THE UNIVERSITRY OF LATVIA

Faculty of Foreign Languages

Thomas More

"Utopia"

Open University

5 course

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***Introduction***

The "dark" Middle Ages were followed by a time known in art and literature as the Renaissance. The word "renaissance" means "rebirth" in French and was used to denote a phase in the cultural development of Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries.

Thomas More, the first English humanist of the Renaissance, was born in London in 1478. Thomas More wrote in English and in Latin. The humanists of al1 European countries communicated in the Latin language, and their best works were written in Latin.

His style is simple, colloquial end has an unaffected ease. The work by which he is best remembered today is "Utopia" which was written in Latin in the year 1516. It has now been translated into all European languages.

"Utopia" (which in Greek means "nowhere") is the name of a non-existent island. This work is divided into two books.

In the first, the author gives a profound and truthful picture of the people's sufferings and points out the socia1 evils existing, in England at the time. In the second book more presents his ideal of what the future society should be like.

“The word "utopia" has become a byword and is used in Modern English to denote an unattainable ideal, usually in social and political matters. But the writer H.G. Wells, who wrote an introduction to the latest edition, said that the use of the word "utopia" was far from More's essentia1 quality, whose mind abounded in sound, practical ideas. The book is in reality a very unimaginative work.” (Harry Levin, “The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance.” 1969.)
Thomas More's "Utopia" was the first literary work in which the ideas of Communism appeared. It was highly esteemed by all the humanists of Europe in More's time and again grew very popular with the socialists of the 19th century. After More, a tendency began in literature to write fantastic novels on social reforms, and many such works appeared in various countries.

“***Utopia***”

The historical Thomas More, the author of Utopia, was an extraordinarily complicated man who tied up all the threads of his life in his heroic death. The real man is to me much more interesting than the plastic creation adored by his most fervent admirers. The Utopia is the sort of complicated book that we should expect from so complicated a man.

It is heavy with irony. Irony is the recognition of the distance between what we say and what we mean. But then irony was the experience of life in the Sixteenth Century - reason enough for Shakespeare to make it perhaps his most important trope while the century was drawing to a close. Everywhere in church, government, society, and even scholarship profession and practice stood separated by an abyss.

In Utopia three characters converse and reports of other conversations enter the story. Thomas More appears as himself. Raphael Hythlodaeus or Raphael Nonsenso, as Paul Turner calls him in his splendid translation is the fictional traveler to exotic worlds. More's young friend of Antwerp Peter Gillis adds an occasional word.

Yet the Thomas More of Utopia is a character in a fiction. He cannot be completely identified with Thomas More the writer who wrote all the lines. Raphael Hythlodaeus's name means something like "Angel" or "messenger of Nonsense." He has traveled to the commonwealth of Utopia with Amerigo Vespucci, seemingly the first voyager to realize that the world discovered by Columbus was indeed a new world and not an appendage of India or China.

Raphael has not only been to Utopia; he has journeyed to other strange places, and found almost all of them better than Europe. He is bursting with the enthusiasm of his superior experiences.

But how seriously are we to take him? The question has been much debated. The Thomas More in the story objects cautiously and politely to Raphael's enthusiasms.

Anyway, the main point about renaissance dialogues and declamations such as Utopia is that their meaning depends on how we hear them. How we hear them depends on what we bring to them.

“More was one of the most thorough and consistent thinkers in the Sixteenth Century. He argued everything like the splendid lawyer he was. I believe that when we read Utopia dialectically, through his other works, we may penetrate to some degree the ironic screen that he has thrown over the work. Even so, complete certainty about his meaning sometimes eludes us.” (Harry Levin, The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance, New York, Oxford University Press, 1969.)

***The Second Book***

The second "book" or chapter in More's work – the description of the island commonwealth somewhere in the New World. I shall leave aside the fascinating first book, which is a real dialogue--indeed an argument between the traveler Raphael Nonsenso and the skeptical Thomas More. I shall rather discuss the second book, Nonsenso's description of this orderly commonwealth based on reason as defined by the law of nature. Since the Utopians live according to the law of nature, they are not Christian. Indeed they practice a form of religious toleration – as they must is they are to be both reasonable and willing to accept Christianity when it is announced to them.

What is the Utopian commonwealth? What does the little book mean?

“As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.” (Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, Indiana University Press, 1984.)

Utopia provides a second life of the people above and beyond the official life of the "real" states of the Sixteenth Century. Its author took the radical liberty to dispense with the entire social order based on private property, as Plato had done for the philosopher elite in his Republic.

“But at the same time, More took the liberty to suppose a commonwealth built on the pessimism about human nature propounded by St. Augustine, More's most cherished author. Augustine believed that secular government was ordained by God to restrain fallen humankind from hurtling creation into chaos. Without secular authority to enforce peace, sinful human beings would topple into perpetual violence; so the state exists to keep order.” (Mikhail Bakhtin)

A major source of violence among fallen human beings is cupidity, a form of lust. Sinful human beings have an insatiable desire for things. For Augustine there was no end to it.

So if we look at Utopia with More's Augustinian eye, we see a witty play on how life might develop in a state that tried to balance these two impulses--human depravity and a communist system aimed at checking the destructive individualism of corrupt human nature. It is carnival, a festival, not a plan for reform. When the carnival is over, and we come to the end of the book, reality reasserts itself with a crash. More did not see in Utopia a plan of revolutionary reform to be enacted in Christian Europe. Remember the subtitle

The six-hour working day in Utopia also represents an eternal check against the tendency of an acquisitive society to turn human beings into beasts of burden to be worked as if they had no claim over themselves. Set over against the misery of peasants depicted in the vision of Piers the Plowman or against the child labor of early industrial America or the sweatshops of modern Asia, the Utopian limitation on labor is a way of saying that life is an end in itself and not merely an instrument to be used for someone else.

It is perhaps also a rebuke to those of us for whom work and life come to be identical so that to pile up wealth or reputation makes us neglect spouses, children, friends, community, and that secret part of ourselves nourished by the willingness to take time to measure our souls by something other than what we produce.

The sanitation of the Utopian cities is exemplary. The Utopians value cleanliness and they believe that the sick should be cared for by the state. The Utopians care for children. Education is open to all. They like music, and in an age that stank in Europe, the Utopians like nice smells. To average English people of the Sixteenth Century – living in squalor and misery.

But to middle-class people like ourselves, our messy and fragmented society looks good in comparison to Utopia. Here More's Augustinian conception of sinful humankind becomes burdensome to the soul, for in the Utopian commonwealth, individualism and privacy are threats to the state. I suspect that we see as clearly as anywhere in Utopia just why communism did not work. The weight of human depravity was simply too much to be balanced by eliminating private property. Yet it is worth saying that More did not ignore that depravity. Utopia is full of it.

“No locks bar Utopian doors--which open at a touch.” (Thomas More, Utopia, tr. Paul Turner, London, Penguin, 1965, p. 73) The only reason the Utopians can imagine for privacy is to protect property; there being no private property, anybody can walk into your house at any time to see what you're doing. Conformity is king. All the cities and all the houses in the cities look pretty much alike. Of the towns Raphael says, "When you've seen one of them, you've seen them all." (Thomas More, Utopia, tr. Paul Turner, London, Penguin, 1965, p.71)

The Utopians change houses by lot every ten years just so they won't get too attached to any endearing little idiosyncrasies in a dwelling. The Utopian towns are as nearly square as the landscape will allow; that means they are built on a grid. I can imagine nothing more similar to Utopian cities in our own day than the sprawling developments outside our great cities where every house looks like every other house and where even the people and the dogs in one household bear a startling resemblance to all the other people and all the other dogs in the neighbourhood.

I think in fact that Utopian women have a somewhat better time of it. A small number of Utopians are allowed to spend their lives in study, freed from the obligation to manual labour that is imposed on everyone else. Women are among this privileged group. Divorce is permitted if husbands and wives prove completely incompatible and if the case is investigated by the authorities. But a husband is forbidden to divorce his wife merely because she has become ugly. In Utopia no old rich men throw out the old wife and take a new young trophy wife in exchange. The same harsh penalties for adultery apply to both sexes. Husbands chastise their wives for offences. But erring husbands are punished by their superiors in the hierarchy of men.

Utopia is a male-dominated society. Women have no political authority; that authority is all placed in the hands of fathers. It is hard to escape the suspicion that sexuality is stringently limited as part of a general belief that passion of any kind is dangerous to the superior rationality that only men can possess.

***Conclusion***

Let me close by making a point that I implied above. Utopia is thus not a program for our society. It is not a blueprint but a touchstone against which we try various ideas about both our times and the book to see what then comes of it all. It helps us see what we are without telling us in detail what we are destined to be. Utopia becomes part of a chain, crossing and uncrossing with past and present in the unending debate about human nature and the best possible society possible to the kind of beings we are. Utopia becomes in every age a rather sober carnival to make us smile and grimace and lift ourselves out of the prosaic and the real, to give ourselves a second life where we can imagine the liberty to make everything all over again, to create society anew as the wise Utopus himself did long before in Utopia. His wisdom is not ours. But it summons us to have our own wisdom and to use it as best we can to judge what is wrong in our society in the hope that our judgment will make us do some things right, even if we cannot make all things new this side of paradise.

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