Radboud Repository

Radboud University Nijmegen

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.
http://hdl.handle.net/2066/28294

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2017-12-05 and may be subject to change.

More's Utopia: The City of God on Earth?*

By
ISTVÁN BEJCZY
Nijmegen

The influence of Augustine's *City of God* on More's *Utopia* has rarely been the subject of systematic investigation,[1] doubtlessly because the *Utopia* does not contain any explicit references to the work of the church father. Nevertheless, many scholars suppose that the *City of God* left a clear mark on the *Utopia*, although its influence is mostly characterized as general.[2] In particular it is presumed that More drew from Augustine's work, to which he devoted a series of lectures as early as 1501, a „feeling for the inevitable mingling of good and bad in any social or legal order".[3] His *Utopia* would, then, express the view that the city of God in its true and pure form could not be established on earth for, according to Augustine, the earth was not only the domain of the city of God, the community of the saints, but also the domain of the city of the devil, the community of the damned. In fact, it was impossible to decide who belonged to which of the two cities. The city of God could not be identified with the actual Christian church, for the church could contain hypocrites, and future converts could dwell among the heathens. To the human eye, the two cities were inextricably linked. They constituted a *civitas permixta* that would last as long as history continued. Only

1 The two main contributions are Martin R. Raitière, More's *Utopia* and the *City of God*, in: Renaissance Studies 20 (1973) 144–168; and Gerard Wegemer, The *City of God* in More's *Utopia*, in: Renascence 44 (1992) 115–135. Raitière illustrates the „imaginative affinity" between the two works originating from „the absence of the orthodox principle of social theodicy" from both of them (148); Wegemer shows how More „carefully creates a pattern of Augustinian allusions" to be taken into account in the discussion of the best way of life (117).

2 Edward Surtz believes the influence of the *City of God* and other patristic writings „appears general and tenuous": see Utopia, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, The Yale Edition of The Complete Works of Thomas More, Vol. 4 (New Haven–London: Yale University Press 1965) clxvi. See also Raitière (as n. 1) 145; Wegemer (as n. 1) 133 n. 1, 2.

3 Raitière (as n. 1) 164. See also Hubertus Schulte Herbrüggen, More's *Utopia* as a Paradigm, in: Richard S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (eds.), Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More (Hamden: Archon Books 1977) 251–262, esp. 260; Dominic Baker-Smith, More's Utopia (London: Harper Collins Academic 1991) esp. 216–226.

at the Last Judgement would the angels of the Son of Man cast out of his kingdom all things that offend, as the Gospel says (Matt. 13:41). The city of the devil would be consigned to hell, whereas the city of God, finally in its pure form, would be subsumed into heaven, its proper abode. Until the conclusion of history, however, the things that offend had to be dealt with. Consequently, sheer happiness was impossible in the *saeculum*.

At first glance, it is hard to see how the *Utopia* accords with these ideas, for it seems that the aim of More's work is to present a truly good and holy community in an earthly context. The Utopian island has been considered a *Hagnopolis* by readers from Guillaume Budé on.[4] One could easily be tempted to think that the *Utopia* runs counter to Augustine's teachings.

There are two ways of setting forth a different view. First, More could be dissociated from the presentation of the Utopian island. It is, after all, not *persona* More himself but the seafarer Raphael Hythloday who is responsible for the discourse on Utopia and for the exuberant praise of it. Even if Hythloday succeeds in depicting Utopia as a holy community, this success does not mean that More wants the island to be embraced as the perfect model for European reality. Many recent studies, which emphasize the ambivalence of More's work, pursue this line of thought.[5]

Second, the idea that the Utopian island represents a holy community may be questioned. Utopia might not be as perfect as Hythloday professes it to be. The island, or the discourse about it, could suffer from shortcomings that Hythloday tries to hide or that are hidden even to himself. This line of thought has been little explored. Some critics have argued that Utopia is by no means an ideal place, but they seem to have judged mainly by twentieth-century standards of happiness.[6] Few scholars have examined in a fundamental way the logical tenability of Hythloday's discourse.[7]

It is the aim of the present article to develop the second line of thought. I want to demonstrate that Hythloday's presentation of Utopia as a perfect community is a failure. Utopia is no city of God on earth, but a *civitas permixta*, just as much linked with evil as the European reality to which it is supposedly an alternative. The efforts by which Hythloday tries to set Utopia apart from evil, both in time and in space,

---

[4] Letter to Thomas Lupset, Utopia, 13/9 (all references to the *Utopia* are to the Yale edition cited in note 3). See also Raitière (as n. 1) 164; A. Prévost, L'Utopie de Thomas More (Paris: Mâme 1978) 47–48.

[5] See, e.g., Elizabeth McCutcheon, My Dear Peter. The ars poetica and hermeneutics for More's Utopia (Angers: Moreana 1983); Damian Grace, Utopia: A Dialectical Interpretation, in: Miscellanea Moreana. Essays for Germain Marc'hadour (= Moreana nr. 100) (1989) 273–302; Alistair Fox, Utopia: An Elusive Vision (New York: Twayne 1993).

[6] See, e.g., Robbin S. Johnson, More's Utopia: Ideal and Illusion (New Haven–London: Yale University Press 1967); Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, Renaissance Essays (London: Secker & Warburg 1985) esp. 44; Harry S. Berger, Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy, in: Second World and Green World. Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making (Berkely: California University Press 1988) 229–248.

[7] An exception is Andrew D. Weiner, Raphael's *Eutopia* and More's *Utopia*: Christian Humanism and the Limits of Reason, in: The Huntingdon Library Quarterly 39 (1975) 1–27.

prove to be counter-effective. By its very nature, his discourse generates the forces from which Hythloday wants to escape. His failure does not imply, of course, that the *Utopia* is a failure as a literary composition. Showing a failure is, in my opinion, precisely the aim of More's work. In doing so, the *Utopia* not only confirms the teachings of Augustine. Hythloday's Utopian adventure can also be seen as a radicalized version of the humanist civilizing project. His failure ironically depicts the endeavours of humanism to depose the Middle Ages and to put a splendid Renaissance civilization in their place.[8]

In the *Utopia* it is not only new worlds that come up for discussion. More, Peter Giles, and Hythloday talk about the social and political conditions of Western Europe as well. The three men essentially agree that these conditions are far from perfect. Hythloday passes the harshest judgments. In his view, pernicious minds who dominate the princely courts are responsible for the depravity of society. He characterizes this depravity mainly as economical and cultural idleness. In order to meet this situation he asks for drastic measures. „Cast out these ruinous plagues“, he exclaims (69/38). Society has to be radically cleansed from the evils that destroy it. One should not permit evil to grow unchecked, punishing it only when it makes itself felt; one should pull it up by the roots before it can thrive (esp. 69/38–71/17).

Persona More takes a different stance towards European reality. He does not contradict Hythloday's opinion that Europe suffers from evil influences, but he exhorts him to meet these influences with more indulgence. In a well-known passage on the philosophy for the statesman, he concludes:

by the indirect approach you must seek and strive to the best of your powers to handle matters tactfully. What you cannot turn to good you must make as little bad as you can. For it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for many years to come! (99/38–101/4)

More alludes to the course of history: the turning of all things and all men to the good will not occur soon. According to Augustine's doctrine, More is, of course, right. Only in the hereafter will all be good. Before the end of time, good and evil mingle inextricably in the *civitas permixta*.

For Hythloday, this idea is unbearable. He does not want to reach a settlement with evil. He wants to exterminate evil altogether. In order to defend himself against the accusations of More and Giles that his desires are unrealistic, he proceeds to the description of the island Utopia, where all things are truly good.

Europe and Utopia can therefore be taken to represent a mingling of good and bad on the one side, a pure good on the other – as the *civitas permixta* and the city of God.

---

[8] I have treated this subject in greater length in my PhD thesis, *Pape Jansland en Utopia: De verbeelding van de beschaving van middeleeuwen en renaissance* (Nijmegen: Universitair Publikatiebureau 1994).

In the European *civitas permixta*, good and evil go hand in hand. With an appeal to history, More accepts this situation, but Hythloday wants to break with it. In his view, the things that offend have to be cast out here and now, so that, as in Utopia, only the good remains. His description of the island should demonstrate that the city of God can be realized on earth in its pure form and can be maintained forever. As he puts it in the final lines of his discourse on Utopia:

[The Utopians] have adopted such institutions of life as have laid the foundations of the common-wealth not only most happily, but also to last forever, as far as human prescience can forecast. At home they have extirpated the roots of ambition and factionalism along with all the other vices ... As long as harmony is preserved at home and its institutions are in a healthy state, not all the envy of the neighbouring rulers ... can avail to shatter or to shake that nation. (245/6–16)

It is, however, highly improbable that evil is as absent from Utopia as Hythloday wants to make his audience believe. The envy of all neighbouring rulers is not required to shatter the Utopian nation. A critical reading of Hythloday's discourse will do.

In order to present Utopia as a true city of God, Hythloday has to protect the island from evil influences in the spatial and in the temporal dimensions which make up the *saeculum*. Both the spatial (geographical) and the temporal (historical) boundaries he draws around the island prove, however, to be highly deficient.

Hythloday begins his description of Utopia with data about the size and the spatial organization of the island. The geographical order he introduces is not just a gesture toward locating Utopia in actual space, but bears consequences for the cultural order of the island. The geographical and the cultural order were established in one single movement, 1760 years before, when Utopus conquered the island that was still called Abraxa and was connected to the mainland. Immediately after the conquest, Utopus had the isthmus between Abraxa and the mainland dug for a distance of fifteen miles and called the island thus created Utopia. The population, a rough band of savages until then, was elevated by him to a cultural level superior to the rest of the world, and this society was still intact when Hythloday arrived (113/1 ff.). The land as well as its civilization are therefore the work of Utopus, and both came into being by means of a sudden and total separation from the wild and the uncivilized. This separation not only takes place in geographical space, by pulling Utopia apart from the outer world so that the island is shielded from corrupt exterior influences, but also takes place in historical time, by making the inhabitants break with their savage past and begin history anew under a different name. From the conquest on, the Utopians started to keep annals, beginning with the year 1 (121/29–31). In a more symbolic sense the change of the country's name also represents a break in (or with) historical time: Abraxa, read as a Greek number, means 365, the number of days in a year.

In its geographical and historical isolation, Utopian civilization is not subject to real change. Hythloday found it as it had been established by Utopus and as it is supposed to remain. There is some room for perfecting it – Utopus probably laid down only the

main features of life, to be developed further by posterity[9] – but apart from these developments history is absent. Utopian civilization, cut off from all evil in time and space, relies entirely on itself.

So it seems. In reality, however, Utopian civilization is far from self-sufficient. It cannot do without the things from which it wants emphatically to free itself. To begin with, the separation in time shows an evident failure. The Utopians have supposedly broken with their past and started history anew. Yet they know that previously they were a „rude and rustic people" (113/5), who lived in a country connected to the mainland, and who were divided in various religious sects that waged incessant wars upon each other (219/37–221/2). The situation before the official beginning of history is therefore part of their historical conscience – and, consequently, of history proper. The uncivilized past of Utopia is not forgotten and may never be forgotten, for it is only by facing their own uncivilized past that the Utopians can perceive the civility of their contemporary situation. Signification is a result of difference: this semiotic rule may hold true even in Utopia, and it certainly does in Hythloday's discourse. Creating distance between the present and the past does not render the latter invisible, but rather meaningful, and the memory of it is necessary in order to understand the present.

The separation of Utopian civilization in space is equally ineffective. The Utopians cannot escape their barbarous neighbours, since their cultural self-esteem relies upon the contrast with the uncivilized outer world. As a matter of fact, Hythloday's discourse shows that the Utopians continually make contacts with surrounding nations. When, for example, the population of the island swells above a fixed number, the Utopians found colonies on the near mainland which are governed by Utopian law. If the original inhabitants are willing to live under Utopian law, they are admitted to the colonies. If, on the other hand, they do not want to abandon their own laws and customs, they are driven away, and if they resist, war is declared on them (137/7 ff.). Apparently the Utopians wish to maintain their cultural purity outside the borders of their island as well and are not prepared to tolerate any deviance wherever they make their appearance.

Nevertheless, the colonies are considered inferior dominions: if a shortage of population arises in Utopia, the colonists return to the island because the Utopians „would rather that the colonies should perish than that any of the cities of the island should be enfeebled" (137/28 f.). In spite of the equality of civilization between the colonies and the island, the former are of less importance than the mother country. Consequently, within the range of Utopian civilization only a seeming uniformity and purity prevails: colonialism causes a division into pure and less pure atmospheres.

Around the colonies is a ring of states which were liberated from tyranny by the Utopians and which are now either ruled by Utopian officials (197/1–17) or dependent on Utopia for their foreign policy (201/10–20). These states rank even lower than the

---

[9] Utopus sketched, e. g., the plan of the capital, Amaurotum, and left the detailed implementation to future generations (121/26–29); he also introduced a relative freedom of religious belief and expression, while he hoped that posterity would reach agreement on the religious truth (219/37 ff.).

colonies, but they are drawn into the Utopian sphere of influence by the Utopians themselves. Utopian civilization continuously generates its own impure derivations and divides itself in doing so. Hythloday's tale about the remote country of the so-called Zapoletans with whom the Utopians stay in touch offers the boldest example. He describes the Zapoletans as:

fearsome, rough and wild. They prefer their own rugged woods and mountains among which they are bred. They are a hardy race, capable of enduring heat, cold, and toil, lacking all refinements, engaging in no farming, careless about the houses they live in and the clothes they wear, and occupied only with their flocks and herds. To a great extent they live by hunting and plundering. They are born for warfare and zealously seek an opportunity for fighting. When they find it, they eagerly embrace it. Leaving the country in great force, they offer themselves at a cheap rate to anyone who needs fighting men. (207/12–22)

The Utopians, who detest to fight themselves, hire the Zapoletans as their soldiers. They actually hope that many of the Zapoletans will be killed, for they would consider themselves „the greatest benefactors to the human race if they could relieve the world of all the dregs of this abominable and impious people" (209/13–15). Yet it is because of the presence of the mercenary Zapoletes that the Utopians can keep their hands clean of bloodshed. To preserve their own purity, they are obliged to maintain contacts with a monstrous kind of people who should more than any other be banished from the Utopian world – for did not Thomas More in the beginning of the conversation with Hythloday state that he was not interested in tales about monsters (53/36–39)?

Thus Utopian space is divided in itself. There is a civilized center, the island, surrounded by a ring of more or less uncivilized dominions, varying from impure derivations in the adjacent colonies to monstrous counterparts farther away. Contrary to Hythloday's allegations, Utopia has not liberated itself from the uncivilized. Utopia has many margins, contacted or even created by itself, that are culturally opposed to its center.[10] Similarly, the city of God was traditionally thought of as surrounded by margins from which the city of the devil harassed it. The Revelation of John predicts that at the end of time Satan will gather the nations which are in the four corners of the world to surround the camps of the saints and the beloved city (Rev. 20:8 f.). According to Augustine, this passage referred to the last affliction the city of God had to endure from the city of the devil.[11]

---

[10] Cf. Shlomo Avineri, War and Slavery in More's *Utopia*, in: International Review of Social History 7 (1962) 260–290, esp. 288: „Utopia ... has to be purged and cleansed from its intrinsic evil. Thus, if the positive traits are being isolated and consequently enlarged, hypostatised and institutionalized, the evil side has to be banished, exorcised and relegated to a sphere outside the confines of the ideal state. Thus Utopia never can be universal, as evil has to reside somewhere outside the blessed realm ... Utopia can preserve in her purity and perfection, because all the dregs have been taken out of her realm and stored somewhere else."
[11] Augustine, The City of God Against the Pagans, Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. (London: Heinemann 1957–1972) XX.11.

But Utopian conditions are even worse than that. Not only is the island unable to disconnect itself from the barbarous outer world, but the uncivilized is also largely present on Utopia itself. The description of Utopian space shows that there are many holes and clefts through which evil trickles into the island.

At first glance, Utopia seems to be a perfectly ordered society. Hythloday makes it clear that in the spatial organization of the island, the Utopians have sought after maximum uniformity. It is significant that the square dominates as an organizing principle:

The island contains fifty-four city-states, all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, traditions, customs, and laws. They are similar also in layout and everywhere, as far as the nature of the ground permits, similar even in appearance. None of them is separated by less than twenty-four miles from the nearest, but none is so isolated that a person cannot go from it to another in a day's journey on foot. (113/19–26)

One must imagine Utopia as a sort of chessboard, the co-ordinates of which are formed by the cities. The pattern of squares on the chessboard is obviously related to the uniformity of space. If a circle had been employed as organizing principle, Utopian space would have been divided in inner and outer spheres, in centers and marginal areas – and margins are not allowed to exist. The island is therefore not made up of circles that presuppose margins, but of squares that are hermetically linked with each other without leaving any intervening or border spaces.

However, when Hythloday wants to describe one of the Utopian cities – it does not matter which, he adds, for they are so much alike that the person who knows one of them, knows them all (117/25–27) – he chooses Amaurotum because he spent his five years in Utopia there, and because it is the worthiest city of all as the meeting place of the national senate. So, it is not true that the cities are all alike. Furthermore, Amaurotum is located in the very center of the country (113/30). Utopia is therefore not a uniform cultural center opposed to a barbarous outer world, but a space that consists of a most dignified center, and, consequently, of less dignified margins. In these margins, civilization proceeds more slowly. Hythloday explains that Amaurotum was planned by Utopus (121/26–29); the other cities must have been built later and modelled on the capital. In Amaurotum, moreover, Hythloday introduces Christendom, Greek literature, and the printing press; from there, these achievements have to spread throughout the island. Hence, the fifty-three provincial city-states are geographically as well as historically marginal entities with respect to the capital from which Hythloday observes them.

As for the Utopian cities themselves, margins again seem not to exist at first sight because of the division of space into squares. Amaurotum „is almost four-square in outline" (117/33f.), its length being somewhat more than its breadth. The city is divided in four equal quarters, which, in their turns, are subdivided in house blocks. Every ten years, the homes are exchanged among the inhabitants by lot (121/14f.). The formation of ghettos and slums seems to be prevented; the spatial and cultural

uniformity of the city seems to be guaranteed. Yet it is possible to discern circular organizations of space within the city, which presuppose an important center and less important margins. In the middle of every city quarter are storehouses from which the (male) heads of the households carry off the goods they need (137/34 ff.). Women and children, the subordinate family members, stay behind in the margins. Meals are taken in common, in large dining halls. The Utopians sit four by four at table, but the central and highest place is reserved for the official or the priest who presides over the meal (143/21 ff.). Children stand in silence next to the tables – in the margins. Women with babies sit in a separate side-room – in the margins. In the main hall, all men sit with their backs to the wall – in the margins? Not really, for the women sitting in front of them are located „on the outside" (*exterius*, 140/32). Hythloday's wording is remarkable. The women are sitting closer to the middle of the hall than the men at the walls, so that *interius* would have been a more proper choice. The fact that Hythloday nevertheless locates the women „on the outside" reveals that his point of view is linked not only to the capital, but also to his sex. In his male perspective, women are always located in the margins, regardless of their actual position.

Hythloday's wording once more plays a trick on him when he states that a wide moat „surrounds" the city (*circumdat*, 120/1). The use of this word suggests that the city, in spite of its rectangular walls, is not a square but a circular form. The rural space outside it is indeed considered marginal. Every Utopian spends two years of his industrious life on the lands „assigned" to the cities, after which period he is allowed to return to his urban residence, because no Utopian should be forced to continue too long in the tough life of the peasantry (115/18–20). The rugged existence in the countryside is considered an improper way of life, a necessary evil. The land outside the city is also the place where animals are slaughtered and cleaned by slaves. Observing such violent and bloody work could desensitize the citizens, Hythloday explains (139/16 ff.). Apparently, nobody worries about the effect of such scenes on the rural population. The public hospitals are likewise situated outside the city (139/34 ff.), and probably also the marshes into which the bodies of people who committed suicide are scornfully cast (187/25). Roughness, violence, illness and death are related to the country, refined civilization to the city.[12]

The abolition of uncivilized margins has clearly failed in Utopia. The countryside occupies a marginal position with regard to the city, the provincial city-states are marginal compared to Amaurotum, and even in the capital itself margins are omnipresent. Far from pure and uniform, Utopia constitutes, as it were, one huge marginal atmosphere, without a distinct center of civilization.

Accordingly, the Utopian population does not consist of men and women who equally share the norms of civilization but of a gathering of marginal groups. Women

---

[12] Cf. Wayne A. Rebhorn, Thomas More's Enclosed Garden: *Utopia* and Renaissance Humanism, in: English Literary Renaissance 6 (1976) 140–155.

and children are second-rate citizens.[13] All persons who prefer manual labor, in particular farming, to intellectual occupations – and those people exist as well (115/20 f.) – do not actually count in Utopia, because spiritual development is the goal of life (135/18 ff.). The slaves and the criminals who are repeatedly referred to (185/15 ff.) fit in even less with the aims of Utopian civilization. In fact, only the male intellectuals from the capital city meet the demands of Utopian civilization, and it is they who are the subjects when Hythloday speaks of „the" Utopians. And even this select company of intellectuals is not immune to the evil that is theoretically absent from the island. From their number, the public officials and the priests are chosen, but measures are taken in case the highest official becomes a tyrant (123/19–21), and legislation also takes into account priests who commit a crime (actually they remain unpunished, 229/24 f.). These regulations would not have been necessary if the intellectuals invested with the highest responsibilities did not lapse into sin now and then. Evil lies in wait everywhere in Utopia and can reveal itself in all persons alike.

Not only the ethical disposition of Utopia contradicts Hythloday's assertions. Hythloday tries to present Utopia as uniform in an aesthetic sense as well, exclusive of all negative elements. In Utopia, as in the celestial city of God, not only is good supposed to exist apart from evil, but also beauty apart from ugliness. Soberness and naturalness are the most important aesthetic categories in Utopia. All gaudiness is considered uncivilized and unacceptable. Pompous dress, jewellery, and cosmetics are kept out of the island. This proves already that ugliness is present in Utopia in the form of prohibitive regulations that enable the Utopians to experience normal reality as beautiful. During Hythloday's stay, gaudiness actually appeared in Utopia, during the visit of richly adorned Anemolian ambassadors who were eventually forced to dress more modestly (153/31 ff.). Ironically enough, Utopian soberness needed a confrontation with its counterpart in order to confirm its superiority. But the preposterous character of Utopian aesthetics is particularly striking in the case of the beauty of the human body.

The great attention Hythloday devotes to physical beauty in Utopia is understandable if one remembers that the elect would be resurrected at the end of time with their souls and bodies, and that in the celestial community all physical deformities would be removed. According to Augustine, the elect would arise as men and women 33 years old, the age of Christ. Those who were too fat on earth would be slimmer in heaven; those who were too slim would gain flesh; those who were too small would grow; those who were too tall would shrink; and so on.[14] Some medieval commentators

---

13 Women seem to have the same rights and duties as men, but in fact they are only exceptionally admitted to the priesthood or to public administration, whereas it is up to them to prepare the common meals, assisted by the slaves. See also Judith P. Jones and S. Sellers Seibel, Thomas More's Feminism: To Reform or to Re-Form, in: Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More (= Albion 10 [1978] suppl.) 67–77.

14 Augustine (as n. 11) XXII.18–20.

even believed that black people would be resurrected as whites[15] – a clear example of the, at least by our standards, excessive aesthetic uniformity that the city of God was supposed to display in heaven.

Of course, things have not got so far yet among the Utopians, but they do their best to approximate the celestial situation as closely as possible. They attach great importance to the care of the physical beauty nature has bestowed on them. They dress themselves in one sort of clothes, which keep their natural coarseness and are similar in shape and colour for everyone. Their outfits differ only between men and women, and between married and unmarried people (127/1–7, 133/33–135/11).

In the case of marriage, physical beauty plays an important role. Before two Utopian lovers contract a marriage, they are obliged to present themselves naked to each other. Each lover makes sure that his or her partner does not suffer from bodily shortcomings that could be a disenchantment to their future wedded happiness. If such a shortcoming reveals itself after marriage, a divorce is impossible: the couple has to bear together the afflictions arising from it (187/39 ff.). In Utopia, ugliness is accompanied by much grief and shame. Accordingly, the Utopians think that laughing at disfigured people is disgraceful (193/18–21).

The Utopian regulations on marriage seemed, at first sight, foolish to Hythloday himself (189/1, 7), but he takes pains to convince his audience that they make sense from a Utopian perspective at least. The consequences of these regulations reveal, however, that the Utopian bodily aesthetic is internally contradictory. It is safe to assume that ugly Utopians remain unmarried. The Utopians are deterred by ugliness, and even if those who suffer from it succeed in finding fiancés, they are ultimately rejected during the obligatory nude inspection. As a result of remaining unmarried, they have to continue to wear their own type of clothes, differring from those of the married. So, they attract attention because of their outfits; moreover, they are unable to camouflage their ugliness on account of the prohibition of cosmetics. As a consequence of the Utopian desire for uniform beauty and the exclusion of ugliness, ugly people become conspicuous. Laughing at the disfigured is not allowed – one has to pretend not to see their misshapenness – but it is precisely because of the Utopian standards of beauty that the disfigured arrest the attention of the beholder. Only for a blind person does Utopia embody the uniformity Hythloday ascribes to it. Those who keep their eyes open see how Utopian civilization continually generates its own counterpart and, in doing so, divides itself.

Thus Hythloday's efforts to define a true and pure city of God in Utopia have backfired. Every boundary that is drawn in and around the island is just as porous as the limits of the Utopian private atmosphere, for every Utopian domicile has not only a front and a backdoor but also side-doors that give access to adjacent houses (121/9–12). As a consequence, the few true supporters of Utopian civilization (the male

---

15 Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities* (New York: Columbia University Press 1928) VIII.12.

intellectuals from Amaurotum) are not protected from the uncivilized even in their own houses. Not only do they have to support the shortcomings of women and children, but they also have to fear that ugly or uncivilized neighbours might stick their heads inside. Utopia is certainly no city of God on earth, but a most pre-eminent *civitas permixta*.

We are able now to confirm the assumptions summarized in the introduction of this article. More's *Utopia* indeed confirms Augustine's idea that all earthly life consists of a mingling of good and bad elements. But there is more to be said about the failed Utopian project. In my view, Hythloday does not make an arbitrary attempt to establish a city of God on earth. He does so with a purpose: to escape medieval Europe and to realize an ideal Renaissance world. His intentions become clear if one concentrates on the connections between European and Utopian cultural history.

In Hythloday's opinion, the European present is corrupt. In the princely courts and in society at large, depravity predominates and suffocates good influences like those of Hythloday himself. However, Europe has not always been so badly off. In time gone by, things were better. In the course of history, mankind has strayed from the sources of true civilization: classical Greek philosophy, most notably Plato (101 ff.); Roman political thought and practice (75); and early Christendom, particularly the teachings of Christ himself (101). The general cultural decay which results from this set-back continues, in Hythloday's conception, in his own days. He, however, wants to break with it and to stick uncompromisingly to the prescriptions of ancient pagan and Christian authors. It is, in other words, Antiquity with which Hythloday identifies himself; he directs his animosity against the Middle Ages, although he does not name the period explicitly. He aims to cleanse civilization of its medieval corruption and to restore it to its classical purity. In this respect, Hythloday shares the humanist program.

However, Hythloday is not a normal representative of humanism. He is a radical, or even an extremist, if not a caricature. He does not want to improve European civilization gradually, but turns his back to it to achieve immediately his Renaissance ideals in Utopia. As I have argued elsewhere,[16] what makes the island especially attractive to him is the fact that it is acquaintanted with European Antiquity, but not with the European Middle Ages. Two times in its history, Utopia entered into contact with Europe. The first time, „twelve hundred years ago", a ship manned by Egyptians and Romans wrecked on the Utopian shores. The crew settled on the island. By learning from them all useful arts the Roman Empire had to offer (109/1–11), the Utopians experienced the influence of Antiquity.

The second time Utopia encountered Europe occurred during the stay of Hythloday himself. Hythloday taught Greek to the Utopians and handed them over the classical Greek library he had taken with him. In addition, he taught the Utopians how to print

---

16 L'*Utopie* et le Moyen Age: la purgation de l'histoire, in: Moreana 31 (1994) 29–42.

books, following the example of editions of the famous humanist publisher Aldo Manuzio, so that Greek literature could be spread throughout the island in its humanist purity, without the danger of corruption by incompetent scribes (181/3 ff.). Hythloday did not want, however, to teach the Utopians Latin, because „in Latin there was nothing, apart from history and poetry, which seemed likely to gain their great approval" (181/5 f.). At the beginning of the *Utopia* More had already revealed that Hythloday had studied more Greek than Latin because he had devoted himself completely to philosophy, and that he had found that Latin philosophy was of no value except for some tracts of Cicero and Seneca (49/38–51/4). The Latin philosophy that Hythloday considers worthless is medieval scholasticism, which he renders ridiculous in a satiric passage. To his delight, the Utopians have remained at great distance from the trifles of the schoolmen whereas they measure up to the ancients in the liberal arts, even without being directly influenced by them (159/20–35).

Thus Utopia embraces Antiquity but keeps aloof from the Middle Ages. By teaching the Utopians Greek and no Latin Hythloday could keep the situation that way. Greek is the language that belongs to Antiquity and to the Renaissance, but not to the Middle Ages. Latin is the language shared by all three civilizations alike. By not teaching Latin, Hythloday made sure that medieval civilization remained unintelligible to the Utopians. As a consequence, they could neither acquaint themselves with Cicero, Seneca, and the valuable Latin historians and poets (doubtlessly the ancient ones), but this deficiency does not seem to have bothered Hythloday too much. Apparently he would rather sacrifice Latin Antiquity than create the possibility that medieval civilization takes hold of Utopia.

Apart from secular learning, the Christian faith is revealed to the Utopians as well. Hythloday told them about Christ, his first followers and their way of life, and the Christian martyrs. Many Utopians convert to Christianity on his account (217/36–219/10). Of the history of Christendom after its initial period (that is, of its medieval history) the Utopians learn next to nothing. Moreover, the organization of the Utopian Christian church is remarkable. There was no priest among us, Hythloday says with alleged regret, so that the Utopians lacked the sacraments that only priests may administer. To provide for their wants, the Utopians deliberated on the question of whether they could choose their own priests without the intervention of a Christian bishop. „It seemed that they would choose a candidate", Hythloday relates, „but by the time of my departure they had not yet done so" (219/19 f.).

It was all the better that Hythloday left the island in time, for otherwise he would have had to admit that through him a Christian church had arisen in the New World, detaching itself beforehand from papal authority. Apparently he told the Utopians that they should subject themselves to the Apostolic See, but he did not prevent them from starting a church of their own – a church which in the absence of control from Rome could pass over the medieval developments of European Christendom. In fact, the Utopian Christians are the first Protestant community in world history. Significantly, a few years after the publication of his work, when Protestantism began to manifest

itself in reality, Thomas More asked Martin Luther whether perhaps he had seen the church he advocated in Utopia.[17]

Through Hythloday's efforts, Utopian civilization is brought to perfection through humanist means. Ultimately the island unites in itself the periods of European cultural history praised by the humanists (notably Greek Antiquity and early Christendom) and excludes the periods abhorred by them (notably the Middle Ages). Utopia represents the Renaissance in its fulfilment. In the first lines of the description of the island Hythloday already alludes to this fact: Utopia, he says, looks like a new moon – in Latin: like a *luna renascens* (110/12).

Is it true, then, that Hythloday succeeds in presenting Utopia as a civilization that embodies only the goods and not the evils of European cultural history? He seems to do so. Yet it is hard to believe that Hythloday, who is unable, as we have seen, to control Utopian civilization in its spatial dimension, is fully capable of managing its historical development at will. I think it is possible to develop a different view. Perhaps we may assume that Hythloday's presentation of Utopian cultural history is unsound. The way he presents European cultural history to the Utopians should warn us against the manipulations his discourse may contain.

After Hythloday's departure, the Utopians know that Europe has known Antiquity, which produced useful arts, Greek literature, and Christendom. They do not know that Europe has gone through the Middle Ages, for this is what Hythloday jealously conceals from them. As for the European present, they do not know any better than that it consists in mere humanist reflections on the benefactions of Antiquity. In short, the Utopians think the same thing about our history as we do about theirs.

However, what the Utopians think of our history is evidently wrong: the Middle Ages are left out of the picture. Would not our picture of Utopian history be just as wrong, then? Are perhaps the Middle Ages left out of it, too?

This view seems highly plausible. According to Hythloday, the Middle Ages have led European civilization to perdition. He presents Utopia as an alternative of pure civilization. We have seen, however, that Utopia is completely in the grasp of the uncivilized. Possibly, therefore, the Middle Ages hold sway over Utopia just as much as they do over Europe; possibly, the small number of male intellectuals from Amaurotum feel just as lonely in the face of this situation as do the small number of humanists battling the medieval predominance in the Old World. Relying on the account of Hythloday, the Utopians could even take Europe for an alternative to their civilization because it would have remained untouched by the Middle Ages. Once again, Hythloday would have overshot his mark: instead of getting rid of medieval Europe, he would have set it forth as an example to the Utopians, while he simultaneously would have

---

[17] Responsio ad Lutherum, ed. John M. Headley, The Yale Edition of The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 5 (New Haven–London: Yale University Press 1969) 1.10, 119; see also Headley's remarks on 834, 887.

praised Utopia, a copy of medieval Europe, to the Europeans — a double publicity in favour of the Middle Ages.

In this way More's *Utopia* delivers an ironic account of the humanist civilizing program. The Middle Ages are an essential prerequisite to the Renaissance, not only temporally, but also logically: opposing the Middle Ages presupposes their existence. Cleansing civilization from the stains the Middle Ages put on it is therefore a struggle already lost. Even Hythloday has, after all, nothing more to offer with his description of Utopia than a copy of the European status quo. His failure proves that standing up against history in an earthly context is useless. One cannot escape from the *hic et nunc* yet remain in the *saeculum*. A closer reading of Guillaume Budé's praise of the Utopian *Hagnopolis* may reveal this truth:

> [Hagnopolis] is content with its own institutions and possessions, blessed in its innocence, and leading a kind of heavenly life which is below the level of heaven but above the rabble of this known world. Amid countless mortal pursuits, as empty and disappointing as they are painful and vehement, the rabble is hurled headlong wildly and feverishly. (13/9–14)

It is significant that Budé, after he concludes that the Utopians lead a kind of heavenly life, assigns to their island a place above the earth, although Hythloday's discourse on Utopia is precisely set up to demonstrate that a heavenlike community could be established in this world. If, however, Utopia was situated on earth, Budé suggests, it would be hurled headlong as well. As a matter of fact, we have seen that Utopia is just as much involved in the rabble of this world as Europe, and Hythloday's aspirations can therefore be rightfully characterized as empty, disappointing, painful, and vehement.

The weakness of Hythloday's discourse consists, above all things, in his lack of control over it, and in his inability to recognize this fact. Meaning cannot be generated except by distinction. Good and beauty cannot be conceived of without evil and ugliness, neither in space nor in time. Thinking in binary oppositions presupposes a negative term, and trying to do away with the latter leads irrevocably to trouble. More's *Utopia* offers a perfect illustration of this semiotic rule. Utopian attempts to realize the city of God on earth are therefore bound to fail. The city of God is in its earthly existence inseparable from the city of the devil, not only because it is difficult to expel the works of the devil in practice, but also, and above all, because the city of God cannot be imagined without its diabolical counterpart. Even as a thought experiment it is impossible to set the city of God apart. It could be done only if we could transcend the categories of space and time — but that transcendance would imply that we were no longer thinking of earthly reality. The city of God is definitely a heavenly affair.