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In the Shadow of the Real: A Reading of Thomas More's *Utopia*

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Abstract
Thomas More's *Utopia*, now considered a foundational work of the speculative fiction genre, re-imagines society so as to create a fictional ideal. In doing so the text alters the co-ordinates and rethinks many social institutions such as the family and concepts like private property. This paper explores how More's imagination is circumscribed by the social world he inhabits since the spectre of the real frequently haunts the ideal world that *Utopia* represents.

Keywords: Thomas More, Utopia, real/ideal, power

Introduction
Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is the product of an imaginative feat of extraordinary depth, detail and fecundity. [1] It attempts a recasting of society along new principles and in doing so, re-imagines the social by placing it outside and beyond the familiar politico-cultural contexts of sixteenth-century England. Written more than ten years before More's appointment as Lord Chancellor under King Henry VIII and his subsequent execution for treason, *Utopia* imagines an ideal society that is free of several institutions and practices that More considered hindrances to his fictive ideal.

However, this re-assembly of the social along the de-familiarized co-ordinates of the fictional island of Utopia involves an interesting act of bricolage. More reimagines social and political concepts such as private property and monarchy to fabricate a fictive ideal. In doing so, More produces a text crisscrossed with many strange mutations of the old, which co-exist in an uneasy tension with the apparent 'newness' of Utopia, as well as the existing social structures of English culture in the early sixteenth-century. The text therefore represents an interesting anamorphic view which allows the portrayal of an ideal picture "where everything has been established according to plan" (More, 39) and is made possible by a specific distortion of perspective. In the "curious vision" that such an anamorphic view permits the implicit 'real' that More inhabited is consequently rendered unstable.

Raphael Hythloday, the central character who describes the island of Utopia to the fictional narrator also named Thomas More raises the central critical dilemma of the text: how does the ideal state that Thomas More's *Utopia* describes relate to the real socio-political space that More inhabited. Whether the text posited an idealized alternative to More's England, or rather presented a picture of a society riddled with doubts and ambiguities, that seriously undermine the very act of elaborating the ideal, is a question that has divided critical opinion. Brendan Bradshaw, for instance, argues that *Utopia* was meant to represent an ideal that showed up the limitations of More's own society and indicated the changes that ought to be made to strive towards the ideal. He also gives us an account of the critical tradition that had for long debated whether or not More's *Utopia* was a mere fantasy

[1] Thomas More, Utopia: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism. Edited by R. M. Adams. New York: Norton, 1992. All quotations in the text of my paper will refer to this edition.

or designed to offer an ideal alternative to the political and social norms that governed English society. [2] (Bradshaw, 20)

This article addresses the question of the ambivalent fit between the fictive and the real that the text reveals. In particular I wish to argue that the act of re-imagining society ends up reinventing the real, marked by ambivalent and defamiliarized referents, through the filters of a fictionality that leaves behind a curious residue of old biases, assumptions and ideologies.

The first theme is one that relates to politics, governance and the idea of the state. The first real debate on politics is inaugurated in Book I when Hythloday posits a schism between the ideal realm of philosophy and the affairs of the state. Hythloday's argument that "[t] here is no place for philosophy in the council of the kings" (More, 25) is rebutted by More, the fictional narrator, who posits the need for a necessary compromise between idealism and pragmatics so as to "at least make less bad" that which " you cannot turn to good" (More, 26). This unresolved debate institutes a gap between the alternatives that More and Hythloday stand for that fundamentally alter the corresponding courses of action that each recommends. The 'Utopian' narrative of Book II is therefore framed by this distinction that marks out the character of Hythloday as representing a voice that maintains a skeptical aloofness from the subtle negotiations of realpolitik.

The creation of the state of Utopia was instituted by an act of violence by King Utopus who subdued both the people and the contours of the landmass to suit his designs. This violent birth by monarchical fiat sits oddly with the apparently democratic structure of the Utopian state, which is largely based on the principles of equal representation and election. A closer examination of the text reveals that the elaborate organization of the government of each city is largely articulated within the framework of a monarchical system. The pyramidal shape of the state has at its apex a prince who "holds office for life" (More, 35) unlike all those beneath him whose tenure in office shrinks as one goes down the structure. There are important safeguards built into the system to prevent abuse and the degeneration into tyranny. However, some of these, like the prohibition of political discussions outside the senate, seem to run counter to the principles of democratic debate and would serve to strengthen the inviolability of the prince who need not concern himself with the fear of a conspiracy against him.

The legal system in Utopia is one that seems to be remarkably effective and simple. Unencumbered by a complex judiciary, the operations of justice appear to work almost through a conscientious internalization of all the laws of the land so that "in Utopia everyone is a legal expert" (More, 64). This impression is however belied by both the undue severity of punishments meted out as well by the fact that they seem designed to produce a harsh regimentation of life in Utopian society that admits very little deviation from custom. The cost of producing an ideal community of order and equability seems to be a shrinking of individual liberties.

The attitude of the state towards its neighbours and the assumptions that govern foreign policy are decidedly imperialist in outlook. They do not consider it improper to "plant a colony" where they find land "unoccupied and uncultivated" and "if the natives will not join in living under their laws, the Utopians drive them out of the land they claim for themselves" (More, 68). They demonstrate a strong sense of the centrality of their island and will protect it at all costs even if it means the dwindling of their colonies.

The act of imagining the alternate state is therefore not able to think outside of certain constitutive categories of power, social control and colonialism— the ghosts of More's England return to haunt the world of the Utopians calling into question their ability to rethink the question of governance and power and unsettling the relationship between the fictive ideal and the material real.

The organization of the households and the manner in which the citizens of Utopia conduct their duties are also similarly underwritten by principles of seniority, hierarchy and patriarchal power. Although there is a broad attempt to redefine the gendered divisions of labor, the family is conceived in strictly patrilineal terms and activities like cooking are "carried out by women alone" (More, 64). The principle of seniority is accorded great emphasis and lies in an uneasy tension with the seeming equality of the social structures. The eldest male member is designated the head of a household, and community activities like dining and going to church are organized keeping the principle of seniority in mind. The need to ensure that "due respect is paid to seniority" without violating the "principle of equality" (More, 44) is often staged in the form of a contradiction that does not get satisfactorily resolved. Furthermore, the communitarian idyll that Hythloday describes is also shot through with a number of implicit hierarchies. The relationship between intellectual and physical labor is one such hierarchy. Individuals who display an aptitude for learning are "exempted from work" and "relieved of manual labor" and elevated to a class of men from whom "are chosen ambassador, priests, tranibors and the prince himself" (More, 39).

The anti-individualism inherent in the conception of *Utopia* is also rendered problematic by a number of currents in the text. Although More removes the private ownership of property from his ideal state and conceives of an economy outside the terms of possession and ownership, it is apparent that vestiges of bourgeois individualism contaminate the delineation of fictional society. The obvious privileges enjoyed by the syphogrants and the tranibors must make their positions eminently desirable. Nor is the idea of competition alien to the world of the Utopians; the interest in gardening is described as being caused partly by "the competition between different streets which challenge one another to produce the best gardens" (More, 35). The expression of individual choice is not discouraged, at least in one's choice of profession, and it is possible for a man to decide against taking up his fathers profession should he be so inclined. It may not be out of place to point out that the entire conception of the communitarian state in Book II is framed by the 'characters' of More and his friend Peter Giles who act as the internal audience to Hythloday's account. These inscribed listeners are far from passive and in Book I exist in a dialogic space with Hythloday. The thematic of anti-individualism is therefore allowed to play itself out in the context of the narrator's extremely skeptical voice in the text.

[2] Bradshaw B. More on Utopia. Hist J [Internet]. 1981;24(1):1–27. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x000080

The various literary devices that serve to underline the insubstantiality of Hythloday's narrative further problematize the relationship between the fictive and the real. Besides the play on nomenclatural signification (Hythloday = nonsense peddler, Utopia = no place etc.) and the denial of precise geographical co-ordinates to the island, there are a number of attempts by the narrator to disconnect himself from an ethical affirmation of the values of the island. For instance, describing the moral philosophy of the islanders, Hythloday writes, "I have no time now to consider whether they are right or wrong, and don't feel obliged to do so. I have only undertaken to describe their principles, not to defend them" (More, 56). This tends to position the space of the island beyond the scope of normal ethical and epistemological reference points, further highlighting its tenuous relationship to the real.

The spectre of the real that haunts More's *Utopia* indicates the limits of re-fashioning one's own lifeworld. In this sense, More is able to demonstrate a vision of a new world circumscribed by finite limits that serve as the ground for all speculative fiction.

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