

On the very notion of utopia

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Resumo

In this paper I seek to explore the possibility of a meaningful relationship between Thomas More's *Weltanschauung*, personality and background, on the one hand, and the formation of the concept of utopia, on the other. In some important respects, the ultimate make-up of *Utopia* reflects several convergent aspects of More's complex personality: his admiration for St. Augustine, whose *De Civitate Dei* was one of More's favorite books and traces of which can be found in *Utopia*; his being a man of the Renaissance and inhabiting the same intellectual world as that inhabited by Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Erasmus of Rotterdam and others; probably deriving from that, his propensity toward re-creation and re-shaping the existing order of things, from a personal level (as self-reformation) to a much higher level (as cosmopoiesis, to use Giuseppe Mazzotta's term); the mysterious nature of the whole utopian project, along with the somehow ironical tone in which the book is written. These – and other – aspects make More's *Utopia* not only a remarkably rich and complex work of literature, but also, in some oblique way, the testimony of an outstanding effort of self-configuration through writing.

Palavras-chave

Utopia, Thomas More, concept of utopia, St. Augustine.

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In this paper I seek to explore the possibility of a meaningful relationship between Thomas More's *Weltanschauung*, character and background, on the one hand, and the nature of his concept of Utopia, on the other. In some important respects, the ultimate make-up of *Utopia* reflects several convergent aspects of More's complex personality: his admiration for St. Augustine, whose *De Civitate Dei* was one of More's favorite books and traces of which can be found in *Utopia*; his profound asceticism, his "temperamental attraction towards monasticism" (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 86) and the "spiritual exercises" he practiced throughout his life; his being a man of the Renaissance and inhabiting the same intellectual world as Pico della Mirandola (whose biography he translated into English), Marsilio Ficino (whom he resembled in more than one way), Erasmus of Rotterdam (with whom he was very close friends) and others; probably deriving from that, his propensity toward re-creation and re-shaping the existing order of things, from a personal level (as moral and intellectual self-improvement) to a much higher level – as *cosmopoiesis* (to use Giuseppe Mazzotta's term); the evasive nature of the whole utopian project, along with the somehow ironical and enigmatic tone in which the book is written. These – and other – aspects make Thomas More's *Utopia* not only a remarkably rich and complex work of literature, but also, in some oblique way, the testimony of an outstanding effort of self-configuration through writing.

1. Preliminary Remarks

Before getting to the matter at hand, however, I should make a couple of preliminary remarks of a rather methodological nature.

The first remark is about what might be called the "evasiveness" of *Utopia*: the difficulty in which the reader, however apt, finds itself to come up with a homogeneous interpretation of the book, a unique and unified perspective from which More's work would make complete sense. No matter how generous the hermeneutic framework is, there is still a sense that this book is designed in such a way as to ultimately *evade* the reader. The meaning that you seem to find at one level of the work is undermined and dismantled, if not openly mocked, at its next level as you dig deeper into the book's world¹. For example, as one scholar has recently put it, "while *Utopia's* humanist perspective and rhetoric invite us to view Utopian society as an ideal society, the text subverts its own explicit positions and consequently undermines any attempt to capture an ideal" (Yoran, 2009, p. 293-4). The sheer volume of literature that has been produced on *Utopia*, as well as the disconcerting plurality of interpretations proposed over the last several centuries testify amply to this difficulty. Thus, very much like in the case of Utopia itself, *Utopia* seems to be quite well protected against incursions from the outside. In either case, to get in you need the assistance of a Utopian guide. You need someone to take care of you and make sure you don't get lost. Now, if we are to seek assistance and befriend some Utopian insider – in other words, someone who is not of flesh and blood, but a creature of imagination – then, the most appropriate way of engaging

¹ "It is very difficult in *Utopia* to gauge or determine More's own opinion upon any particular matter." (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 177).

in such a relationship would be through imagination itself. Hence not only the important role that a more imaginative hermeneutics will deliberately play throughout my paper, but also – perhaps more importantly – the irremediably tentative, incomplete character of my interpretation.

My second preliminary observation is about a certain criticism that can be leveled against an approach like this that seeks to relate a work of fiction to the personal world of its author: it would be – so this criticism goes – illegitimate to establish relationships between somebody’s self, on the one hand, and the nature of his or her work, on the other hand. These are entities that fall under different ontological categories: the character of an author, his background, the inner workings and configurations of his private self, are “incommensurable”, so to speak, with the type of world he or she creates as an author. To consider them together would be to count apples and oranges.

It would certainly be wrong to count apples and oranges, I hasten to add, but that’s not what I am doing here. The philosophical premise on which my entire approach is based is that there is a fundamental resemblance between the self of an author and the fictional worlds he creates in his works. One’s self is not a “given”, something that one is born with and has to carry with them as long as they live. On the contrary, a self is an ongoing process, a “work in progress”, something one continually creates and re-creates. Alexander Nehamas describes the process quite accurately:

To create a self is to succeed in becoming *someone*, in becoming a *character*, that is, someone unusual and distinctive. It is to become an individual... To become an individual is to acquire an uncommon and idiosyncratic character, a set of features and a mode of life that set one apart from the rest of the world (1998, p. 4-5).

In other words, the creation of the self is not unlike the process of literary creation: what is crucial in both cases is the fact that becoming *this* or *that* is, ultimately a matter of style; nothing is given, but everything is the result of a process of (aesthetic) fashioning, deliberation and projection. We all aspire to have a “beautiful” self. Therefore, I can be said to be creating a self for myself just as an author creates a character in her books. The fact that the same word (“character”) is used to mean both a “hero” in a work of fiction and the ethical quality of a self is quite telling and is certainly more than a “word game”. Someone who *has* character *is*, in an important way, a character himself. Then, to the extent that I am right, it may be said that the self of an author is something he creates in parallel with the creation of his work: the two, part of the same larger process of configuration, are not separated from each other, but they are in continuous communication. They are communicating vessels, as it were. Thus, we can approach a work of fiction from the point of view of its author’s character and worldview above all because the author himself is, to an important extent, a “creation” (if his own), a character, a *created self*, not unlike the people that populate his works.

Stephen Greenblatt reaches basically a similar conclusion, even though he argues differently for this type of approach. For him, between the roles that Thomas More play in society (at the court, in his family, in the Tower), on the one hand, and the substance of his literary works (*Utopia*, in particular), on the other, there is a profound affinity. In an important sense they are the two sides of the same coin: “Social actions are themselves always embedded in systems of public significance, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation, while the words that constitute the works of literature.... are by their very nature the manifest assurance of a similar embeddedness” (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 5).

2. The *City of God* within

We learn from Roper’s *Life of More* that, “to his great commendation”, More “for some time gave public lectures on St. Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* in the church of St. Laurence in the Old Jewry” (Roper, 1947, p. 211). Unfortunately, the content of these lectures has not been preserved, but we do know, however, that Augustine was to have a tremendous influence on More for the rest of his life. Augustine’s works played a major role in his formation as a writer, as a scholar or, simply, as a Catholic. Indeed, most modern biographers tend to emphasize More’s special relationship to Augustine. Richard Marius, to give only one example, notes that St. Augustine was More’s “favorite saint, the writer who more than anyone else influenced the shaping of his mind. He knew Augustine almost by heart, and *The City of God* is more often quoted in his works than anything else in the Augustinian corpus” (Marius, 1985, p. 26)².

A crucial theological statement that the young Thomas More must have found in *De Civitate Dei* is that regarding the distinction that St. Augustine draws between “the worldly city” and the “City of God”. He divides human society into two “branches”:

the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God’s will. I also call these two classes the two cities, speaking allegorically. By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil (Augustine, 1972, p. 595).

The most important thing about these two cities is that, although so radically different in nature, they co-exist, exist side by side. However counterintuitive this may sound, *sub specie historiae*, the “City of God” is not located in some supra-celestial realm, but it is right here, “among us”. The citizens of one city mingle daily with the citizens of the other, they cross paths and rub elbows. St. Augustine talks specifically about the “glorious” *Civitas Dei* “as it exists in this world of time, a stranger among the ungodly” (1972, p. 5). The metaphor he uses most frequently – and which will subsequently make an important career in the Western theology – is that of the pilgrim: for him “the City of God is on pilgrimage in this world” (p. 45). Living historically means, at its very best, living as a pilgrim.

² Peter Ackroyd makes a similar point. In addition, he aptly notes that More’s admiration for St. Augustine must have been fueled by the same rhetorical tradition to which they both belong: “it is easy to see why he should have been drawn towards the saint even as a young man. Augustine was a rhetorician, a master of Latin prose, but he was also a revered figure of the Church who had imbibed and mastered true classical learning” (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 105).

Equally importantly, not only physically and spatially are the citizens of the heavenly city *in* this world and integral part of it, but also, genealogically, they come *from* this world. They are not aliens, but earthlings, if “chosen by grace”. They haven’t been transplanted here from who knows where; on the contrary, they have always been here; they are “locals”. As a matter of fact, and this something worth paying attention to, they – the “chosen” ones – have their origin in “the same lump” as the “condemned”. They are made out of the same stuff. What ultimately distinguishes the two groups is God’s grace, in one case, and its absence, in the other:

When those two cities started on their course through the succession of birth and death, the first to be born was a citizen of this world, and later appeared one who was a pilgrim and stranger in the world, belonging as he did to the City of God. He was predestined by grace, and chosen grace, by grace a pilgrim below, and by grace a citizen above. As far as he himself is concerned he has his origin from the same lump which was condemned, as a whole lump, at the beginning. But God like a potter... made “out of the same lump one vessel destined for honor, and another for dishonor” (Augustine, 1972, p. 596).

This line of Augustinian thinking is crucial, I think, for understanding some of the key-aspects of Thomas More’s project: what is, exactly, the nature of the society described in *Utopia*? What’s its relation to the non-Utopian world? What type of project is this? Who are the Utopians? What is exactly Utopia’s relation to More’s England? The Augustinian insight is also crucial for dissipating the host of wrong – sometimes, hilariously *wrong* – kind of questions that have always surrounded Utopia: What exactly should we do to put Utopia into practice? Is it the first form of Communism? Is More’s book actually a political manifesto? And so on and so forth.

If we decide to use *De Civitate Dei* as a key to understanding some of the central aspects of More’s book – and, I think, it would be profitable to do so – then Utopia is nowhere other than *in* the world. Utopia – More’s equivalent of Augustine’s “City of God” – is the significantly better version of the “city of man”, which was the world he knew. Utopia is the world transfigured. It is no accident, then, that in so many respects Utopia reminds the reader of More’s England: this is something More did deliberately, to show that his Utopia is nowhere to be found but in the historical world. If we leave aside Augustine’s language of grace, election and damnation, then his insight, when applied to understanding More’s work, should mean that the whole utopian project is about self-overcoming. Read in this key, *Utopia* is not anymore the fantasy of a light-minded humanist who just wanted to “have a laugh” with his friends, but the serious vision of someone who thought that, should we manage to gain access to the deeper and better part of our selves and come to know our genuine potentialities, changing the world into a better place would not be such a big problem.

Thus, *Utopia* ceases to be a book about daydreaming and hopes impossible to fulfill and becomes a manifesto of self-overcoming and self-knowledge; it promises access to such a redeeming self-knowledge that would allow us to understand what we *can* do and, therefore, that it is only up to us to change the world. The world has been for a long time in such a poor shape not because it is impossible to ameliorate, but because we have never really put our minds to doing anything about it. As Constantin Brancusi one said, “things are not difficult to make, what is difficult is putting ourselves in the state of mind to make them”. In the *utopian* “state of mind to make them”, we might want to add.

In the Book I of *Utopia*, when Hythlodæus introduces Utopia and talks about “the kind of things which Plato creates in his republic and which the Utopians actually put in practice in theirs [*quae fingit Plato in sua Republica aut ea quae faciunt Vtopiensis in sua*]” (More, 1965, p. 101), he offers us – if in an oblique manner – a glimpse into the nature of the Utopian discourse. The things that the Utopian discourse is about look unfamiliar, odd or even “absurd” not because they really are so, but because of our poor perception and corrupted judgment. According to Hythlodæus, we have been exposed to mediocrity and pettiness of mind for so long that when we see greatness we cannot help looking for flaws in it. To such a corrupted mind Christianity itself will seem Utopian:

if all the things which by the perverse morals of men have come to seem odd are to be dropped as unusual and absurd, we must dissemble almost all the doctrines of Christ. [...] The greater part of His teaching is far more different from the morals of mankind than was my discourse. But preachers, crafty men that they are, finding that men grievously disliked to have their morals adjusted to the rule of Christ... accommodated His teaching to men's morals (More, 1965, p. 101).

Just as in the case of St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* the two classes of people, the citizens of the “two cities”, are – as we have seen – *cut* out of “the same lump”, made out of the same stuff, so in More's *Utopia* we have the symbolic gesture through which the Utopians were separated from the rest of the world. Initially, what is now Utopia was part of the world, made exactly out of “the same lump” as the rest of the world. It was only later that Utopus – a political potter of sorts – having modeled Utopia into a perfect city, decided that it also has to be physically cut off from the mainland:

the island once was not surrounded by sea. But Utopus, who as conqueror gave the island its name... and who brought the rude and rustic people to such a perfection of culture and humanity as makes them now superior to almost all other mortals, gained a victory at his very first landing. He then ordered the excavation of fifteen miles on the side where the land was connected with the continent and caused the sea to flow around the land (More, 1965, p. 113).

This must have been an extraordinary political gesture, of a quasi-demiurgic nature, which crowns Utopus' efforts of creating a totally new

form of human society. The physical act of separation is meant to signify, in a poignant fashion, the irreversible and radical nature of his project.

To conclude, if we use the hint from St. Augustine, the Utopian state is not to be looked for in a world completely different from ours, but right here, under our very nose. For Utopia is, in its essence, nothing other than a better, transfigured version of our own world. It has always been there, but – caught up as we always are in the web of our alienated self and of its many lies and deceptions – we did not know how to look for it. The Utopian man is not at all an alien, someone from another planet, but the man *within*, our better self. As St. Augustine would have put it, in the individual man “the base condition comes first, and we have to start with that; but we are not bound to stop at that, and later comes the noble state towards which we may make progress, and in which we may abide, when we have arrived at it” (Augustine, 1972, p. 596). In other words, the Utopian man is someone who has managed to over-come himself. This insight points to a fundamental aspect of More’s project: Utopia cannot be brought about by a political revolution, nor by extraordinary statesmen and even less by technological advancements, but by a process of *inner transformation*. To become Utopian is to have won a *transformative victory* over yourself. It is not that “every bad man will become good, but no one will be good who was not bad originally. Yet the sooner a man changes for the better the more quickly will he secure for himself the title belonging to his attainment and will hide his earlier appellations under the later name” (Augustine, 1972, p. 596).

3. Whips, hair shirts and other mortifications

Looking at More’s *Utopia* through Augustinian lenses can indeed be a good hermeneutical strategy, but one that is helpful up to a point only. As you may recall, earlier in this paper I said “If we leave aside Augustine’s language of grace, election and damnation”. Well, I am not completely sure that we *can* leave it aside. Read against Augustine’s doctrine of “the two cities”, More’s book easily makes sense, but in Augustine the concepts of predestination, grace, election, and damnation are absolutely central. They inform the system of his theology to such an important extent that if we try to put them aside, the entire system collapses and what we are left with is not Augustine anymore, but something else. In other words, if we consider More’s project *outside* the theological context of divine grace, then a host of major difficulties emerge. These difficulties seem so hard to overcome that it would not be an exaggeration to say that, at this point, More’s project becomes, finally, Utopian.

More was certainly aware of these difficulties. As a matter of fact, one of the most remarkable things about his book is the fact that he *did* want to build a “heavenly City” outside the theological context of grace. Considering the “City of God” within the context of grace is, in a sense, the most natural thing to do; doing it outside of it is not only unnatural, but the sign of a remarkably courageous mind. It also testifies to the intense dramatism of More’s religious life.

The crucial question that More now faced was how to conceptualize this process of self-overcoming using not a theological, but primarily a political vocabulary. In other words, how are we to gain a “transformative victory” over ourselves *in the absence of grace*? The fact that – in spite of More’s personal deep attachment to Christianity – references to Christ’s figure do not play any significant role in *Utopia* can be read precisely as an implicit acknowledgment that here he decided to think this transformation in the absence of grace.

Significantly, the types of measures More proposes for triggering in people this “inner transformation” in the absence of grace are expressions of a private life marked, as Peter Ackroyd puts it, by a “temperamental attraction towards monasticism” (1999, p. 86). We know from several sources that More contemplated priesthood to the point of living among monks for a while, as a way of testing his vocation: “he gave himself to devotion and prayer in the Charterhouse of London, religiously living there without vow about four years” (Roper, 1947, p. 211). Harsh as life in *Utopia* may seem, he subjects Utopians to the same type of treatment he subjected himself to:

His own life of discipline, and his devotion to the Catholic Church, suggests that he was naturally inclined to the imposed order of authority. That’s why *Utopia*, despite More’s own ironic negations and reservations, remains a powerful vision of existence; it radiates from the center of More’s being and there are aspects of Utopian worship and custom, for example, which are strongly evocative of his own experience in the Charterhouse (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 176).

One of the most frightening things we as modern readers come across in *Utopia* is the way one’s body is treated (or, rather, mistreated) there. In *Utopia* the individual human body becomes the target of almost total public control and scrutiny, a site of pressure, suppression and repression, to such a degree that we today would not hesitate using the term “concentration camp” as a better description of the place. For example, one cannot move one’s body beyond prescribed (and quite narrow) limits without prior approval from the governor. Failing to obtain governmental authorization for this type of bodily performance can have the most severe consequences: “If any person gives himself leave to stray out of his territorial limits and is caught without the governor’s certificate, he is treated with contempt, brought back as a runaway (*fugitiuo*) and severely punished. A rash repetition of the offence entails the sentence of slavery” (More, 1965, p. 147). In a certain sense, then, it may be said that not only do people’s things (houses, cloths, toothbrushes) belong to everybody, but even their bodies are not really theirs. They are public property, if not to be used by others, at least to be watched, controlled, manipulated, punished – in short, *abused* by others. Yet, in Utopian logic, however limited your access to your body is, that’s something you should not complain about: any Utopian leader would gladly tell you that it is *hybris*, a sign of *superbia*, to claim exclusive rights on your body.

However, if we consider this issue from the perspective of More's personal worldview, it would be wrong to see this kind of bodily treatment in terms of a "sacrifice" that one "has to make" for supposedly higher purposes. As a matter of fact, for him, this is the most appropriate way to treat a body: it seems to have been his deep conviction that the body is a beast of sorts that has to be kept under control at all times, humiliated, disciplined and punished as appropriate. You have to fight your body as one fights a stubborn enemy: constantly, fearlessly, and without any scruples. And fight More did: he was engaged in this battle throughout his life. According to Cresacre More, his great-grandson, when Thomas More "was about eighteen or twentie years olde, finding his bodie by reason of his yeares most rebellious, he sought diligently to tame his unbrideled concupiscence by wonderfull workes of mortification" (quoted in Ackroyd, 1999, p. 69). Thus, even before entering the public scene, long before he had any opportunity to make any real enemies – political or otherwise – in the outside world, he found out that since birth he had been chained to his worst possible enemy: his own body. As such, he took pre-emptive actions: "he secretly wore next his body a shirt of hair... He used also sometimes to punish his body with whips, the cords knotted, which was known only to my wife, his eldest daughter" (Roper, 1947, p. 242). This difficult relationship with his body – and with the world of bodies in general – must have marked not only his existence, but – as some biographers suggest – his entire worldview. Ackroyd, for example, finds in his mature works traces of "what is almost disgust at the body and its functions". The need for a sense of order is something that permeates both his life and his work. More must have felt it in his "own physical being; he bore its marks in a literal sense, when he put on the hair shirt which chafed his skin" (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 69).

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