanted customs* to his own city" – or Fox's more prosaic identification of *Utopia* as "an instrument of analysis rather than a *definitive* statement" seem more tenable than the either/or imperatives forwarded by the traditionalist and progressive schools alike.[6] The emphasis on adaptive transplantation and on the lack of a definitive statement highlight the ambivalent, polyvalent potentialities embedded in the text.

The contrariness of the author-work relationship and the elusive *essence* of the text invokes obvious comparisons with Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, conceived and written a few years earlier in 1509 (pub. 1511), which has perhaps evoked more instantaneous and persistent furore than More's *Utopia* written in 1515.[7] Both writers elude attempts at a simplistic alignment of their life-style with the idealist preoccupation of their works. Humanist critique of social and moral evils and the reforming impulse are mediated by multiple hedging strategies – the 'framed tale' format, the overlapping of play and truth, the self-referential yet traditional Christian evaluative framework etc. Both exemplify a genuine concern for the masses, are deeply suspicious of the existing structures of surveillance and locate deviant behaviour primarily within the empowered circle. The two texts also betray elitist inclinations in their conscious choice of Latin as the medium of expression. Thomas More specifically intended to withhold access to pseudo-scholars conversant only in English who, "by theyr owne defaute mysseconstre and take harme of the very scrypture of god."[8] But neither was averse to taking recourse to colloquial usage as Erasmus's indulgence with proverbs and More's preference for litotes

---

[5] Bradshaw posits the appropriation of *Utopia* by Christian orthodoxy through its transposition to the realm of sheer fantasy against the jubilant branding of the book by radical socialists as a virtual communist manifesto with step by step instructions on actual social revolution. Bradshaw, "More on *Utopia*", pp. 2-3.

[6] Schoeck, " 'A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions' ", pp. 281-82; Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* p. 51; emphasis added.

[7] Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, (tr.). with introduction and commentary by Clarence H. Miller, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979; Thomas More, *Utopia*, Robert M. Adams (tr.) & (ed.), Norton Critical Edition, 1975; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.. All citations to the two works are from these editions, unless otherwise stated.

[8] More, *Complete Works*, vol. 8, 179. This reluctance to popularise indiscriminately is also noted by Hubertus Schulte Herbrüggen, "More's *Utopia* as Paradigm", in Sylvester and Marc'hadour (eds.), *Essential Articles*, pp. 251-62; p. 252.

illustrate.[9] *The Praise of Folly* and *Utopia* thus, are complementary productions by two friends with close intellectual affinities and the examination of one necessitates the scrutiny of the other.

Yet Erasmus, the restless free-ranging spirit with dubious antecedents, was distinctly different from More belonging to solid citizen stock steeped in local and national politics. Marius's above mentioned comment on More's ambassadorial engagements while writing *Utopia* and Mermel's careful scrutiny of More's "active public life" since 1514, i.e., before the writing of *Utopia*, dispels the popular image of More the reluctant office-bearer.[10] Whatever his private scruples, More was vigorously engaged in *realpolitic*, was rooted in his own country and in the ultimate analysis proved fanatic enough to be martyred for religion. Erasmus was truly pan-European, a Christian maverick who channelled his boundless energies strictly within the limits of *vita contemplativa*, counselling and urging but never perpetuating reform. His genuinely non-dogmatic and consequently polyvalent perception could never conceive of any absolutist cause worthy of the final sacrifice of life. Hythloday — apart from being a projection of More's 'cancelled self', representing "all that More deliberately excluded from the personality he created" — also carries overtones of the Erasmian persona with his determined programme of non-participation.[11] Such distinctiveness and similarities combine with the different dates of conception to produce convergent works marked by sharp disparity of ambience and emphasis. *The Praise of Folly* coincides with the inception of Henry VIII's reign and shares the general mood of joyous anticipation. *Utopia*, following suit seven years later, wears the grim visage of partially betrayed expectancy. However, to categorically designate the latter as more progressive and modern would involve overlooking the complex interplay of ideas, frequently cross-connecting, that contribute to the richness of the two texts.

---

9   Elizabeth McCutcheon examining More's wide ranging use of litotes in *Utopia* identifies this rhetorical device as an aid to "functional and idiomatic, even colloquial, prose." McCutcheon, "Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in *Utopia*", in Sylvester and Marc'hadour (eds,), *Essential Articles*, pp. 263-74, p. 263.

10 Jerry Mermel, "Preparations for a Politic Life: Sir Thomas More's Entry into the King's Service", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7, (1977), pp. 53-66, p. 55. Also see Schoeck, " 'A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions' ", pp. 282-83.

11 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 33; Alistair Fox, "English Humanism and the Body Politic", in Alistair Fox and John Guy (eds.), *Reassessing the Henrician Age: Humanism, Politics and Reform 1500-1550*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 34-51, p. 38-39.

Both Erasmus and More urge a two-fold revolution – religious renewal and socio-political reform – but strive for opposing resolutions through divergent means. Despite Duhamel's assiduous avowal of *Utopia*'s scholastic lineage,[12] More's work operates on a secular level, within a national framework, and aims at plausible institutional reconstruction. *The Praise of Folly* is more medieval in spirit in envisaging a utopian Christendom, superseding geo-political boundaries. The universal kingdom of Folly ensures equality of all subjects whereas *Utopia*'s *colonial imperialism* vis-à-vis the neighbouring states unambiguously reiterates the Utopians' more-equal-than-others status.[13] Erasmus looks back but proposes a radical equalitarian society whereas More looks forward to an egalitarian, egotistic, unequal social order. On the other hand *Utopia* is progressive in proposing institutional restructuring as opposed to the individual spiritual metamorphosis suggested by Folly. Moreover, Erasmian social reform is ultimately self-defeating as it pivots on the principle of worldly renunciation, whereas More places his faith in assertive social control. Yet again, Folly's seemingly self-referential dominion is actually subject to an external sanctioning mechanism, namely the tenets of primitive Christian communism. By contrast, Utopian autonomy is wholly autocratic, legitimising slavery, euthanasia and genocide.[14] The regimental hierarchy of *Utopia*, although egalitarian and emancipated, would clearly not appeal to the masses who, through their lived experience, have learnt to be wary of any unequal gradation. On the other hand the anarchic possibilities embedded in the carnivalesque rejection of official order and ideology in the opening and closing sections of *The Praise of Folly* definitely align the work with popular utopian formulations. Lastly, the open-endedness of Folly's self-praise and the direct call for audience participation in extending the narrative beyond the written word accommodates the possibility of multiple, alternative, even subversive engagement with the text and its application in real life. More's *Utopia* on the other hand, culminates in a definite closure. At the end of the conversation, Morus leads Hythloday back into the room for perhaps a more intimate version of Cardinal Morton's household dinner and reaches the despairing realisation that an actualised European utopia is virtually impossible: "Yet I confess there

---

[12]   P. Albert Duhamel, "Medievalism of More's *Utopia*", in Sylvester and Marc'hadour (eds.), *Essential Articles*, pp. 234-50.
[13]   See Shlomo Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", *International Review of Social History* 7, (1962), pp. 260-90, for an extended interrogation of *Utopia*'s imperialist motivations.
[14]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 59-60, 69.

are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that I wish our own country would imitate — though *I don't really expect it will*."[15] The regressive radicalism of *The Praise of Folly* is closer to plebeian consciousness and aspirations, universal in scope, yet its inward-looking renunciatory programme fails to forward any concrete resolution. The ordered, regimented, utilitarian, hierarchic Utopian polity by contrast, offers no respite from work but proposes revolutionary *material* transformation of the socio-economic composition of the state.

The initial vernacularisation of *Utopia* ought to be scrutinised for further clues to the ambiguous and changing intent and impact of the text. Erasmus's reluctance to ally himself to any dogma enabled posterity to project him as a proto-Protestant if they so desired. Robinson, the first translator of *Utopia*, had undertaken the much more dangerous task of assimilating the work of a renowned Catholic martyr within a Protestant canon. He achieves his purpose by disjuncting More's "wilful and stubborn obstinacy" in religion from his work *Utopia* which "containeth [matter] fruitful and profitable ... style pleasant and delectable."[16] He eschews his responsibility somewhat by enlarging upon the "barbarous rudeness" of his translation and the persuasive power of "honest citizen" Tadlowe who cajoled him into printing and "must take upon him the danger which upon this bold and rash enterprise shall ensue." He further invokes the "safe conduct" of Cecil's protection and pre-empts detractors by labelling them as men of "fond and corrupt judgement."[17] On the positive side Robinson urges "the good and wholesome lessons" that *Utopia* could provide for the "advancement and commodity of the public wealth of ... his native country."[18]

Baker details the topical radicalising impulse behind Robinson's endeavour. This early translator boldly interpolates the phrase "godly government" in the title of Book 2 of *Utopia* (1551) which is replaced by "politic government" in the more conservative political atmosphere of 1556 when the second edition of the translation was published. There is a corresponding shift in the translator's identity from "citizen and Goldsmythe of London" to "sometyme fellowe of

---

15   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 85, emphasis added.
16   Prefatory Letter in Thomas More, *Utopia*, (tr.) Ralph Robinson, Everyman edition, 1910; London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1951, pp. 2-3.
17   Prefatory Letter, in More, *Utopia*, (tr.) Ralph Robinson, pp. 3-4.
18   Prefatory Letter, in More, *Utopia*, (tr.) Ralph Robinson, pp. 3, 2.

Corpus Christi college" of gentle extract. These minor relocations not withstanding, Baker argues, Robinson's free translation is directed at endorsing as an applicable exemplum, the egalitarian communistic ethos of Utopian society and at popularising More's *Utopia*. Moreover, against the backdrop of the 1549 rebellion directed at enclosures and social superiors in Cornwall and Norfolk, Robinson's unabridged and more specific re-rendering of More's sympathetic portrayal of the 1497 Cornish rebellion, invests the 1551 vernacular version of Latin *Utopia* with "resonances that More [himself] would have abhorred."[19] Thus, because of its timing and the translator's bias, the earliest English rendition (1551) seems to acquire greater radical force than its original. However, the anglicisation of *Utopia* rolls off the ground with the serio-comic story of Diogenes with which Robinson begins his Prefatory Letter. The paradigm of the redundant philosopher during a national emergency and his ridiculous efforts to prove useful by "tumbling the tub" adds a ludicrous touch to the entire process and positions Robinson in a relationship with More's text that duplicates More's own relationship to Hythloday's narrative.[20] The playful ambiguity of their positions – Robinson/ More/ Morus/ Hythloday's contribution to the social process is perhaps as futile as that of Diogenes – masks the serious mission of the narrative. This deliberate safeguard against hostile authoritarian intervention and possible censorship is exploited to the hilt by the traditionalists intent on diffusing the subversive angularities of a work well incorporated in the highly respectable English canon. Thus C. S. Lewis's dismissal of *Utopia* as "a holiday work ... which starts many hares and kills none" merely prefigures more subtle endeavours at de-politicising *Utopia* in more recent times.[21]

But More did start something more dangerous than timid hares and was in deadly earnest about exposing them. This is evident from the function to which the parerga is put in the early editions of the book and from the actual process of composing *Utopia* wherein Book 2 preceded the composition of Book 1. More solicited comments from his humanist friends prior to the publication and included them in printed form from the very first publication of *Utopia*. The

---

[19]　David Weil Baker, "Topical Utopias", pp. 6, 4-5, 17-18. The Everyman edition of More, *Utopia*, (tr.) Ralph Robinson, used for citation of Robinson's Prefatory Letter in this article manifests closer affinity to the 1556 version and consequently does not register the nuances detected by Baker.

[20]　Prefatory Letter, in More, *Utopia*, (tr.) Ralph Robinson, p.1 *ff.*

[21]　C. S. Lewis, *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1954, p. 169.

1516 Louvain edition includes Peter Giles's letter to Jerome Busleydon; John Desmarais's letter and verses written by him and two other humanists; Busleydon's letter to More followed finally by More's famous letter to Giles prefixed to *Utopia* proper. The 1517 Paris edition expanded the existing parerga by adding two more letters – one from Guillaume Budé to Thomas Lupset and a second letter from More to Giles. To the two 1518 Basil editions was prefixed the written recommendation of Erasmus though some of the earlier letters were omitted. These were interspersed by fictional maps, alphabets and verses from the land of Utopia accentuating the element of play.[22] The interplay of *realistic* fantasy and actual recommendations denotes ambiguous apprehensions regarding reader-response. The fictional appendages highlighting the playful element serve to deflect unwelcome close-quarter scrutiny by the censoring authorities. They simultaneously docket the anxious, almost unhappy anticipation by the author of an enthusiastic reaction to the work.

The recommendations similarly engage in the dual role of wooing the reader and adding the weight of considered eminent public opinion favourable to *Utopia*. More seems both afraid yet desirous of a positive, serious response to his own creation. He evades yet indirectly acknowledges the responsibility of controlling and directing reader-response. Through his eminent friends, More draws attention in the prefatory material to the major concerns of his work – the excellence of the Utopian commonwealth; the interrelation between public and private interests; the contrast between a harmonious, equalitarian Utopia and a disharmonious, acquisitive Europe, particularly England; and as Budé suggests, the possibility of using the Utopian structure as a corrective exemplum. The marginalia, contributed probably by Giles and Erasmus, place a continued emphasis on the use of Utopian ideal as a critical apparatus for judging contemporary society. Giles and Budé, both question the credibility of Hythloday's narrative, thus re-invoking the issue of *fictional* rendering. However Giles's stress on More's interpretative powers and imaginative skills reinforces no less assertively, the relation between More and his creation and the critical intent behind the literary endeavour.[23] Logan cautions us about the

---

[22] Surtz and Hexter were the first to include the entire parerga in their Yale edition (1965) of *Utopia*. For a more expanded discussion see R. S. Sylvester, "'Si Hythlodaeo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's *Utopia*", in Sylvester and Marc'hadour (eds.), *Essential Articles*, pp. 290-301, 293. A sample of some of the letters is found in More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 109-33.

[23] *Thomas More: Complete Works*, vol. 4, (eds.) Surtz and Hexter, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, pp. 39-41, 11-13, 23.

blindness of humanist enthusiasts of *Utopia*, particularly Budé. But the fact that it was perceived by all of them as a "book that embodies their own social and religious ideal"[24] testifies that the elite circle for whose consumption *Utopia* was intended, identified it as serious reform-oriented literature. More helped to sustain this impression by prefacing their *informed* opinion to his work.

The nature of serious application becomes more focused as one pursues the genetics of composition. Erasmus's letter of 1519 which informs us that Book 2 of *Utopia* predates Book 1 leads one to surmise that More felt the need to provide a specific English context to his Outopia/Eutopia.[25] Recalling Marius's reminder about the ironic disparity between the circumstances of *Utopia*'s composition and its idealist aspirations, one might puzzle over the writer's personal motive in engendering such a work. But whatever the individual impulse – guilt, indirect confession, hypocrisy, sheer blindness – the socio-political critique of European civilisation, mainly England, written after Book 2 and prefixed to it, is an obvious indication of More's desire to foreground his ideal terrain against a specific historical context. As no insidious ambivalence is evident in the satiric exposure through specific instances of corrupt, self-aggrandising authority in Book 1, the premise that this serious critique of contemporary England was written with the sole purpose of introducing a farcical fantasy-land seems highly unconvincing. It is more likely that More was consciously pre-empting just such a possibility of misreading his fictive world as a mythical absolute divested of historical contingencies and instead suggesting obliquely the Utopian model (the emphasis is on suggesting) as a *corrective guideline* for a currently malfunctioning power structure.

The contrasting reception accorded the book in different ages exemplifies paradoxically, its subversive rather than its playful ambience. According to Sylvester, the first German (1524), Italian (1548) and Spanish (1637) translations of *Utopia* excluded the whole of Book 1, presenting Book 2 as the complete text of *Utopia*.[26] But it is not merely, as Sylvester suggests, an enthusiasm for new worlds contiguous to the European discovery of hitherto

---

[24]   George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 3-4.

[25]   Erasmus to Ulrich von Hutton, in *The Epistles of Erasmus*, 3 vols., (tr.), Francis Morgan Nichols, London: Longman and Green, 1901-18; vol. 3, ep. 585B, p. 398. See also the convincing elaboration upon this fact and the presentation of *Utopia* as a kind of literary patchwork in Hexter, *More's Utopia*, pp. 16-30.

[26]   Sylvester, " 'Si Hythlodaeo Credimus' ", p. 291. For bibliographical details of these vernacular editions see nos. 34, 37 and 44 of R. W. Gibson compiled *St. Thomas More: A Preliminary Bibliography of His Works and of Moreana to the Year 1750* compiled, with a bibliography of *Utopiana* by R. W. Gibson and J. Max Patrick, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 45, 48, 56-57. Gibson and Patrick however mention the fact of omission only in relation to the Spanish translation.

unexplored regions.[27] In a Europe dominated by expansionist rulers and religious strife it would be diplomatically naive, even suicidal to indulge in an unrelenting exposure of the lapses of a foreign country specially at the administrative level, unless there were strong political incentives for doing so. The very act of omission acknowledges the translator's fear of being embroiled in hazardous political controversies. For the modern critic, condemnation of specific sixteenth century English or European malpractices is 'dead' history. But against today's background of complex cultural, ideological, political and territorial conflict between the forces of capitalism and communism and the ascendancy of the former since the 1990s, any unequivocal censure of private property and the model of an ideal state operating through collective control and slavery does pose serious problems for both camps. The obsessive preoccupation with Book 2 and the recent efforts to read it as an oscillating text whose indeterminacy per se constitutes radicalism and which incidentally suits the appropriating endeavours of all and sundry is in actuality the de-politicisation and de-historicisation of More's *Utopia* for propagandist purposes. More's decision to use Book 1 as a pre-text to Book 2 testifies that the creation of a utopian realm is a negative response to the world of our own ordinary experience. As John Freeman affirms, "The concept of *Utopia* as a game whose sole object is the wild, clicking movement of meaning between complexly arrayed rhetorical bumpers is a trivialization of the text more in line with modern day than Renaissance modes of experience."[28]

Utopia should be located within the humanist discourse on improved secular and spiritual existence and interpreted as an intellectually committed effort on the part of More to take a stand regarding the state of things. The rearrangement of the order of composition in the published format suggests an integral connection between the two books. Any overemphasis on one at the expense of the other will lead us astray from the text's meaning and betray our own limitations. Drawing upon, yet breaking through the barriers of medieval social satire, More's *Utopia* imitates the literary device of double perspective with its explicit comparison between the real and the illusory. But as Knapp claims, this phenomenon of *other worldliness* in sixteenth century English literature is also a cultural re-situating and re-channelling of the thwarted imperialist aspirations

---

[27]   Sylvester, " 'Si Hythlodaeo Credimus' ", p. 291.
[28]   Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia* ", p. 307.

experienced by the English during the early stages of colonisation.[29] The paradoxical ambiguities of the text – the overlapping of Outopia/ Eutopia, of Raphael "the healer of God" and Hythloday "the speaker of nonsense" – are intentional; deriving from the highly sophisticated but enigmatic mode of self-deprecatory self-advertisement frequently resorted to by humanists, particularly Erasmus. But they are symptomatic of a deeper confusion. It is the inevitable paradox of a text with a broad mass-based concern directed at an extremely limited and elite audience; of an author whose class connections and private interests conflict with his ideological vision; of the craving for a communist commonwealth fostered at least partially by nascent imperialism. The very contradiction, the preoccupation with self-shaping and nationhood and the quiet but definite discarding of religious referential (seven deadly sins etc.) invests the work with a singularly modern sensibility which still manages to echo the anxieties of the present-day individual and the state. With More's *Utopia*, the English critical apparatus for measuring social maladies makes the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Utopia is also England, just as Morus is also Hythloday; but one must admit the host of ambivalent possibilities embedded in the word 'also'. The reading of *Utopia* as a political text, reinforced by subsequent textual interpretation, disassociates one from the conspiracy of "keeping *Utopia* outside the bounds of the known world" which Helgerson believes, "has been a major political enterprise for the last four and a half centuries."[30] Improving upon the framed-tale format generally associated with *Utopia*, Freeman invokes the paradigm of enclosure to chart the complex relationship between More's England and Utopia as "alibi", "pretext" and "postscript."[31] The attitude to the historical phenomenon of enclosure recorded in Book 1 has long been considered one of the most potent literary challenges directed at status quo and many of the statements have justifiably been imprinted permanently in common memory. The comment on sheep "that used to be so meek and eat so little" but have now "become so greedy and wild that they devour men themselves" is an obvious instance.[32] The inflammatory rhetoric of Book 1 echoes strikingly, the

---

[29] Jeffrey Knapp, *An Empire Nowhere: England, America and Literature from Utopia to The Tempest*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

[30] Richard Helgerson, "Inventing Noplace, or the Power of Negative Thinking", cited in Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*, p. 307.

[31] Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*", p. 289-311.

[32] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 12.

incendiary language of insurrection before and after his time. The following extracts from the fourteenth century peasant leader John Ball, More, and Leveller W. P. Gent, despite being addressed to distinctly disparate audiences of different centuries, are closely alike in their focus and mode of articulation:

What have we deserved, or why should we be kept thus in servage? We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve: whereby can they [i.e., lords and noblemen] say or show that they be greater lords than we be.... They are clothed in velvet and camlet furred with grise, and we be vestured with poor cloth. They have their wines, spices and good bread, and we have the drawing out of the chaff, and drink water. They dwell in fair houses, and we have the pain and travail, rain and wind in the fields; and by that that cometh of our labours they keep and maintain their estates (Ball, 1381).

Thus one greedy, insatiable glutton, a frightful plague to his native country, may enclose many thousand acres of land within a single hedge. The tenants are dismissed and compelled, by trickery of brute force or constant harassment, to sell their belongings. By hook or crook, these miserable people — men, women, husbands, wives, orphans, widows, parents with little children, whole families (poor but numerous, since farming requires many hands) — are forced to move out. They leave the only homes familiar to them, and they can find no place to go. Since they cannot afford to wait for a buyer, they sell for a pittance all their household goods which would not bring much in any case. When that little money is gone ... what remains for them but to steal, and so be hanged — justly, you'd say! — or to wander and beg? And ... if they go tramping, they are jailed as sturdy beggars (More, 1516).

The King, Parliament, great men in the City and Army, have made you but the stairs by which they have mounted to Honour, Wealth and Power. The only Quarrel that hath been, and at present is but this, namely, whose slaves the people shall be. All the power that ... [they] hath, was but a trust conveyed from you to them ... they have mis-employed their power, and instead of preserving you, have destroyed you.... (Gent, 1648)[33]

---

[33] Jean Froissart, *The Cronicles of Jean Froissart*, Lord Berner (tr.), Gillian and William Anderson (eds.), Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963, p. 161; More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 12; W. P. Gent, "The Bloody Project", in A. L. Morton (ed.), *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings*, Berlin: Seven Seas, 1975, pp. 165-79, p. 178. The third person address and the mediation of the fictional narrator Hythloday however, does give More's critical analysis an indirect and a descriptive touch. Ball's words are similarly mediated by his chronicler, Froissart, an eminent statesman of noble lineage.

Severed from its context, the above passage from *Utopia* could very well be mis-located within the tradition of seditious literature that holds the empowered squarely responsible for the wretched condition of the masses. The disturbing closeness in language and emphasis between an erudite humanist treatise and genuinely rebellious proclamations illustrate the extent to which *vox populi* could wrest for itself a site within elite discourse in times of momentous transition. The disruptive agency of Hythloday's anti-enclosure arguments is contained by framing it in Latin for a selective dispersal and subversive protest is seemingly appropriated by the very forces against whom it is directed. And yet, a dialogic field of discordance and resistance is fostered by the uncompromising critique of status quo in Book 1 which defeats such restraining strategies.

Despite the highly rarefied coterie of readership, the application of an analytical apparatus that interrogates the relatedness of major social maladies and traces them to the aggressive individualism of the empowered, does foster discomfiting self-reflection. Enclosure is projected as a hydra-headed monster causing dislocation, pauperisation, depopulation, constriction of employment avenues, inflation, dearth of corn and cattle, famine and intensive criminal activity at the petty level. No abstract vice but the specific commercial activity of large scale sheep-rearing taken up by noblemen, gentlemen and abbots and the monopoly over market by a few rich men are held responsible for the economic and social destabilisation of the realm. They are an "oligopoly" who "are never pressed to sell until they have a mind to, and that is only when they can get their price".[34] For the closed coterie at least, many of whom were successful wool merchants like More's friend Antonio Bonvisi, More's relentless logicality precipitates an unflattering self-scrutiny. His astute identification of profit-oriented, manipulative market control as the rudiment of mercantile economy implicates his own circle as the most destructive force in the nation. As More's investigation of the English enclosure system illustrates, all his analytical forays culminate in the paradoxical resolution: the shaping of a new and more humane state is dependent upon the self-cancellation of those who have the power to conceptualise and usher in this regenerated national identity. Thus, much before the juncture demarcated by Fox and in a very different manner, More exposes "the deep-seated fracture" at the heart of the Christian humanist reform. It is not, as Fox concludes, the incompatibility of the

---

[34]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 13.

rational absolutism of Utopia and fallible human nature that turns More towards an interrogation of the efficacy of Erasmian humanism and the ultimate rejection of the Utopian ideal.[35] Far from negating the Utopian model, More adopts it to escape the inevitable suicidal self-exploration involved in any impartial, objective scrutiny of the existing status quo.

Utopia therefore, is not *parasitus*, that is, a marginal replica of England or a manifestation of the desired but unrealised England, but a *locus* for re-situating and re-constructing More and his model state (England) so as to allow them a second chance of survival. The rejuvenation is accomplished through structural parallels and contrasts between England and the imaginary world. Freeman reminds us of the frequently over-looked analogy between English enclosure movement and peasant eviction and King Utopus's expropriation of Abraxians to "enclose" and create (through disconnecting) the "island" of Utopia.[36] The impoverishing, negative effect of English enclosures is posited against the constructive, beneficial impact of Utopia's enclosure by sea. By emphasising the purpose (which is different) rather than the process (which is the same) of the two enclosures, this form of consolidation through expropriation is legitimised in the Utopian context. Utopus is made to mimic and de-sensitise this abhorrent historical process by repairing the theft of commons (English) through their restoration and communal ownership (Utopian) and by offering re-population and prosperity instead of the usual enclosure-related depopulation. Freeman interprets this projection of a mythical improving enclosure as "an appropriation not only of a fictive territory but also of the dominant ideology that book 2 transforms and seeks to subvert".[37] According to him, it initiates a more balanced transaction between dominant ideology and marginal discourses.[38]

Similarly, the alien instances of Polylerites, Anchorites and Macarians, exemplify through inverted analogy, the self-aggrandising, rapacious, incompetent rule of English and French monarchs who have little regard for their subjects' welfare.[39] The corrective analogy of the Other worlds,

---

[35] Alistair Fox, *Literature and Politics in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 96-106. For an earlier version of similar ideas see Fox, "English Humanism and the Body Politic", pp. 37-38.

[36] Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*", p. 290.

[37] Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*", p. 294.

[38] Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia*", p. 290.

[39] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 15-17, 20-26.

particularly the insistence on the power of public opinion to mould and restrict royal prerogative, comes perilously close to challenging the socio-political structure of the leading European nations, specially France and England. The constant alternating of the familiar and the remote locales imposes a kind of spatial limitation over the known world and circumscribes the official attitudes to war, territorial aggrandisement and penal system with sharply varying marginalised perceptions of the same. Hythloday's critique of *king's wars* that send home "too badly crippled" soldiers unable "to follow their old trades, and too old to learn new ones", his condemnation of the several forms of disbandment that force retrenched servants to "starving, unless they set about stealing" or drive the dispossessed "to the awful necessity of stealing and then dying for it", and his denouncement of laws intent upon "first making them thieves and then punishing them for it", undoubtedly articulates the opinion of the disempowered.[40] However, despite such commonsensical and obvious affinities with the sensibilities of the have-nots, the marginalised nature of Hythloday's discourse is underscored by situating it within a dialogic format where counter-opinion is expressed by a lawyer, the officially endorsed upholder of justice.

The immediate narrative which frames Hythloday's criticism of European government embodies complex nuances. Within the orbit of power, Hythloday's is the voice of insanity: it is absolutely ineffectual unless ratified by supreme authority (in this context Morton). Also, neither the supreme authority nor the entrenched intermediaries will alter the course of history on the basis of his, i. e., an outsider's suggestion. Nevertheless, textual strategies such as using Cardinal Morton's casting vote in favour of Hythloday, forcing the guests to simulate a reversal of response and the centring the lonely voice denotes an authorial preference for marginalised perception of social maladies over dominant ideological explanations. Hythloday's location in the fictional milieu reflects that of his creator in real life: both are effecting a disbalancement from within by disrupting the norms of decorous behaviour. Hythloday, an invited guest, can either endorse the prevailing opinion at the banquet or maintain a discreet silence. Instead he chooses to actively dispel the ambience of collective harmony and well-being by introducing a discordant, jarring note. More, 'included' among the power elite – virtually *invited* because of his abilities – toys in the text, with several options of decorous response available to him but

---

[40]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 10, 14.

at this precise juncture his voice merges with Hythloday's to point an incriminating finger towards his own circle. Thus the pursuit of truth leads both the character and his creator to a breach of decorum and more dangerously, to the necessity of self-cancellation.

The radical subversiveness of the social critique presented in Book 1, is not extended in every detail to Book 2. Avineri, tabulating the non-ideal aspects of Utopian existence, focuses on slavery, war, diplomacy, mercenaries, foreign trade etc.[41] Elucidating the imperialist nature of Utopian warfare which aims at extending military, political and economic hegemony over other nations, Avineri comments that it is "rather difficult to square with *any* notion of an ideal society".[42] The obvious disparity between the two sets of laws, one operating within and for Utopians and the other for non-Utopians, is explained by Avineri through the paradox of "perfectionism".[43] Projecting itself as a community of the elect, Utopia perceives itself as having acquired the right to shape the moral and material destiny of other nations. The unequal transaction between Utopia and non-Utopian countries can be contextualised within a colonialist ideology but it problematises the reading of Utopia as an ideal state. Is *Utopia* a cleverly constructed dystopia? Is Book 2 an ingenuous denunciation of all remedial efforts? Does the entire text operate at the level of farcical fantasy, un-illuminated by any serious intent? The widely divergent critical responses of Perlette, Fox and Lewis testify that such conjectures are not entirely hypothetical.[44]

Any endeavour to resolve these problematic issues must look to the historical contingencies that shaped the utopian literature of Renaissance England. Knapp's surmise that the "contrarily idealised" no-wheres are imaginative displacements and inversions of thwarted imperialist aspirations[45] is directly applicable to Utopia's expansionist manoeuvres. However, it is equally pertinent to the genesis of Utopia as an island: it was physically created by severing the fifteen miles of isthmus connecting it with the mainland and by re-naming the territory formerly called Abraxa in accordance with the name of the conquering king Utopus who transformed both the land and "brought its rude

---

[41]   Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", pp. 260-64.

[42]   Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", pp. 260, emphasis added.

[43]   Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", pp. 287-89.

[44]   Perlette, "Of Sites and Parasites"; Fox, "English Humanism and the Body Politic" and *Politics and Literature*; Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*.

[45]   Knapp, *An Empire Nowhere*, pp. 260.

and uncouth inhabitants to ... a high level of culture and humanity"![46] It is an ideal 'colony', and therefore an ideal 'state'. New, unfamiliar territory must be requisitioned to begin anew, for the known world is corrupt beyond redemption. The erasure of pre-colonial past and de-historicisation thus, is the essential precondition for rejuvenation. Such a construct of colony legitimises imperialist ambitions and simultaneously encourages renewal of individual and collective identity.

De-linking from history opens up numerous possibilities. It releases More from the self-cancelling self-exploration inevitable within the English context and replaces the guilt of corrupting a nation with the responsibility of building a new one. It is noteworthy that even at the conceptual level, More survives self-annihilating self-scrutiny not by reforming himself but by dismantling the old state structure and replacing it with an entirely new model. It illustrates both the limitation and the audacity of the shapers of national destiny. Unable and unwilling to de-class, i. e., reform themselves, they would rather re-mould the collective identity within which they are positioned. More important, they have the potential to effect such transformation. More's *Utopia* therefore, is essentially self-centered, bounded by national and secular parameters. It deliberately disassociates itself from the universal moral context within which the more traditional *Praise of Folly* operates. More is primarily interested in the rejuvenation of the state and its inhabitants; entire humanity is not his concern. The most distinctive shortcoming of Utopia in fact, is that it resembles no other state. Discriminatory behaviour towards foreigners is moulded by this self-obsessed insularity. Utopia's prime and ultimate concern is narcissist: all interaction with the outside world is directed and vindicated by its own need. This uniqueness and self-containment lend to Utopian world a concrete, material, pragmatic ambience, not found in the more diffused conventional social criticism of the day. The separateness is not an obliteration of all temporal connections. Disjunction from history is more specifically a deliberate discontinuity with the past in order to create a new history. Utopia thus, is born out of More's English experience and the delinking from history is the strongest affirmation of this connection.

Once the self-referential mode of Utopian existence is contextualised, the positive aspects of dismantling the old set up and building anew come to the

---

[46]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 31.

fore. More's contribution to the literature of social criticism lies in the introduction of structural rather than moral concepts and in identifying the intrinsic relationship between the individual and the state. Individual metamorphosis can be achieved primarily through a transformation of the collective social relations with which a person engages. In the process More also discovers the most effective model of moral regulation: deviant human propensities can be best neutralised by locating them within a structure that renders such propensities inoperative. The corollary to this theoretical breakthrough is the imaginative construction of a 'contrarily idealised' society that reverses the norms of empowerment. The shifts from and correspondences with old England are highly significant – hierarchy remains but it functions on the basis of moral and intellectual superiority, not primogeniture or birthright; utilitarian bias replaces the emphasis on status; and community receives priority over the individual. Within its limited scope, Utopia is truly equalitarian but its exclusion of non-conformism in public, private, moral, social or religious behaviour is as uncompromising as that of Tudor absolutism.[47]

The non-evolutionary,[48] regimented totalitarianism so unacceptable to Greenblatt[49] is perhaps occasioned by More's deep-seated conviction regarding man's irrevocably fallen nature. More's pessimistic views on human fallibility have led him to devise unrelenting strictures that will allow minimal free-play to individual will. Such an assumption strengthens the neo-Catholic conclusion that "*Utopia* does not represent More's own ideal,' but a rational-secular *Vernunftstaat*, intrinsically imperfect".[50] But it is equally likely that more personal considerations motivate the standardisation. The scrutiny of English maladies has identified 'new men' like More as the arch enemies of the state. To re-situate these men in the commonwealth and to eliminate their dynamic destructive potential, More needs to advocate the most stringent measures of collective conformity. The conceptualisation of Utopia, is for More, an exercise in self-regulation that extends far beyond the debate between More's public and

---

[47] See for example, the Utopian attitude to unlicensed travel, bondmen, marital infidelity and atheists. More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 44-45, 59, 60-62, 74-75.

[48] For an elaboration of the concept of Utopia as "an achieved state" rather than a continuously perfecting one, see Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", pp. 287-89.

[49] Greenblatt perceives "the steady constriction of an initially limitless freedom" in all facets of Utopian existence. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 40.

[50] Avineri, "War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*", p. 284. For ingenious extensions of the same argument see Alan F. Nagel, "Lies and the Limitable Inane: Contradiction in More's *Utopia*", *Renaissance Quarterly* 26.2, (1973), 173-80; Bradshaw, "More on *Utopia*", and Perlette, "Of Sites and Parasites".

private persona which critics see embedded in the Morus-Hythloday dialogue. A significant factor about the emergence of the new state is often overlooked, especially by the detractors of Hythloday: the new model is aptly suited for the empowerment of people like More. The shift of emphasis from birthright to superior morality, intelligence and utility enhances their chances of occupying the driver's seat which is impossible in the English context. It is not entirely irrelevant that More daydreams of being forever the king of Utopia. He writes to Erasmus,

You have no idea how I jump for joy, how tall I have grown, how I hold up my head, when a vision comes before my eyes, that *my Utopians* have made me their perpetual sovereign. I seem already to be marching along, crowned with a diadem of wheat, conspicuous in a Greyfriar's cloak, and carrying for a sceptre a few ears of corn.[51]

Self-promotion is evidently the obverse side of self-regulation. Utopia is thus the imaginary site for the fulfilment of dual aspirations: that of colonial England and of Saint/King Thomas More. And yet even this dream of ruling over a land and people that have abolished monarchy is as absurd and self-defeating as Gonzalo's desire in *The Tempest* to lord over *his* commonwealth: it will purportedly have "no name of magistrate", "[n]o sovereignty" and yet he shall have the "plantation of this isle" which he "would with such perfection govern" that is shall "excel the Golden Age"! (2.1.144-68).[52] Paradoxically, this places both More and Gonzalo in an antagonistic relationship to their commonwealth and re-enforces the Outopia/Eutopia dichotomy: the ideal collective can be achieved only at the expense of their royal aspirations and vice versa.

The above discussion merely contextualises the historical and other contingencies that shape *Utopia*, it is not intended to reduce the work to a literary encapsulation of the acquisitive aspirations of emergent authority. Such a narrow view cannot explain satisfactorily the apprehensions of the conservatives or the proprietary enthusiasm of the socialists regarding the text. The key to this enigma lies in the self-referential world of *Utopia*. As stated earlier, Utopia incorporates in its functioning, perceptions and practices directly

---

[51] *The Epistles of Erasmus*, vol. 2, (tr.), Nichols, no. 486, p. 443. The repetition of "my" shows that if reality denies More the realisation of his ambition, he will create a fantasy world to accommodate them.

[52] Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Shakespeare's works are from Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard eds. *The Norton Shakespeare Based on The Oxford Shakespeare.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

antithetical to those found in European societies. The insistence on leisure that hinges on the compulsory participation of every citizen in productive work is a doubly subversive concept. It implicitly projects as a negative contrast, the unequal, exploitative social machinery of the English commonwealth and, simultaneously forwards a solution extremely discomfiting to the "great lazy gang of priests ... [the] gentlemen and nobility ... their retainers, that mob of swaggering bullies" who "live idly like drones off the labour of others ... whom they bleed white."[53] The priority decreed for the sick, infirm and weak in terms of food, care and sanitary shelter[54] is antinomic to the English administrative attitude which considered hospitals as trash removal sites where the poor causing "infection and annoyance" could be dumped.[55] The elimination of superfluity and the minimisation of differential lifestyle in public and private spheres offered to the contemporary reader the contrasting association of numerous sumptuary and dress regulations that endorsed social disparity. They further debunk Tudor statecraft's conscious adoption of the strategy of ostentatious display to enhance monarchical authority.[56]

The absence of unwieldy legislation in the administrative infrastructure of *Utopia* is a more serious thrust at demystifying the legitimising props of established order. The legal system has traditionally been a coercive instrument in the hands of the empowered and the complex mechanism of law has remained both opaque and suspect for the common man. The official equation between law and fair play has always enabled entrenched authority to pose as the disseminator of justice and to validate its utilisation of the legal apparatus for self-consolidation. The spate of new statues during the Tudor regime is not only a response to the changing social reality; it also exemplifies a fledgling authority's efforts to extend its portals of power. In sixteenth century England, the legal system was increasingly identified by the commoners as an exploitative device requisitioned by the articulate. Plebeian awareness of this phenomenon is evidenced by the fact that twelve out of the thirty five popular uprisings between 1581 and 1602 were directed against misadministration of

---

[53]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 38, 10.
[54]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 42, 60.
[55]   C. H. Williams, ed., *English Historical Documents*, Vol. 5, 1485-1558, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971, pp. 1038-39.
[56]   The complex irony involved in More's critical renunciation of ceremonial display is brilliantly explored by Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 11-22.

justice and four were specifically aimed against lawyers.[57] The persistence of this popular perception regarding the judicial system is seen as late as the 1590s when Shakespeare makes the leader of plebeian uprising, Jack Cade, identify Lord Say as a representative of the ruling class and accuse him of appointing, "justices of peace, to call poor men before them about matters they were not able to answer. Moreover, thou hast put them in prison, and because they could not read, thou has hanged them" (2 *Henry VI*, 4.7.34-36). It is indeed "lamentable" that "parchment, being scribbled o'er" and sealed with "bee's wax" also "*seal[s]*" the fate of man (2 *Henry VI*, 4.2.79-73, emphasis added).

When discerning voices within dominant ideology express similar views more cogently and denounce law's manipulative intent, the threatening prospect of marginal discourse displacing and subsuming dominant discourse became imminent. Montaigne's expertise as a lawyer forces him to admit that laws are "the mysticall foundation of ... authority" made "by men, who in hatred of equality, have want of equity."[58] The inevitable consequence is that, "There is nothing so grossely and largely offending, nor so ordinarily wronging as the Lawes."[59] More's equally disillusioned assessment of "nations ... that, even with infinite volume of laws and interpretations ... cannot manage their affairs properly"[60] further exposes law's inadequacy as an ordering device. Such confirmation of the total inefficacy of the judicial system issuing from one of the most successful legal practitioners of the day drastically undermines the projected image of law as a neutral, inviolate system of divine origin and identifies it as a political and ideological expedient mystifying the masses: "They ... bind men by a set of laws that are too many to be read and too obscure for anyone to understand."[61] More has already advanced a step further in Book 1 with his disclosure of the essential connection between competitive possessiveness and ever expanding legal systems that result in unequal social formations: "Different men lay claim, successively or all at once, to the same property; and thus arise innumerable and interminable lawsuits — fresh ones everyday."[62] Utopians need few laws as everything is held in common and so

---

[57] Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England 1509-1640*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 187.

[58] Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, (tr.), John Florio, vol. 3, London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1910; "Of Experience", p. 331.

[59] Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 331.

[60] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 63.

[61] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 63.

[62] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 28.

they "have no use" for lawyers whom they brand as "a class of men whose trade it is to manipulate cases and multiply quibbles."[63] The irony of self-negation through a condemnation of his own legal profession is predicated upon a complete rupture of the traditional association between legal practice and equitable distribution, which brings the reader face to face with the most revolutionary concept propounded in the text — the abolition of private property as the pre-requisite for good governance:

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. As long as private property remains, by far the largest and best part of mankind will be oppressed by a heavy and an inescapable burden of cares and anxieties.[64]

Duhamel, attempting to locate *Utopia* within the medieval scholastic tradition, regards the abolition of private property as incidental to the logical structure of the work: "an obvious inference from basic principal."[65] Hexter however, rightly surmises that it is the most crucial issue in *Utopia*.[66] This is corroborated not only by the critical response to *Utopia* over the ages that predominantly focuses on this aspect but also by the text itself.[67] Book 1, that serves as a postscript preface to Book 2, acquaints the reader/listener with Utopia by drawing attention to its superior social organisation, "everything is shared equally, and all men live in plenty."[68] And this introductory reference is situated within Hythloday's elaboration of the antinomy between private possession and "weal-public" which is elaborated in Book 2 as a consequence of collective production and consumption: "there is an abundance of everything, as a result of everyone working at useful trades, and nobody consuming to excess."[69] Similarly, after a lengthy survey of Utopian administration, work pattern, religion, family structures, morality etc., the text reverts to the discussion of the connection between private ownership and commonwealth.[70] In "the various commonwealths flourishing" in his day, Hythloday perceives "nothing ... but a

---

[63]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 63.
[64]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 28.
[65]   Duhamel, "Medievalism of More's *Utopia*", p. 245.
[66]   Hexter, *More's Utopia*, pp. 56-62.
[67]   Budé and Busleydon's letters attached to the first edition of *Utopia* (1516) by Thierry Martens foreground the absence of private property in their enthusiastic approval of the text. Hexter, *More's Utopia*, pp. 44-46; More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 115-22.
[68]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, p. 28.
[69]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 28, 40.
[70]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 82-83.

conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth."[71] The textual *enclosure* of the Utopian society with reflections on money economy and common good is a consciously devised strategy for emphasising the centrality of this issue in *Utopia*.

If Utopia is taken to be an exemplar, then the first step towards an ideal commonwealth is the complete dis-functionalisation of money. As Hexter observes, the Utopians escape all the problems afflicting European societies, "not because they are naturally better than other men, but because their fundamental law — their *police*, to use a contemporary French equivalent — destroys not merely money itself, but the very utility of money."[72] More is unique in being able to detect, almost in the initial stages of nascent capitalism, two vital components in its make-up. The first is the shift from land to money as the source of empowerment. It is a transfer rarely diagnosed even by later social critics and often garbled by the rhetoric of moral indignation directed at human greed and covetousness. Second, More identifies the change as an impersonal socio-economic revolution, only partially dependent on human agency. Consequently his accent is upon reforming the socio-economic pattern, not the human beings subject to it.

The essential corollary to a non-monetary set-up is collectivisation, hence the prevalence of communal ownership and obligatory labour in Utopia. These obvious socialist ingredients have encouraged partisans like Kautsky to designate More as the formulator of theoretical socialism advocating an "alternative mode of production" as the means of transforming society.[73] But, as Greenblatt has more recently illustrated, More's de-privatisation is infinitely more sophisticated and complex than that suggested by Kautsky.[74] Criticism from within that proposes economic redistribution and material equality is subversive, even revolutionary, in the context of an absolutist state. Its incendiary potential is accentuated by its easy alignment with plebeian articulations of discontent that frequently revert to the concept of primitive, agrarian (and Christian) communism for redress. Utopia's shared society of plenty therefore, embraces the dreams of the peripheralised. But the communal ethos prevailing in Utopia that collapses public/private distinctions, extends beyond economic considerations to a de-personalisation of the self. The dismissal of "the elaborate ideology of status and custom that provided a time-

---

[71]   More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 83.
[72]   Hexter, *More's Utopia*, p. 60.
[73]   Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and his Utopia*, 1927; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979, p. 161.
[74]   Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 33-58.

honoured justification for the unequal distribution of wealth in society"[75] is accompanied by an equally comprehensive social framing of identity. The enforcement of conformity through the internal operation of shame and external incentive of public acclaim; the imposition of uniformity in eating, housing, clothing; the standardisation of the avenues of self-expression and personal gratification are all geared towards minimising individuation. Collective endorsement displaces profit orientation as the motivator of human action. Under the circumstances, privacy is not a desired condition but a hindrance to self-realisation. Possessive individualism is abolished both with reference to property and the self. The Utopian belongs to the state – he can own no possession, not even himself. This absolute *cancellation of the ego* and the related concept of possession are More's most significant contribution to the redefinition of private property. It strikes at the root of an ideology that conceives of the individual as "a private and self-regarding entity."[76]

Utopia, like *The Praise of Folly*, is more of an intellectual exercise than a formulation of practical proposals for immediate implementation. The haunting reflection of a totalitarian state, the precise nature of the Antwerp sojourn that produced *Utopia* and the alacrity with which More joined royal service immediately after, all lead one to endorse Freeman's comment that, "What starts out as a private fantasy, a refashioning of both the self and the island of England according to the most idealistic dictates, ends up being circumscribed by the dominant ideology it seemingly subverted."[77] Hythloday's concluding indictment of faulty commonwealths that give "extortion the colour of law" and thrive on money and greed is posited against Morus's unspoken "objection ... to the basis of ... their [i.e., Utopian] whole system ... their communal living and their moneyless economy" adding to the contentious cavil about the extent to which Hythloday is More's spokesperson and over *Utopia*'s ideal/idyll duality.[78] But such speculations are ultimately beside the point as More himself participates in the subversion of his subversive text. Negotiations between the public and the private self remain inconclusive, Hythloday's militancy vies with the more practicable compromise of the fictional Morus and Utopia's empirical objectivity is marred by its empire building. These minor ambiguities apart, the disruptive impact of self-cancellation (Book 1) and self-transference (Book 2) and radical social critique is effectively neutralised by situating it entirely within

---

[75] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 37.
[76] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 41.
[77] Freeman, "Discourse in More's *Utopia* ", p. 309.
[78] More, *Utopia*, (ed.) Adams, pp. 83, 84.

a text written in Latin to effect linguistic alienation where such fantasies of "self [and collective] annihilation maybe indulged in playfully without real loss".[79] The paradox, as Greenblatt reminds us, is that "far from being effaced by his creation, More was made famous by it."[80] On this playground where incompatible impulses are to be contained by dominant ideology, at least a couple of errant gamesters resist appropriation.

The contradictory strains of practical humanism and nascent bourgeois ideology in More's upbringing coalesce to foster an enquiring and creative intellect responsive to its immediate environment and free from an exclusive commitment to other-worldly ideals. Though not unconcerned with ethical norms, his preoccupation with tangible causes inclines him towards a rational, analytical interrogation within a secular framework. The determination to locate within a temporal rather than a spiritual context the causes of social and economic dislocation and the proposal for a new state divested of all mystical mediation and structured on genuine people's participation encourages other inquisitors and sufferers alike to seek solutions *here, not hereafter*. The novel proposal of excluding private possession from social precincts and of re-fashioning the self through purely collective signifiers also cannot be wholly subsumed by official discourse. Despite the conciliatory strategies employed by the text and the author, and the specific national parameters imposed upon Utopian desire, such incongruencies sustain the text's intransigent ambience. Like later utopias, More's no-where becomes a site of "ideological contention and dispute."[81] With Book 1 and Book 2 placed beside each other the complete work becomes in the final analysis a "provisional, fragmentary, and contradictory construction" which effectively heightens "the reader's awareness of the incongruities between social fact and Utopian vision."[82] The responsibility lies with the later readers of salvaging *Utopia* from the fate of being denoted as what Barthes terms an "empty signifier"[83] and of transforming it into a diagnostic tool for social analysis that simultaneously posits a belief in the practical efficacy of counselling and a new-found confidence in human agency's role in shaping destiny.

---

[79] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 54.
[80] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Fashioning*, pp. 55.
[81] Peter Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land. The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986, p. 26.
[82] Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land*, p. 89.
[83] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr., Annette Lavers, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, p. 128.