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De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula utopia

Thomas More (1477/1478?-1534, GB)

Dates: Thomas More's work was first published in Latin in Louvain, towards the end of 1516, under the title *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia, libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus clarissimi disertissimique viri Thomae Mori inclutae civitatis Londinensis civis et Vicecomitis*. It was published in Paris in 1517 and in 1518 another edition was published in Basel, in the shop of Johann Froben, which included letters from Erasmus of Rotterdam to Johann Froben, from Guillaume Bude to Thomas Lupet, from Peter Giles to Jerome de Busleyden and from Thomas More to Peter Giles. The first English translation by Ralph Robinson was published in 1551 under the title "On the best State of a Commonwealth and on the new Island of Utopia A Truly Golden Handbook, No Less Beneficial than Entertaining by the Most Distinguished and Eloquent Author Thomas More Citizen and Undersheriff of the Famous City of London."

Summary: Utopia was conceived in the summer of 1515 when More was taking a period of rest in the Flanders where he had gone as a member of a royal trade commission. Evidence has been provided for the fact that first he wrote Book II first and only later Book I, after he had gone back to London in October 1515. The work consists of two books: the first is structured as a dialogue and contains a strong critique of the evils of England under Henry VIII, whereas the second is descriptive and illustrates the political, economic and moral features of the new Island of Utopia. The very long title of this short work is clear evidence of the complexity of this exceptionally dense and highly ambiguous work. Not exceeding 150 pages in its final version, the work aims to be instructive as well as diverting, in accordance with the aesthetic principles of Horace and Lucretius. The title itself openly declares the typical aesthetic precept of the humanist More, which was also the attitude of his great friend Erasmus, of the "riso ludere," that is, to assert serious things by means of playing, as dictated by the great lesson taught by the Greek writer Lucian. The title and the letters to his humanist friends included in the 1518 edition already reveal a bewildering mixture of reality and fiction. Book I begins with the narrator More relating his trade mission in Bruges on wool business and of his encounter, outside the church of Nôtre Dame in Antwerp, with a foreigner accompanied by his friend Peter Giles, "a stranger, a man of quite advanced years. The stranger had a sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders; from his appearance and dress, I took him to be a ship's captain." The stranger is introduced to More as Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese sailor who travelled with Amerigo Vespucci in his voyages to the new world and visited unexplored countries, encountering different peoples, laws and customs. Hythloday, however, is not a simple traveller "for his sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather of Plato." Raphael is a sailor and a philosopher, a well-read humanist, who knows Latin and Greek perfectly and has read the classics. The setting moves from the churchyard to the garden of More's house. Raphael begins to relate his peregrinations and the teachings he has learnt from unknown peoples: "[...] he also described quite a few other customs from which our own cities, nations, races, and kingdoms might take example in order to correct their

errors,” among which, of course, the island of Utopia mentioned in the title. However, before describing this country the narrator More and the traveller Raphael Hythloday have a long conversation regarding the intricate and delicate relationship between the philosopher, the intellectual and power. Such a debate originates from the question Peter Giles asks to Raphael: “My dear Raphael [...] I’m surprised that you don’t enter some king’s service; for I don’t know of a single prince who wouldn’t be eager to employ you. Your learning, and your knowledge of various countries and men would entertain him while your advice and your supply of examples would be very helpful in the counsel chamber. Thus you might advance your own interest and be useful at the same time to all your relatives and friends.” Raphael’s attitude is radical: he is the idealist philosopher who accepts no compromise with reality and tries to preserve his independence of thought. Power engenders greed, violence and war. Most men of power do not accept being told the truth about the conditions of their own countries and, above all, they do not want to encourage reforms. At this point, in order to receive confirmation of the righteousness of his position, Raphael Hythloday begins on another digression, a “dialogue within the dialogue.” He describes a dispute which occurred in the house of Cardinal John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, patron, employer and mentor to More in his childhood. It is at this point that criticism and satire against English institutions and laws begin. The dispute originates from a courtier’s appreciation of the rigid British legislation that punishes theft and vagrancy with the death penalty. Raphael Hythloday seizes the opportunity to bitterly reproach the English penal system and the socio-economic system of the country. Social evils cannot be solved by means of penalties and punishment, however severe these may be; it is necessary instead to find out the reasons why men commit such crimes. The main reason is to be found in the aristocracy, a rich, idle and parasitic class that has deprived the industrious farmers of their land and destroyed their houses in order to create pastures for sheep and the production of wool. Hythloday provides an accurate analysis of the Enclosure Act, which forced countrymen to move to towns and become vagrant, through the well-known quotation: “Your sheep [...] that used to be so meek and eat so little. Now, they are becoming so greedy and wild that they devour men themselves, as I hear.” Economic and social crisis inevitably leads to the corruption of customs: punishing theft with death is immoral, since only God has rights over human life. Moreover, it is dangerous because it encourages bandits to kill their victims in order to get rid of witnesses. Hythloday juxtaposes the English penal system with the habits of the Polylerites, whose law is based on equity and effectiveness. Thieves are condemned to hard labour which has to provide social benefit, but at times they can also be employed by private citizens and “if they work hard, they are treated without any insults, except that at night after roll call they are locked up in their dormitories.” At this point, the debate focuses on the British and French kings’ evil imperialist policies, based on military conquest. Instead of taking care of the well-being of their people, European kings are driven by an inextinguishable thirst for wealth and receive the bad services of their counsellors, who always invent immoral and pernicious ways to ensure that their prince’s wealth is to the detriment of his people. Quite different is the behaviour of people such as the Achorians and the Macarians, whose interest is their country’s prosperity rather than their own personal wealth.

Confronted with Hythloday’s pessimism about the actual chance of persuading the governors to modify their political regime, the narrator More plays the role of the practical philosopher who must be capable of adapting to circumstances and of finding a

mediation. "There is another philosophy that is better suited for political action, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand, and acts its parts neatly and well." Raphael seems not to understand (or perhaps does not want to understand) More's proposal: he cannot distinguish diplomacy from simulation and, in his opinion, the advice to adapt to circumstances becomes a sort of shield that protects other people's corruption. Raphael stands for radical change and, above all, for one clear and overriding idea: that private property and money are the root of all social evils. "But as a matter of fact, my dear More, to tell you what I really think, as long as you have private property, and as long as cash money is the measure of all things, it is hardly not possible for a nation to be governed justly or happily. For justice cannot exist where all the best things in the 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." As a matter of fact, utopian institutions are based on the abolition of private property and money. As an answer to the doubts set forth by his interlocutors about the convenience of Raphael Hythloday's proposal, the philosopher and traveller claims that they lack imagination. Indeed, during his five-year stay on the island of Utopia, he has witnessed and experienced the righteousness of utopian institutions and the happiness and harmony they bring to their people. At the end of Book I, Raphael Hythloday, urged by the narrator More, promises to give an accurate description of the island.

Book II begins with the description of the crescent-shaped island of Utopia, with its sea waters penetrating between the two crescents of the island. Utopia's protected seclusion and isolationism is represented not only by the waters, but also by the steep coasts that protect the island from any possible invasion. Utopia is depicted as a separate and self-sufficient place whose detachment and separation have been decreed by King Utopus, who gave the island his name and cut the isthmus that connected the island to the continent. Before its foundation, of which this represented the first act, the country had been called Abraxa and had been inhabited by a rough and wild tribe. The foundation act is a radical action imposed by Utopus on both nature and man and indicates that the passage from nature to culture is violent and lacerating. The island is made up of fifty-four towns, all identical to one another, the capital being Amaurot, situated in the centre of the island and crossed by the Anyder river. It is square in shape and fortified by walls. Its houses are embellished with similar gardens which are spacious and provided with doors that are never closed. The inhabitants must occupy a different house every ten years, a decision sorted out by casting lots, since in Utopia there is no private property. Each town is surrounded by cultivable land with buildings where citizens live in turns, as they have to dedicate two years of agricultural work to the community, whatever their usual job is.

The basic social unit is the family, composed of at least forty members. Since there are six thousand families in each town, the population of the whole island amounts to around thirteen million inhabitants. Every year each group, formed by thirty families, appoints "an official, formerly called the syphogrant, but now called the phylarch." All phylarchs elect the prince by secret ballot; the prince is appointed for life, but can be dismissed if suspected of tyranny. The prince and twenty tranibors (who represent ten syphogrants) meet in session every three days: "There is a rule that no decision can be made on a matter of public business unless it has been discussed in the senate or the popular assembly." If important matters are involved, the population is also consulted through all the heads of families, who communicate their opinion to the Senate. Utopia is ruled by a democratic and parliamentary political system, with particular juridical and

institutional devices whose object is to prevent tyranny.

In the section dedicated to “Their Work-Habits,” the economic and social organisation of Utopia’s inhabitants are described in detail. Private property, the source of inequality and contention, has been abolished. The society of Utopia is economically based on agriculture, which is practised by all inhabitants, men and women alike. Only the phylarchs and those men who, owing to their extraordinary talent, dedicate themselves totally to their studies, are exempt from manual work. Idleness is strictly banned from Utopia, since everyone is aware that his or her work contributes to the establishment of a just society. The working day is six hours long, and spare time can be devoted to the intellectual activities one feels most inclined to, such as attending public lectures, listening to music or playing educational games. Each inhabitant is given the chance to harmoniously develop his or her mind and body, since this is the only way one can reach happiness. “The chief aim of their constitution is that, whenever public needs permit, all citizens should be free, so far as possible, to withdraw their time and energy from the service of the body, and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind. For that, they think, is the real happiness of life.”

The life of the Utopians is characterised by frugal habits, similar to monastic regulations as far as the rites of meals and clothes are concerned. Luxury is banned: clothes are the same for all the inhabitants, the only distinction being between men and women, unmarried and married people. Thanks to such a drastic elimination of superfluous needs and to a well-planned and organised policy, the utopian republic is self-sufficient, despite the fact that people work only six hours a day. Indeed, the island has supplies in store for two years, in order to be prepared in case of bad harvests. If there is overproduction, produce can be given to neighbouring populations. The economy of the island is essentially autarchic. In this respect, not only has the principle of distributing products on the basis of existing needs eliminated poverty in Utopia, it has also established a widespread feeling of solidarity and brotherhood among the Utopians, the causes for rivalry and discontent having been abolished.

The section “Slaves” states categorically that the hardest labours are assigned to prisoners of war, usually foreigners, or to Utopians who have committed serious crimes. Punishments are heavy, aiming to be exemplary, as these Utopians, in spite of their excellent education, are attracted by crime. However, it is important to note that, even if punishment is heavy, criminals are given the chance of social reinstatement. Slaves do not constitute a social class, as in Plato, and their children are born free.

The government carefully controls demographic trends, so that every town has the optimum number of inhabitants. Thus, if there are too many young people in a family, they can be transferred to a less prolific one. Marriages are characterised by the rules of eugenics: girls get married at eighteen years of age and boys at twenty-two. Young people must undergo a pre-marriage test, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises and mismatches: “Whether she is a widow or a virgin, the bride-to-be is shown naked at the groom by a responsible and respectable matron; and similarly, some respectable man presents the groom naked to his future bride.” Only death can dissolve marriage, the only exception being adultery. In this case, divorce is granted, but the offender is branded as infamous and condemned to perpetual bachelorhood.

Each town is divided into four boroughs with markets where the various heads of the families go to get what they need. In Utopia, money and barter have been abolished. Gold and silver, as well as precious stones, are no longer precious and are hoarded as stocks in case of war. As a matter of fact, gold is particularly despised by the Utopians

who use it to forge chains for slaves and to make chamber pots, while precious stones are used as children toys. In the section “Social Business and Relations,” a day in Utopia is accurately described, according to a precise time pattern. Particular attention is paid to the rite of meals, eaten in common halls, where old and young people sit beside each other, and the young people must respect the old, since they are the guardians of true wisdom in Utopia. Lunch is preceded by a moral reading and the menu consists of a frugal yet healthy diet. The evening meal is accompanied by music and, at the end of it, fragrances are burnt.

In Utopia, hospitals are efficient and ill people are promptly treated. Those who are affected by incurable diseases, and old people who make a request to magistrates have the right to euthanasia. Conversely, suicide dictated by different reasons and performed without the approval of the priests and the Senate is excluded from all sacred rituals. “But the suicide, who takes his own life without the approval of priests and senate, they consider unworthy either of earth or fire, and throw his body, unburied and disgraced, into the nearest bog.”

In terms of relationships with other countries, contacts with the outside and travel, they are strictly controlled, since Utopia protects its autarchy. Its isolation preserves it from external corruption. From a military point of view, though brave, the Utopians are against war and decide to take up arms only in order to protect themselves from enemy attacks and to free oppressed peoples. Precisely because they are so against violence, bloodshed and the use of weapons, the Utopians do not despise the employment of every possible means, from cunning to corruption and diplomacy, in order to win. If such means turn out to be ineffective, the Utopians accept to start a war but they only recruit mercenary soldiers, the Zapoteles. War aims merely at re-establishing a fair peace, since every form of plunder carried out against civilians is strictly forbidden. In Utopia great importance is given to education, as it is considered the means whereby man can eliminate the obstacles that hinder the attainment of a just society. All children are taught to read, while most adults are given a sort of permanent education. The Utopians devote a lot of their time to enriching their humanistic and scientific knowledge. They love music, dialectics, arithmetic and geometry, while they despise scholasticism, metaphysics and astrology. They also have their own moral philosophy: men are predisposed by God so that they live their life in accordance with their nature, that is according to reason. “They define virtue as living according to nature; and God, they say, created us to that end.” According to the Utopians, nature itself ascribes a pleasant life to men, a life in which the body must neither be neglected nor mortified, and instinctive pleasures are to be appreciated. This moral is based on a delicate balance between pleasure and virtue and is in perfect harmony with the religious pluralism and lack of dogmas in Utopia. The Utopians ignore Revelation, any religious belief is granted, intolerance and fanatic proselytism is forbidden, even if the Utopians are in favour of a simple humanitarian deism: “they 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.” Since Hythloday’s arrival in Utopia, many Utopians have become Christians, attracted by the community life led by Christ’s apostles. Nevertheless, the Christian faith is not the only religion professed, but is one of a number of religions in Utopia. There are also atheists and materialists, but they are despised, because they are considered incapable of lifting up their souls. In Utopia, the priesthood is shared by both men and women; priests are not numerous and are allowed to get married.

Book II closes with the doubts the narrator More has as to the actual possibility of establishing a country similar to Utopia, based on equality and on the abolition of private property. Recognising the need for long meditation when trying to give an answer to these pressing questions, More hopes firmly that those dispositions which made Utopia happy, will be realised also in Europe one day.

Analysis: Utopia is the founding text of the utopian genre for two main reasons. The first is that Thomas More coined the key word, utopia, with a double etymology: in Greek it means non-place, land of nowhere (ού-τοπος), but also land of the good and happiness (εύ-τοπος). The second reason is that Utopia establishes the paradigm, the formal and thematic recurring elements which will be developed and transformed by the tradition of utopian texts that followed it. Nowadays, critics agree that the comprehension of such a complex and elusive work cannot exclude a deep analysis of its narrative form. The multiplicity of readings and the countless questions aroused by the work are the result of the sophisticated narrative form adopted by Thomas More. Ambiguity, a constitutive element of the text, is produced by More through a skilful mixture of fictitious and realistic elements, such as the real and fictitious name of Hythloday. The framework of the letters exchanged with his humanist friends, as an introduction to the 1518 edition, represents together with the other texts (two woodcuts, the Utopian alphabet and the six-line stanza by a certain Anemolius) an important element for a correct interpretation of the text, as in these letters More's humanist friends not only express their point of view and give their interpretation of the text, but they also set out the main problem, that is, whether More has invented or reported a real dialogue. The letters establish a sort of "utopian pact" between the author of the text and the reader, who not only must accept the rules of this subtle game between reality and fiction, but s/he must also be capable to decode the endless semantic challenges of the names assigned to characters and places by More. The prevailing figure of speech, in fact, is litotes, a rhetorical expedient through which More gives his island names which disprove their meanings as soon as they are pronounced. Therefore Anyder, the river, means "waterless" in Greek, the capital city, Amaurot, means "dark city" and the philosopher and traveller Hythloday has a surname that means "a non-sense-peddler," while his name Raphael reminds the reader of the double role of the archangel, who heals sufferers and, at the same time, reveals and proclaims "God's works." Such subtle intellectual play does not exclude a serious intentionality, but it builds up communicative strategies of persuasion which were very common among the humanists of the time. Moreover, Utopia's literary fiction is also gained through a complex and tangled relationship between More the author and More the narrator and character and the fictitious character of Raphael Hythloday. Actually, the narrator and character More intervenes directly as a "persona" in the dialogue in Book II and in the final pleading in defence of Utopia by Raphael Hythloday in the same Book.

The literary shrewdness and skill whereby Thomas More articulates this relationship are unquestionable, as proved by the many interpretations the work has generated among More scholars, who try from time to time to identify More's attitude with the ideas expressed by one character or another without keeping in mind the complex literary structure that characterises Utopia. In the opinion of some critics, the character More has to be identified with More the author of Utopia, his attitude thereby becoming antithetical to Hythloday's. Other critics claim, instead, that the author used this literary device as a kind of mask in order to give free expression to Hythloday's ideas. Moreover, a whole series of contrasting interpretations reveals Utopia as an open-ended

book: Utopia as the dream of a humanist philosopher highly influenced by Plato, as an evangelical society based on the model of the first Christian community, as a bitter satire against the politics of the time, and as a sort of link between Plato's aristocratic communism and modern communism. Alongside the new moral values proposed by the humanist Thomas More (equality among classes, abolition of private property and mutual tolerance among different religious beliefs), other proposals are formulated that never aim to be definitive. Accordingly, Thomas More's work is to be read as "an open ended exercise," aiming at questioning the principle of authority. On the one hand, the study of Greek by the humanists can be considered as a way of reducing the authority burden of Latin culture. On the other, the Greek language offers the opportunity to play with the polysemic nature of names, which would not be possible with the Latin language. It has been rightly observed that the translation of the Greek term utopia into the Latin word nusquam inevitably causes a loss in meaning. Moreover, the Platonic device of the dialogue, enriched by some aspects of the culture of the time (drama and interludes, as well as legal disputes in courts, given More's profession as a judge), becomes in More's hands a means to stress once again the importance of the principle of tolerance. Even if the dialogue focuses on pressing problems and the two interlocutors have antithetical positions, the debate is balanced. Both speakers are given enough time to express their different points of view. The calm and well-balanced dialogue between Raphael and More is deliberately opposed to the uncivil and senseless quarrel in Book I, in which a friar and a parasitic jester exchange calumnies, abuses and insults. The two characters, moreover, typically belong to the genre of satire, revitalised by More thanks to an unmistakable mark of contemporaneity. The technique of the "dialogue within the dialogue," besides serving as counterpoint and as a model not to be imitated, also has the function of making Raphael express the main reason why Henry VIII's England witnesses discontent, social disquiet and misery: the politics of the enclosures that deeply modified social relationships in the countryside. The spreading of large estates provoked the expulsion of small farmers and landowners, forced to move to towns, unemployment, price rises and above all the "oligopoly," that is, the ownership of cattle in the hands of few people.

In Utopia, the device of dialogue gives More the chance to present two different points of view on very important subjects. On one hand, Raphael, the traveller, philosopher and humanist who refuses to enter the service of princes, supports the abolition of private property, after expressing bitter criticism against the unbridled luxury of the nobility and the despotism of kings. On the other, More the narrator and character, the active politician who is aware of the necessity of compromise, expresses his doubts concerning the general organisation of Utopia and the possibility of immediately establishing a society without money and private property. The lesson to be learnt is that two contrasting positions can be freely exposed in a calm and civil dialogue, based on mutual respect, and in an atmosphere of tolerance, where problems can be solved without violence.

Thomas More's critics have thoroughly investigated the possible sources of inspiration of a work which, thanks to its author's vast humanistic knowledge, is so rich in continuous cross-references echoes of authors and works belonging to Classical antiquity. Possible influences are Aristophanes' *The Birds* and *Women at Parliament* for the description of the communist states, Lucian for the tradition of imaginary journeys and the subtle play between reality and fiction, and Horace and Juvenal for the genealogical derivation of the utopian genre from satire. Nevertheless, Thomas More

seems mainly to refer to Plato and his two works *The Republic* and *Laws*, with whom scholars of the utopian genre are inevitably confronted. The elements associating Thomas More's work with Plato are numerous: the shape of the island, the crescent with a communication channel towards the sea, the fortification system that recalls Atlantis, the abolition of private property, social practices such as eugenics and others which can be easily compared with those expressed in the works of Plato mentioned above. However, apart from these similarities, which confirm Plato as one of More's privileged sources, there are some substantial differences which designate Utopia as a work by a Renaissance humanist investigating man's needs and rights in an attempt to plan a liberal democratic state at the service of the individual. Plato's abolition of private property is proposed in order not to establish a society of equals, but to build an aristocratic community which could live off the work done by slaves and servants. His communism favours the ruling class with the aim of preserving its morality, sparing it the troubles of managing material goods. Plato's society springs from an abstract notion of justice, through the establishment of institutions which mirror the ideal paradigm. More, on the contrary, starts from the analysis of the evils of his society, which at the time was undergoing profound changes: the feudal regime and economy, based on agricultural economy, were about to be substituted by commercial capitalism and a mercantile economy, centred on the town. More's proposal, therefore, of a communism of goods is not simply to be seen as a method of distribution, but represents the foundation of equality and permeates utopian ethics. Interpretations of Thomas More's *Utopia* which do not consider its historical and ideological context are anachronistic and misleading. It is therefore inaccurate to emphasise More's Catholicism, thus reading *Utopia* as being nostalgic for the Middle Ages and a stable agrarian economy, nor it is proper to consider More as the spokesman of a middle class, hostile to the Church and to the aristocracy and representing a dying feudalism. Thomas More's *Utopia* is conceived by a Christian humanist who considers pride as the true social evil: his perspective is focused on ethics and is inspired by a moralising and evangelical humanism. It is the work of an intellectual, who claims his right to freely criticise society and the political system and who invents a society founded and desired by men through a highly speculative and rational operation.

Some scholars studying the origins of utopian writing emphasise the references to the great geographical discoveries and to the travel reports which are explicit in both Thomas More and Francis Bacon. Raphael Hythloday is a philosopher, but also an experienced sailor who travelled with Amerigo Vespucci. According to Hythloday, travelling implies enriching oneself with new experiences and getting to know different peoples, laws and customs; travel represents a form of freedom from constrictions, from the limits imposed by society and to which one does not want to submit. And Raphael's very appearance, his careless style, highlights his nonconformism. It is interesting to observe that, from the very beginning of the genre, the utopian writer has a clear antinomian attitude towards travel. If, on one hand, Thomas More gives travel a high heuristic value, he also perceives, as did Plato, contact with the foreigner as dangerous and threatening: the foreigner is a disturbing element to any already consolidated order. The foundations of Utopia, therefore, derive from interesting tension between two tendencies: on the one hand, the movement represented by travel, on the other, stasis and confinement as unavoidable elements for the perfection of the utopian plan.

It is also interesting to observe that Thomas More makes use of some of the typical rhetorical strategies of travel literature. First, there is the use of the narrator as "eye-

witness,” giving an authenticity to the events described. Second, the other place is described by means of the stylistic device of the “estrangement,” that is the ability to look at, and describe the other reality from an external point of view, as if it were an extraneous object. Raphael’s attitude of total extraneousness towards the reality he left is revealed in Book II through the technique of the “inversion of values.” In Utopia, gold, precious stones and refined clothes have no value, gambling is unknown, class differences do not exist, and private property has been abolished. In this way, the Utopians’ use of gold to make chamber pots or of precious stones as children’s toys represents More’s criticism of the colonial esprit, of the gold fever which had galvanised great explorers and the Spanish *conquistadores*. It is through the description of the new society that the critique of the British society is performed. The presumed systematic search for verisimilitude is articulated in Thomas More’s Utopia by means of various external expedients: two maps of the island (the first appeared in the 1516 edition, the second in the Basel edition, drawn by Holbein) and the Utopian alphabet with a sample of verse written in a new language. In this respect, it is necessary to highlight Thomas More’s concern about creating a new form of language in the new society. Such willingness to invent new words emphasises a close relationship between the utopian text and magical-religious utterances. There is a sort of kinship between utopia and rituality. In this case, magic is seen as an evocation rite, in others as a rite of desecration rite (linked to satire) that produces a systematic inversion of values. Moreover, the need to create a new language highlights the need to provide a people who have attained perfection with a language free from imperfections. In More, the intellectual game and the linguistic adventure also dominate his endless linguistic inventions and puns. Thus the verse by the poet laureate Anemolius, Hythloday’s nephew, puns on the two meanings of Utopia: the same name can acquire a negative (ou) or a positive (eu) meaning by simply modifying the initial letter. Accordingly, the same pun is present in a sample of the Utopian language: “My king and conqueror Utopos by name, a prince of much renown and immortal fame, Hath made an isle that erst no island was, Full fraught with worldly wealth, with pleasure and solace. I one of all other without philosophy Have shaped for man a philosophical city. As mine I am nothing dangerous to impart, So better to receive I am ready with all my heart.”

In this regard, it is important to emphasise that Thomas More’s text establishes the semantic features of the utopian genre, along with some recurrent formal elements (such as travel, dialogue, stereotypical characters and plot).

The first of these features is insularity, whereby the utopian writer realises his desire to create an isolated place, detached and secluded from the rest of the world. Thomas More’s island is an artificial creation, whose map represents the typical attitude of the utopian writer. Removed from historical reality, utopia is situated in a sort of parallel geography, allowing the development of an alternative history, the fulfilment of an experimental field, of a possible side experience. Insularity brings about an autarchic system, an almost complete economic independence and the principle of a closed economy. In More, as in other utopian writers, money engenders inequality, as it allows the hoarding of capital, treasuring of goods and, therefore, social injustice. Trade, as well, is an immoral and anti-social activity, since it is based on the concept of benefit and of the value artificially added to objects. This attitude leads More and many other utopian writers to privilege a society founded on an agricultural system, where work is equal for everyone, and production and consumption can be easily planned, with no possibility of capitalisation.

The second semantic feature is the geometrical form of the utopian city. In More, the representation of the city keeps pace with the representation of society. If, on one hand, it has been proved that More's topography of the ideal city is bound, from many points of view, to his sixteenth-century experience, on the other it faithfully presents some distinctive features of the archetypal city. The town walls and towers ("The town is surrounded by a thick, high wall, with many towers and bastions") for example, bring to mind the Renaissance city, but its perfect geometrical shape, "the square," emphasises the will, to be found in any model of ideal city, to crystallise life, to fix every becoming form. Town planning in utopia mirrors the principle that is responsible for its socio-political organisation: More's egalitarianism is topographically revealed through a geometrical disposition which does not privilege any perspective in particular.

The third feature is to be found in More's will to establish laws and institutions which are equal for everyone. As a matter of fact, at the basis of every utopia, there is the belief that, through just legislation, men can improve themselves and reach perfection. In Utopia, therefore, the legislative field acquires a primary importance: law as order is decreed by a wise legislator, a key figure in utopias. The most evident result, deriving from such a normative weight, are a rigorous social uniformity of the inhabitants of Utopia, state planning and the myth of complete transparency. These are willingly accepted by Utopia's inhabitants since they feel themselves to be part of a whole and there is no conflict between the individual's interests and those of the state. Over the centuries, owing to these very features and especially to the idea that reason can control and rule every aspect of reality, utopia came under accusation. Twentieth-century anti-utopian writers and interpreters of utopia revealed the limits set by the model of rational perfectibility of man and society. On one hand, therefore, Thomas More's Utopia presents some features which are progressive for the time and is a highly speculative exercise prospecting solutions and alternatives. On the other, More starts the typical utopian procedure of simplification and reduction of the anthropological complexity of reality, whereby the most obscure elements of human life, such as sex and crime (in a word, evil) are not considered and therefore removed. This is the reason why, in the twentieth century, the new concept of "critical utopia" has prevailed. This kind of utopia preserves the speculative and cognitive elements linked to the idea of looking at reality from an outside point of view, but it no longer considers reason as absolute and definite and abdicates the spirit of the system, thus renouncing to the strong model offered by traditional utopia.

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