The Intellectual World of Sir Thomas More

HUGH TREVOR-ROPER

THOMAS MORE, WHOSE QUINCENTENARY WE CELEBRATE, is one of the heroes of our age. Everyone venerates him now. Catholic and Protestant, Conservative and Socialist, traditionalist and reformer, English and Irish—all are united in his praise. Sweetness and light, spirituality and good humor, scholarship and wit emanate from his portrait, whether painted in color by Holbein or in prose by Erasmus. He is a man of marvelous completeness, and for all seasons. And naturally all of us (or at least all of us except Professor Elton) are very indignant with King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell, who sent him to the block.

Such unanimity has its dangers. There is a risk that the image of More may be made dull by the thick patina of so much praise. Some of his writings, let us face the fact, *are* rather dull. Nor are they always good-humored. How many of his admirers have really read those laborious works of his later life: those tedious and often ill-tempered tracts against Luther and the early English reformers, Frith and Tyndale, Barnes, Bilney and Fish, which entitled him to canonization? For it was not *Utopia*, nor *Richard III*, nor the translations from Lucian, nor the "merry jests" that qualified More for the company of the saints. Those works, or some of them, qualified him rather to join Erasmus, his lifelong friend, in more interesting or at least more exciting company, on the Index of Prohibited Books.

Let me, then, begin this essay by trying to save More from the saccharine praise of his unanimous admirers. This is not too difficult an operation. All we have to do is to move back a little in time. For More was not always an uncontroversial pattern of wisdom and virtue. He was not always praised for transparent simplicity, honesty, wisdom, tolerance, respect for the rights of conscience, et cetera. His death was not always regarded as the martyrdom of the human spirit. Indeed, it is only in the last half-century that this character has been given to him. For the

○ HUGH TREVOR-ROPER is Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University and the author of *Archbishop Laud, 1573–1645; The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century;* and *Hermit of Peking.*

first four centuries after his death he was a much more controversial, more mysterious figure. Had it been otherwise, he would surely not have had to wait four centuries for his ultimate canonization.

It was only in 1935, on the fourth centenary of his death, that the Church of Rome gave More that final sign of approval. This, on the face of it, is surprising. In the generation after his death, the Catholics had confidently prophesied such canonization. In those years a number of biographies had been written or inspired, and his works published, by the survivors of his family circle. However, nothing had happened. The biographies remained unprinted; the memory of More became an introverted family cult and in the next century died away. The Roper family did not forget their connection with More, but by the later seventeenth century they were more interested in their older connection with Archbishop Chichele. That secured them some concrete advantages: it qualified them, as Founder's Kin, for hereditary fellowships of All Souls College.

Why, we may legitimately ask, did More have to wait so long for such obvious recognition? The answer, I believe, is not far to seek. For centuries after his death, he was a totem figure of the English Catholics, and particularly, being himself a layman, of the English Catholic laity. The English lay Catholics were not, in those centuries, either very popular or very powerful in Rome. They were also regarded as tainted in their ideas: ever since the reign of James I, they had appeared dangerously "Protestant," more English than Roman. Since they were unpopular, there was no desire, and since they were weak, there was no need to humor them. Even in the nineteenth century, when they grew in strength, they remained suspect: "cisalpine," not "ultramontane"; supporters of Newman against Manning, of Acton and Döllinger against the "Vaticanism" of Pius IX. It was not until the conciliatory reign of Pope Leo XIII that peace was made. Significantly, it was then, in 1886, that More was beatified. His beatification can be seen as a sop to the English Catholic laity, comparable with the cardinalate of Newman, the reconciliation with Acton. The English Protestants, meanwhile, looked on with indifference. They had never shown much interest in More.

Then came the canonization of 1935. At first this episode too was treated with indifference by English Protestants. The British government took no official notice of the event, regarding it as an internal Catholic affair. Nevertheless, from that date More's historical character changed. From a recusant figurehead he became a great Englishman in whom Protestants as well as Catholics could take pride; and Protestants and Catholics vied to revive his fame, his works, his history.

First of all, in the very year of the canonization came the classic biography by the Anglican scholar R. W. Chambers. In the ensuing years

the early biographies of More—almost all written in the generation after his death, and in his family circle—were printed or reprinted. So were some of his own writings. His statue was set up in the borough of Chelsea, where he had lived, and this time even Protestants were allowed (somewhat grudgingly) to join the celebration.

Meanwhile this English cult was being overtaken by another, wider movement: the More industry, from English, was becoming international. In 1963 the "More project" was launched at Yale, and the complete works of More, unpublished since the mid-sixteenth century, began to reappear, edited and annotated with devoted scholarship. In the same year the Abbé Germain Marc'hadour in Angers founded an international association, the *Amici Thomae Mori*, whose membership now extends across the world and whose publication, *Moreana*, has appeared regularly for fifteen years. At the same time More was made famous by Mr. Robert Bolt's play and Mr. Fred Zinnemann's film. In this quincentenary year there have been conferences and colloquies on More everywhere. From a great Englishman he has become again—as he had been in his own lifetime—a universal genius, a great citizen of the world.

This last stage in the revival of More, it should be noted, is quite independent of his Catholicism. This is shown by the simultaneous revival of More's greatest friend, Erasmus. In the previous four centuries, Erasmus had hardly been regarded as Catholic at all. During most of them, his works had been published only in Protestant countries. Today he has been brought out of his cramped Protestant cupboard, just as More has been brought out of his narrow Catholic niche. To him, too, great works of scholarship have recently been devoted. His complete works, too, are now being republished. His name has become a symbol of the new cosmopolitanism. There is an Erasmus prize for those who serve European unity. There is even an Erasmus international train, passing—as he did, but more swiftly and luxuriously—up and down the Rhine.

The reason for this double revival, this reconvergence of two long-separated friends, is clear enough. It springs less from their times than from ours. More and Erasmus, constant friends in their lives, were torn apart, after death, by warring ideologues. Thus severed, they shrank in stature and in the nineteenth century both were devalued. No nineteenth-century English historians, not even the Catholics Lingard and Acton, thought much of More. If More and Erasmus have been reunited in our time, and thereby restored to their original greatness, it is partly, at least, as symbols of that ecumenical movement which, after four centuries of division, seeks to restore the spiritual unity of Christendom.

Of course, there is some danger in seeing the past through the present. The modern glass through which we look may show us new

21

aspects, but it may also discolor or distort. The English Catholics who, in the England of Mary Tudor, or abroad in Catholic Flanders during the reign of Elizabeth, narrated More's life and published his works, omitted certain aspects of both which seemed to them incompatible with the new orthodoxy of the Council of Trent. Modern liberals similarly slide over his rough handling of Protestants in London and credit him with views on the absolute liberty of conscience which he did not hold. If we are not to make comparable errors, we must try to see him in his own context, not ours.

Even within that context, he is mysterious enough. For in spite of the innocent simplicity which he cultivated, in life as in writing, More was not an easily intelligible character. Great men seldom are. He fits into no convenient category. To contemporaries, even to his own household, he was an enigma. Why did this open enemy of mortification and of superstitious observances secretly wear a hair shirt next to his skin? Why did he refuse to take the oath of supremacy, at which none of his devoted household boggled? Why did he give no reasons for that mortification or this martyrdom? What, above all, is the meaning of *Utopia?* While his friends were bewildered, his opponents, of course, were positively exasperated by the complexity of his character. In particular, they were maddened by his apparent levity, the indecent flippancy (as they thought it) which masked his purpose and enabled him to evade serious discussion. The same charge, of course, was brought against Erasmus by his critics, who described him as a sophist, a changeling, an amorphous polyp, a slippery mouse.

In an attempt to grasp this Protean spirit, I propose to look at More in his own intellectual context; to identify the tradition to which he attached himself; to watch, if possible, the formation of his mind. This cannot be done from purely biographical evidence. We have very few contemporary sources for More's early years. We know little of his studies. We have very few of his books, no personal papers; for all such property was confiscated when he was declared a traitor. His papers have all mysteriously disappeared. Almost all that we know on this subject is retrospective, from his own writings or those of Erasmus. We shall have to rely largely on deduction, implication, association. This method is necessarily tentative. However, it is more fruitful, I think, than to see him anachronistically, retrospectively, through an iridescent halo or mist.

The outline of More's early career is clear enough. He was born in 1478 and sent to school in London. Thereafter he served in the household of Cardinal Morton, who afterward sent him to the University of Oxford. From Oxford he went to the Inns of Court to study law. All this reveals nothing of his mind. Then suddenly, in 1499, we have a shaft of

light. Erasmus comes for the first time to England, and in his letters reveals the new world he has discovered there.

In some ways, this first English visit of Erasmus, which was to have such large consequence for him and for us, was an accident, a deviation. Erasmus, at that time, was based in Paris. He had not intended to come to England. His overriding aim was to learn Greek, or rather to improve the Greek which he had begun to learn in Paris, and for that purpose he had planned to go to Italy. Italy, at the time, was the center of Greek studies; there, as Erasmus wrote, "the very walls speak Greek." But Erasmus was diverted from Italy. His English pupil Lord Mountjoy had persuaded him to come to England. And what did he find there? To his surprise,

a climate at once agreeable and extremely healthy, and such a quantity of intellectual refinement and scholarship, not the usual pedantic and trivial kind either, but profound and learned and truly classical, in both Latin and Greek, that I have little longing left for Italy except for the sake of visiting it. When I listen to Colet it seems to me that I am listening to Plato himself. Who could fail to be astonished at the universal scope of Grocyn's accomplishments? Could anything be more clever or profound and sophisticated than Linacre's mind? Did Nature ever create anything kinder, sweeter or more harmonious than the character of Thomas More?

Today Erasmus is famous, More is famous, their friendship is famous, and we take it all for granted. But pause and consider. More, whom Erasmus thus cites, was then a young law student, twenty-one years old. He had written nothing. He had never been abroad. And yet he is cited, naturally, even automatically, in this company of much older men whose names were already established. Grocyn, at that time, was fifty-three years old, Linacre thirty-nine, Colet thirty-three. Moreover, this company had clearly accepted him as one of themselves. Soon afterward Colet would pay a remarkable tribute to More: he would describe him as the unique genius among the many talented men of England.

And what was this company in which the young Thomas More already shone as a uniquely brilliant star? First of all, Grocyn, Linacre, Colet were all Greek scholars. All had studied Greek in Italy, and especially in Florence. That is what drew Erasmus to them, and More also. After Erasmus's departure, we find More, too, studying Greek, first under Grocyn, then under Linacre. With him, as a fellow pupil, was William Lily. Lily, too, had begun his studies abroad: he had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, had learned Greek from a Greek teacher in Rhodes and improved his knowledge in Italy. Afterward Colet would appoint him as the first high master of his own foundation, St. Paul's School. In 1504 More described Colet and Grocyn as the only masters of his life, Linacre as his present tutor, Lily as his beloved companion.

Together, these five men—to whom we should add William Latimer, who had also studied in Italy—were the founding fathers of Greek studies in fifteenth-century England.

However, it was not Greek studies alone which united these men. They also had something else in common, and it is this something else which I wish to emphasize. They were all Platonists. They had been to Florence because Florence was the center of Platonic studies in Europe. Those studies had been brought thither in the last days of Byzantium by the last great Byzantine Platonist, the pagan Georgius Gemistus Pletho. There they had flourished, and become Christianized, or re-Christianized, in the Platonic Academy founded by Cosimo de' Medici. The great teachers at that academy were Marsilio Ficino, the editor of Plato and Plotinus, and his disciple Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the prodigy of his age. It was to hear Ficino and Pico that these Englishmen had gone to Florence, and it was their Platonic doctrine, as well as the Greek language, that they taught on their return. The ideas of Pico were preached in London by Colet, whom we have heard Erasmus compare with Plato himself. The first publication of Linacre was a translation of the Greek Neoplatonist Proclus, a pagan of the fifth century. The earliest surviving letter of More describes his attendance at Grocyn's lectures in St. Paul's Cathedral. The lectures were on Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius—the pseudo-Dionysius—was a sixth-century Syrian Neoplatonist, one of the main sources of Christian Platonism in the Middle Ages.

Like Grocyn, Colet, and Linacre, More too was a Grecian. Like them, he believed that the Greek language was the necessary means of intellectual and spiritual revival: through it, and through it alone, the science and philosophy of antiquity, the true faith of the New Testament and the fathers, could be recovered. Some of his most urgent intellectual writings—his long letter to the theologian Martin Dorp in 1517, his letter to the University of Oxford in 1518—are pleas for Greek studies, which he defends against all comers. In *Utopia* his narrator, Hythlodaye, is a Grecian and carries Greek books to that happy island ("for in Latin there was nothing that I thought that they would greatly admire"). But within Greek literature, More too, like his masters, is committed to a particular philosophy. He too is a Platonist, a Christian Platonist, inspired, like them, from Florence.

This he showed clearly in his first published work, which appeared in 1505. It was a translation into English of the biography of that "singular layman," the Florentine Platonist Pico della Mirandola, written by his nephew. Pico's life (we are told) More had chosen as a pattern for his own. He published the biography as a New Year's gift for a woman friend who had entered a nunnery as a Poor Clare. The significance of

24

this publication cannot escape us. More himself had recently passed through a religious crisis. He had contemplated, for himself, the monastic life. As a law student he had lived for a time among the Carthusians of London—the most austere and uncorrupted of monks, the only monks whom Erasmus admired. But in the end he had decided to marry and live, like Pico, as a religious layman, in the world. More's *Life of John Picus, Earl of Mirandula* is in fact the apologia of a Christian Platonist addressed to one whose still-tempting example the translator has decided not, after all, to follow.

More's interest in Plato is, of course, well known. *Utopia* is, in form, an imitation of Plato's *Republic,* and Plato is often cited in it. But the biographers of More have tended to treat this as a mere literary model. I believe that this is wrong, demonstrably wrong. I believe that if we study More's thought in his early years, we must see that his mind was not merely dipped, but steeped, in Platonism: the Platonism of Pico; the Platonism of St. Augustine, who had brought Neoplatonism into Christianity; the Platonism of Plato himself. The life and ideas of Pico, says Vittorio Gabrieli, exercised "a seminal influence on his mind," and many of Pico's ideas can be found in his later works. At the age of twenty-three we find More lecturing on the philosophy of St. Augustine in Grocyn's church in London. In his fidelity to Plato himself, he went beyond any of his contemporaries; for we are told by Erasmus that "while still a youth, he attempted a dialogue in which he maintained a defence of Plato's community, even in the matter of wives."

This Platonism of More will no doubt be disputed by some. It will be said that, in some respects, he was a Thomist, an Aristotelian. Some commentators have called him—since he commended innocent pleasure—an Epicurean. But these, I think, are superficial judgments. Platonism does not exclude some aspects of Aristotelianism. Aristotle was, after all, a pupil of Plato, and Gemistus Pletho, the great mediator of Greek Platonism in the fifteenth century, was careful to insist on the area of agreement, as well as of dissent, between the two philosophers. The Florentine Platonists continued to embrace Aristotelian ideas, and their English disciples always expressed respect for Aristotle; it was only with the later revival and petrification of scholasticism that Aristotle became an enemy. More himself suffered some petrification too. As for Epicureanism, More only accepted it where it did not conflict with Platonism: that is, superficially. If the Utopians believed in the innocence of pleasure, it was certainly not on Epicurean premises. The two central doctrines of Epicurus—that the soul is mortal and that "the world runs by chance, governed by no divine providence"—are the only two beliefs which are positively punished, as "vile and base opinions," in More's ideal state.

Once we recognize the profound influence of Plato on More we can understand (I believe) some other aspects of his character which puzzled contemporaries. For instance, there is his "Socratic" technique. For behind Plato stands Plato's own master, Socrates, and Plato's Socrates was a model for both Erasmus and More. Erasmus's prayer, "Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis," shocked the orthodox, and More was known as "our Christian Socrates." Both Erasmus and More used the Socratic method. They also used "Socratic irony," that disconcerting affectation of ignorance and simplicity which was Socrates' most effective dialectical weapon. And then there is the Socratic, or Platonic, raillery. That teasing wit, that gentle mockery, that vivid sense of the absurd which animate the writings of both Erasmus and More are in the Platonic tradition. The obvious example is Erasmus's *Encomium Moriae,* "the praise of Folly" inspired by and dedicated to More. Grave scholars were shocked by the frivolity of that work, but when they attacked it, More rushed to its defense. He gladly accepted Folly as his advocate, and he and his friends regularly played on his own name, μωρός the fool, "*oxymorus* or rather μωρόσοφος," as Guillaume Budé called him. The Utopians, More tells us, cherished fools. He himself kept a fool, Henry Patenson, who features in Holbein's family portrait. Even in his greatest work of devotion, his *Dialogue of Comfort,* written during his last imprisonment, he happily claimed to be "of nature even half a giglot and *more.*" "I would," he added, "I could as easily mend my fault as I well know it, but scant can I refrain it, as old a fool as I am."

The comic spirit of Platonism is not often emphasized or perhaps even noticed by scholars, but in the nineteenth century Lord Macaulay recognized it. Plato, he remarked, was one of the greatest comic writers; and the most perceptive exponent of Platonism, Walter Pater, acknowledged it when he cited, as one of the greatest examples of the Platonic tradition in later Greek literature, the comic dialogues of the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata. For this reason I do not find it in any way strange that More and Erasmus, with their friend William Lily, should practice their newly acquired Greek by translating, in 1505–1506, the works of Lucian; or that the Utopians, when they had learned Greek and acquired all the Greek classics, found particular delight in "Lucian's merry conceits and jests." On the face of it, Lucian should not have appealed to More, for he was an Epicurean philosopher who ridiculed all religion, including Christianity, and would afterward be condemned by the Church. But the Platonist tradition, which he too represented, could triumph over these differences.

More, then, was a Platonist, a committed Platonist in the Christian tradition of Florence, but also a real Platonist, a disciple of the pre-Christian Plato himself. To recognize this is, I believe, the beginning of

wisdom in the matter. But what in fact is Platonism, and how was it interpreted by those who, in the fifteenth century, had revived it? Only if we answer this question, I believe, are we in a position to interpret More's thought.

Platonism, in one word, is idealism, the determination to identify the universal spirit which informs matter and, having identified it, to disengage it from the bewildering variety, the inert machinery, the practical compromises in which it is so often trapped and buried. In religion the Platonist seeks the animating spirit, and is impatient of theological discipline and mere ritual. In secular life also—if he interests himself in secular life—he seeks an ideal society which can preserve itself against corruption and, by a stable constitution, dispense with the sordid trivialities of day-to-day politics. The quest for such a spirit, the demand for such an ideal stability, arises most naturally in an age of hectic change, a time of apparent corruption, disintegration, decay.

Plato himself grew up in such a time. His youth coincided with a disastrous war, in which the greatness of his city was destroyed. In the wake of that disaster, he saw his revered master, Socrates, judicially murdered. He came to hate the society around him, and, hating it, he rebelled against those earlier philosophers who, in more stable times, had envisaged, without discomfort, a world of perpetual mobility. In his greatest political work, his *Republic*, he had imagined a form of society which, at whatever cost in freedom, would preserve itself forever, without change.

Platonism was thus essentially anti-historical, as it was also anti-theological. In religion it insisted on the immortality of the human soul and the divine guidance of the world. In politics it pursued the mirage of an ideal state, preserved alike against political corruption and historical change. Fortunately, perhaps, most Platonists did not go in for politics. They were artists, visionaries, mystics, saints, and their function was to illuminate, not to govern. But when they speculated in political matters, the result was always the same. Whatever their culture—whether ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, pagan, Christian, or Moslem—they invariably produced totalitarian systems, repellent to liberal men.

All this can be seen in More; indeed this is what separated More and Erasmus from their fellow humanists, from those whom we now call civic humanists. The civic humanists believed that antiquity, which they studied, offered an ideal of public spirit and that the highest duty of a scholar was to serve his city or his prince. The humanist court of Henry VIII attracted many such men, headed by Thomas Cromwell. But More, as a Platonist, never believed that political life was the ultimate good to be derived from classical learning. To him the world of the spirit came first, and ideally he would have kept out of politics altogether, as

Erasmus always did, preferring poverty with scholarship and freedom to the golden servitude of court life. In fact he did not do so; and this is what makes him a more complex, a more mysterious, and in the end a more tragic figure than the undivided saint of European scholarship, Erasmus.

For in the end More rejected the life of scholarship as he rejected the life of the cloister. He studied the law. The law led to civic duties, Parliament, the royal service. In all these spheres of action, he discovered, and exercised, great practical abilities. He was a powerful lawyer, a formidable diplomat, a tough negotiator, secretive and strong willed—as his foreign rivals reported, "full of craft and subtlety" concealed "by smooth speech and calm expression in the English way." As the climax of his career, he would achieve the highest office of all, becoming Wolsey's successor as Lord Chancellor. That career was not achieved by mere saintliness. But always, beneath the surface, there was tension. Even at the height of his success, More's heart was elsewhere: in Plato's Academy, in the London Charterhouse, in Utopia. The secret hair shirt betokened that internal tension, the Epicurean facade concealed it, the public "fooleries" protected it. In 1505 his model was Pico della Mirandola who, though a great aristocrat, had fled from all "worldly business" and had ended as a devotee of the puritan friar Savonarola. In 1516, when he was called to office by the king, he publicly expressed his anxiety in the first book of *Utopia*. In 1522, when he was already high in office and no cloud could be seen on the horizon, he wrote his essay on "The Four Last Things" in which he likened civil life to a prison in which all worldly authority is "no better but one prisoner bearing a rule among the remnant, as the tapster doth in the Marshalsea." As Mr. James McConica says, "Nothing could be more at odds with the tone of common humanist opinion concerning the vocation to public service."

Divided souls have long agonies, but they also have moments of productive fusion. More's moment of fusion came in 1515, and its product was his greatest work, *Utopia*. For four centuries men have argued about the meaning of that work, and at the end there is still no agreement about it. It is as mysterious as More himself; to it, as to him, we agree only in ascribing the indefinable quality of greatness. Some have seen *Utopia* as an expression of nostalgia for medieval traditionalism; others as a blueprint for modern socialism, or even for modern imperialism; others, like More himself (but we must remember his Socratic irony), as a mere *ludibrium*, a jeu d'esprit, a holiday exercise. I believe that, to understand it, we should set it in the context of his mind—a mind which was (I have suggested) fundamentally Platonic. Like Plato's *Republic*, like every expression of Platonic philosophy in politics from Plato to Marx, it is an attempt to escape from history, an

attempt to freeze historical change, to fix a society, whose ordinary course is seen as disintegration and corruption, in an ideal mold: a mold which, by the very terms of its existence, is, and must be, repellent to liberal men.

Consider the circumstances in which More wrote *Utopia*. In 1515 he had been engaged for some two years on a work of history. His subject was the tyrannous reign of Richard III. More had heard a great deal about the tyranny of Richard III when he had served in the household of Cardinal Morton, who had suffered from it, and he had evidently thought much about it. "Formerly he disliked the court and the company of princes," says Erasmus, "because he always had a peculiar hatred of tyranny and love of equality." He had written, and had invited Erasmus to write, a reply to Lucian's dialogue on tyrannicide. The tyranny of Richard III, vividly described by Morton, was therefore, to him, an illustration of a general problem. From that particular tyranny England had been saved by the victory of Henry VII at Bosworth Field and the coming of the Tudor dynasty. But of course a mere change of dynasty was no guarantee for the future. Nor could it solve the general problem. How, More asked, could tyranny be permanently excluded from a society? How could equality be made perfect and lasting?

While he was reflecting on these problems, he was sent by Henry VIII on a commercial embassy to the Netherlands. The journey interrupted his particular historical work. Away from his documents, he could not continue it. He laid it aside, and in fact would never complete it. On the other hand, the general problem remained in his mind. Moreover, in the Netherlands he had time on his hands. He stayed in Antwerp with a friend to whom Erasmus had recommended him, Pieter Gillis, the town clerk, a humanist scholar who became his close friend. He also saw there a new form of government, a federation of city-states. The problem of tyranny, how to secure equality against the historical forces which destroyed it; the friendship and conversation of Gillis; the sight of the city republics of the Netherlands—all these met in his mind. But the force which drew out of them the ideal republic of *Utopia* was the Platonism which was already there: that unhistorical, anti-historical idealism which, in politics, has always led to blueprints for totalitarian rule.

More was not himself unhistorical. His *Richard III* shows that he read the ancient historians with care. But history to him, as to the humanists in general, was not a constructive science; it was a storehouse of moral examples, some good, most bad. He did not seek, in past history, a means of controlling the future; he looked to philosophy for a means to end history, to end it altogether. Like Plato, like Marx, like Pico's hero Savonarola, who in his own time had sought to stay the

29

ferment of Renaissance Florence by means of an intolerant puritan republic, or like that other Dominican friar, Tommaso Campanella, who a century later would seek to pickle all Christendom in a millenarian theocracy, More sought a social form which would protect society against historical change: that is, against history itself. His island of Utopia had no history. Since the time when King Utopus imposed his constitution, seventeen hundred years before, nothing had happened there, and nothing would happen in the future, for the Utopians "had laid such foundations for their state as shall continue and last not only happily but also, as far as man's wit may judge and conjecture, endure for ever." And a Dutch admirer, on reading *Utopia*, wrote to More that if only the cities of antiquity had adopted such a system, they would still be flourishing today.

More's *Utopia* was the crystallization of his Platonic ideas, their logical application to politics. Perhaps it was only a *ludibrium*, a holiday task, but that does not make it frivolous. What comes off the top of a man's mind is often what has fermented at the bottom of it. The book at once became famous, and it made its author famous too. But perhaps it is worthwhile to particularize his fame. We shall find that, once again, it is within a narrow Platonic world, a world that was soon to evaporate, or to be transformed.

Seven years after the publication of *Utopia*, its fame excited an old man living in Padua, Nicolas Leonicus. Leonicus was a distinguished Platonist who had once taught the Greek language and Greek philosophy to More's old tutor, Thomas Linacre, and to his contemporary, William Latimer. He was now teaching a pupil of his pupils, King Henry VIII's young kinsman, Reginald Pole, afterward cardinal of England. Leonicus wrote to More, who was a stranger to him, presenting a tributary book and asking, in return, for a copy of *Utopia*. A copy was duly brought out to him by More's protégé John Clement, who happened to be visiting Italy. Leonicus was delighted with it, and wrote enthusiastically about it to his young pupil, Pole. Pole no doubt read it, for he too was a Platonist. A few years later, Pole was in England and there met the rising minister of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell. To him too he sang the praises of Platonism and Plato's *Republic*. However, the minister was not impressed. Plato, he said, was now *vieux jeu;* and he countered Pole by praising a more up-to-date work of political philosophy which was circulating briskly in manuscript: Machiavelli's *Prince*. Pole (according to his own later account) was very shocked. That work, he said, was written by the finger of Satan. Machiavelli, of course, had no use for Plato, or ideal commonwealths. He did not wish to end history. He wished to understand it, and to use it; and Cromwell, as he was soon to show, followed him.

Thomas Cromwell's famous discussion with Pole took place in 1530. By that time More was Lord Chancellor of England, but already his whole intellectual world was crumbling. In 1515–16, the year of *Utopia*, he had appeared as the heir, the most brilliant and most attractive exponent, of a long tradition: the tradition of Florentine Platonism associated, through him and Erasmus, with a respiritualized, reformed, ecumenical Christianity—what Erasmus called "the philosophy of Christ." But less than two years later, in 1517, the fatal blow had been struck. Or rather, the stone was loosed which brought the enchanted castle down.

We all know who struck that blow, who loosed that stone. In 1517 Martin Luther, following the innocent example of Pico della Mirandola himself, posted his challenging theses in his local church. As Erasmus foresaw, that frontal challenge, and the frontal resistance of the established Church, split the unity of Christendom; and neither Erasmus, by refusing the challenge, nor More, by accepting it, could save that unity. It was broken for centuries, perhaps forever.

However, it was not only the unity of Christendom that foundered in those years. Less spectacularly, but no less finally, the new Platonic synthesis, which had given its last glow to that unity, was also being undermined. It was undermined in philosophy by the revived scholasticism of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and it was undermined in politics by Machiavelli and his disciples.

Machiavelli too had been nurtured in Florence on Florentine ideals. He too had immersed himself in the writers of antiquity. But the lessons which he derived from those writers were not Platonic. They were the lessons of history, that "reason of state" from which the idealists of all ages have sought to escape but from which there is no escape. Platonism was not killed by the Reformation or by Machiavelli. But it was transformed. The Platonism of Plato himself, which was the Platonism of More and Erasmus, gave way to the Hermetic, Kabbalistic, magical Platonism of Reuchlin and Agrippa, Cardano, Dee, and Bruno, the conjuring with demons and spirits, planets and stars. This magical Platonism was not a new development. It had roots in the later work of Plato; it had been fed by the Hermetic writings of the Roman Empire; it had been forwarded by Ficino and Pico. But Erasmus and More had no sympathy with it. In this, as in so much else, their minds were pure.

With the dissolution of More's intellectual world, there was dissolved also the spirit which had animated it, the spirit of confidence, gaiety, good-humored raillery, and love of life. As Marie Delcourt has written, the ideological tempest of the 1520s would carry away both the great hopes of the previous generation and the bold and genial spirit behind them. "Neither the *Praise of Folly* nor *Utopia* could have been written

after 1520. Thereafter, only Rabelais would triumph over the intellectual depression which had settled upon Europe." Rabelais, we may remark, was the avowed disciple of Erasmus, "to whom I owe (as he wrote) *quicquid sum et valeo*, all that I am, all that I am worth"; and he borrowed some of his ideas openly from the *Utopia* of Thomas More.

In the new age marked by the division of Christendom after 1520, Erasmus fared better than More. The Platonic "philosophy of Christ" might have foundered, but Erasmus's scholarship and his implicit heresy—his rationality, his unflinching textual criticism, his skepticism— continued to keep his ideas alive; he looked forward to the scholars and thinkers of the next century. The work of More lacked these preservative ingredients, and so it dissolved, leaving only the indefinable quality of saintliness and the fact of martyrdom. *Utopia*, that Platonic political ideal, with its uncomfortable social criticism and radical formula of stability, was disowned. After the Peasants' Revolt in Germany, it won no support in Europe. Only a few Spanish clergy dreamed of applying that idealist blueprint to the unresisting conquered society of America, as Oliver Cromwell would afterward dream of applying the equally Utopian schemes of his followers to the "blank paper" of conquered Ireland. But their voices were not heard in Europe. There the book continued to be read as an agreeable fantasy, but in the political philosophy of the time it marks a dead end.

As for More himself, from 1522 onward he became a mere religious controversialist. In many ways, as he saw the need to fight for his ideas, he silently denied some of them. After his martyrdom he shrank into a provincial saint, cultivated only in a dwindling family circle. In England, outside the family, he was hardly mentioned, and the biographies which that family wrote or inspired remained unpublished. Ironically, it was in Spain and Portugal—the countries in which the name of Erasmus was most ruthlessly blotted out—that the name of More was most warmly cherished. But it was cherished only as a symbol: More was seen as the critic and the victim of Protestant England and its heretical Tudor dynasty. So in Spain and Portugal and the Spanish Netherlands his name was revered but his books were not read. The greatest of them, *Utopia*, was on the Index.

They Were Dancing

PHILIP MURRAY

"You told the truth but used it like a lie. . ."
Dionysus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*
Sutherland Translation

With this long, light, rusted, gimcrack knife
The defendant stabbed his landsman fifteen times.
The deepest wounds are in the victim's neck and heart;
There are also cuts upon his hands between the fingers;
He had tried feebly, drunkenly to defend himself
In the vestibule of the wrong apartment house
One block from his own, before locked inner doors.

The quarrel began in a bar and continued outside;
The deceased had pawed the thigh of the defendant's girl
While they were dancing. The defendant is quoted as saying
In Spanish, "I am going to kill this one."
A witness saw them both enter the apartment lobby;
Only the defendant came out; his black and white
Checkered trousers were blotched with bloody stains.

Arrested minutes later near the scene of the crime,
He spoke no English and pleaded innocent.
The knife was recovered from a curbside garbage can.
We are assembled here to try this man,
Examining evidence, weighing testimony
In two languages, determining beyond
Reasonable doubt, his innocence or guilt.

A single witness testifies for the defense,
An island friend who speaks no English and answers